

A
Billionaire
Holiday
Romantic
Comedy



SANTA VS. THE SECRET SHOPPER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

IVY HUNT

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COMEDY

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This year Santa's going on the naughty list...

In order to take over as CEO of my family's billion-dollar company, my grandfather insists I play Santa Claus in our flagship store. To say it's the worst job ever is an understatement. I can't even pretend I want to be good at it.

Enter the merriest, cheekiest, most feisty thorn in my grumpy, workaholic side: Krista Parr. This secret shopper has no idea who I really am—at least not while I'm wearing the red suit and beard.

We immediately butt heads. But maybe the costume has softened my brain because instead of firing her, I've somehow persuaded Krista to teach me to be a better Santa. (Hint: she's unlikely to succeed.)

It's becoming alarmingly clear to me that I'll do just about anything to spend more time with this Christmas-crazy woman. I just hope she'll forgive me when she finds out who I really am.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Connect with Ivy.](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER ONE

ZACH

A FREAKING FAT SUIT.

This is what I've been reduced to—selling my soul and packaging it as Christmas cheer.

I eye my brand-new gut in the narrow mirror in front of me, then glance at the three-piece ensemble on the garment rack to its right and scowl. Instead of my usual Tom Ford jacket, pants, and tie, there's an oversized red velvet coat, matching trousers, and a hat with a white cotton ball on the end.

Would've been nice if a new outfit had been tailored to fit me, but given this getup is part of the tradition my family is so freaking fond of, the best I can hope for is decent dry cleaning.

I draw one cuff to my nose and sniff, ready for soot and mothballs. The scent of cookies assails me, and I drop the sleeve.

A single knock sounds from the door of the small, windowless stockroom that serves as Santa's dressing area—and my personal hell—for the duration of my tenure as the Forrester & Sons department store Santa. It's the polar opposite of my executive corner office, a mere block and eighty stories away.

“Hold on!” Shit. I snatch the combo mustache and beard and pull it over my face. The elastic band snags on my ear as I try to attach it to my upper lip and chin. Fuck, it itches. But there's no way I want anyone to recognize me in this getup.

Before I can tell whoever's out there to scram, my grandfather's longtime assistant, Meredith Carter, peers inside. She's all put together, her hair up in an elegant bun. I don't think I've ever seen it down. The only aspect of her updo noting the passage of time is its progression from black to salt-and-pepper to the silver it is now.

"You almost ready, Zach?"

I roll my eyes. "Does it look like I'm ready?"

She walks in and shuts the door behind her. "Hurry, or you'll be late."

"Do I have to?" The petulance in my voice makes me wince. I sound like a toddler instead of the thirty-one-year-old adult that I am.

Meredith's green eyes twinkle, and I swear her lips twitch the slightest bit before they flatten into a stern line. "How much do you want this?"

The same question I've been asking myself for weeks. I want the CEO position at F&S International—also known as my family business. The one that started at this very location, the Forrester & Sons department store, over a hundred years ago.

As the story goes, my great-great-grandfather, Oliver Forrester, was short-staffed and ended up playing Santa at the store. In a supposed holiday miracle, the day after Christmas, shares he had in a railway company spiked.

Since then, every CEO-in-waiting has been required to follow this asinine ritual of donning the Santa suit before assuming leadership of F&S International. And somehow, in a string of crazy coincidences, the handover has always resulted in a period of exponential growth. No one's leaving anything to chance.

The proof is in the Christmas pudding. Great-grandfather Mitchell Forrester played Santa in the 1920s and listed F&S on the New York Stock Exchange. Only a few days later, the stock skyrocketed, making F&S a household name. His son, my grandfather, Harold Forrester, wore the red suit right

before expanding into international property development, setting up offices in London, Hong Kong, and Sydney.

“I want it.” My teeth grit tight. “I’ve worked my whole life for it.”

“Well, you know what you need to do. Otherwise, you end up like *him*.”

Him. Dear old Dad. The only Forrester who refused to play Santa. Apparently, his words were “over my dead body.” Now, said body isn’t *actually* dead. It just resides on a hundred-and-fifty-foot-long yacht that cruises the Mediterranean, complete with an onboard office that he uses to run the Forrester Foundation.

Consequently, Grandfather maintained his role as the head of the company while he groomed me to continue the family legacy, working me doubly hard to make sure I didn’t wind up like his son.

And I won’t. I’ll do whatever it takes.

Ivy League business degree? *Check.*

Start in the stockroom? *Check.*

Work my way up with roles in each department, amid accusations of nepotism at every step? *Check.*

Now I’m SVP and acting-CEO, running things on a day-to-day basis. The role is mine in every way but name.

Will Grandad budge? Fuck, no. If I don’t get my ass into this goddamned red suit, I’m out. The board will vote someone else in as CEO. F&S International will no longer be a family company, a fate worse than death as far as he’s concerned.

“We’re sure as hell not telling anyone about this,” I remind Meredith.

“My lips are sealed.”

I peek out the door. The Santa greeting area is empty, but not for long. Soon it will be teeming with little people—little people I have no experience with. What do I know about Christmas? Dad’s off on the other side of the world. Mom

passed away when I was a kid. But the rest of the Forrester clan will regroup at the yearly New Year's Gala, just in time to take photos that will grace the cover of the annual report to shareholders, proclaiming F&S International a family-run company with traditional values—the ones with high digits and an obscene number of trailing zeros. The gala's also where I'll formally be announced as CEO, all ready to take over on the first business day of the new year.

The door swings open again, and a bald, heavysset man stomps in. If not for the badge pinned to the lapel of his dark suit, I'd peg him for the bouncer at a club in the Meatpacking District, not security for a luxury department store by Central Park South. He nods at Meredith. "Morning, Ms. Carter."

She beams. "Tommy. How lovely to see you."

Tommy-the-Bouncer grins, wide and toothy. "You, too, ma'am." But when his gaze swivels to me, no trace of humor remains. "And who are you?"

Somehow, I force out, "The new Santa."

"ID?"

Meredith jumps to my rescue, smiling. "This is Oliver Mitchell. He's here from one of the out of state stores for the season."

Not that I need any more reminders. Even my middle names carry the weight of the Forrester legacy, having belonged to my great-great-grandfather and his father.

Tommy squints at me, then points at my head.

I growl as I yank off the black Yankees ball cap I've kept low on my brow. He runs his narrowed stare over me. Meredith clears her throat and taps her watch. Tommy takes a step back with a shrug. No question who's the boss around here.

I take a deep breath.

Shit. This is it.

Both Meredith and Tommy shamelessly watch as I tug on the loose velvet pants, struggling to keep the miles of fabric up

as I fasten the belt and slip into the padded jacket.

Meredith steps forward and begins to do up the buttons, but her arthritic fingers tremble. I cover her hands with mine. “I got it.”

She looks up at me with a soft smile.

I take my time with each gold disc. Every closure is another band around my ribs.

The snowy wig comes next. I grab it from the rack, plop it on my head, and add the glossy boots and white gloves.

Meredith ignores my protests and insists on showing me how to put some cakey pink gunk on the exposed areas of my face. Finally, she crowns me with the scarlet hat, adjusting the cottony pompom so it hangs over the side, right in my peripheral vision.

Yep. As if I need one more reminder of today’s fashion choices.

She straightens the mustache and beard, nudges a pair of square reading glasses up my nose, then steps back. My transformation is complete.

“Oh, aren’t you adorable!”

I shoot her a black glare right as a soft snort sounds behind me. But when I swivel back to Tommy, his expression is completely stoic.

Freaking jokers all around.

The suit sags on my trim form even with the belt, compliments of my morning routine at the gym. I can’t imagine what the guys would say if they saw me like this. Noah would smirk, Thorne would take bets for how long it will take me to cave, and Luke and Ryker would pose for selfies with me and blast them out into the world. Assholes, the whole lot of them.

“We need to find you more padding.” Meredith raps her knuckles against my artificial belly.

Tommy examines me again, up and down. “I’ll make sure it happens, ma’am.”

Kiss ass.

He holds out a white plastic card. “Your store ID. It’ll let you into all the personnel-only facilities. There are staff break rooms on each floor.”

His head cocks to one side. “No smoking in the building. If you need a cigarette, smoke outside, but not in the suit.”

Yeah. No fucking way. I’d freeze my ass off before going out in public dressed like this.

“There’s lunch available on floors three, five, and eight. Your card also includes a daily stipend for the coffee shop on the mezzanine if you want those fancy drinks and hipster shit.”

I nod.

“Welcome to Forrester & Sons.”

CHAPTER TWO

KRISTA

THE LITTLE FERRIS wheel in the Christmas window display is hypnotic. The cast of the Avengers fill one car. Barbie and her entourage occupy the next. Most of the other pods are dedicated to Disney characters, from Snow White all the way through to Princess Raya.

Another window showcases a tableau of the Radio City Rockettes, legs thrust high. One of the other panes features an elegant couple in designer clothing dressed for New Year's Eve shenanigans.

Snow-patterned stencils frame each of the windows. Despite being a grown woman, bubbles of excitement fizz like champagne in my belly. Around me, a sea of children wait with their parents. We're all marking time outside the famed Forrester & Sons department store, housed in a hundred-year-old building with a limestone exterior and built in a classical style. While short, at a mere ten stories, it takes up the entire city block.

Not that I've ever been inside. First off, it's a tourist trap. Second, I'd have to sell my firstborn to afford anything in there. New York is expensive, and I'm learning that the hard way after just a couple of weeks in the city. It's a good thing this job's not going to last more than a month.

But from the look of things, firstborns abound. Forrester & Sons is THE place to meet Santa. It's practically the North Pole's satellite office.

My legs tingle—no big surprise given that the jolly red coat I have on barely covers my butt. My green tights do nothing to keep the cold at bay, and my only pair of patent leather stilettos pinch my toes. Meanwhile, people around me are all more warmly dressed in designer winter wear. Right about now, I'd give up my first and second born in a package deal for a pair of UGGs.

Something crashes into me, and I wobble slightly as a voice yells, "Chloe, no!"

A harried-looking woman snatches the lollipop out of the kid's hand, but it's too late to save my skirt. Sticky candy residue has formed a perfect bullseye on the crotch. Ugh. So much for a professional image on day one of my new posting.

"I'm so sorry." The mom gives me an apologetic look then glares down at her offspring. "Say sorry to the nice woman."

Chloe stares at her mother obstinately. No apology is forthcoming. Despite my fashion mishap, my lips twitch.

A stare-off between adult and child ensues. Child is in the lead, right until Mom slaps her hands on her hips—a shift in power. "Chloe, if you don't, Santa's going to put you on his naughty list. And it's too close to Christmas for you to change his mind."

Chloe turns and peers up at me, bottom lip trembling. "I'm sorry," she whispers as her eyes water. My heart cracks a teeny-tiny bit, even as I suspect I'm in the company of a future Broadway diva. *Brava.*

I bend at the knees, balancing on the toes of my impractical shoes. "Oh, honey. It's fine. Just watch where you're going next time, okay?" I'm plenty familiar with unintentional misdeeds, and their accompanying frowns. My own mom was forever soliciting "sorrlys" from me or apologizing on my behalf.

"You excited to see Santa?" I ask.

Chloe nods again, but now a grin hovers on her lips.

"Do you know what you're going to ask him for?"

Her face splits into a beaming smile. She points, and I straighten and follow her little finger to the humongous pink dollhouse in the store window. Superimposed on the smiling plastic faces of the resident dolls is the skewed reflection of the chrome and steel F&S International skyscraper that looms behind us.

Both buildings are New York City icons but utterly different in every way except price per square foot. A gazillion dollars each since we're on Fifth Avenue, just by Central Park.

"...and I want the dolly that goes with it!" Chloe bounces on her feet.

I blink. "Oh, wow. That's huge. Even I could live in it." Nope, not kidding.

A "Yep" is muttered behind me, then a louder, "Well, be a good girl, and we can tell Mommy to tell Santa."

Ah. So, she's the nanny. Now I feel even worse for her, holding that half-eaten germ-infested lolly.

She shrugs as if to say, "Bribery. You know how it goes."

Actually, I don't. My parents are the ultraconservative, Christmas-is-commercial, fire-and-brimstone type. They do not subscribe to the idea of Santa and all his trappings.

Gestures, not gifts.

Pious, not presents.

Sacrifice, not stockings.

We did have a tree, but the focus was more on the Advent calendar. A nativity scene took center stage on the mantle, and snow angels were encouraged over snowmen. And Santa? He didn't have our address. The closest I'd gotten was Salvation Army Santas on the streets or the ones in the holiday movies I loved. I've always wanted that storybook Christmas.

I turn my gaze back to Chloe. Props to the girl. She's somehow managed to get her hands on another lollipop

"You have any?" The nanny scans the surrounding space as if she expects some little creature to appear out of thin air or

that I might claim one of the ones wandering about.

“Not yet.”

Her jaw drops. “You’re *choosing* to be here?”

I am but shrug again for her sake.

But I can’t say I’m not excited. I love this version of Christmas. The decorations, the presents. But... Christmas guilt is a thing.

“God. I have so much to do,” the nanny continues. “But Chloe over here made me promise we’d come and see Santa.”

It would be impolite to end the conversation if the woman’s just getting going. “My Christmases are pretty plain,” I answer, glancing over her shoulder at the door. “I don’t usually have a ton going on.”

“Sounds peaceful,” the woman says wistfully.

Sounds boring.

“Do you have a lot of shopping to do?” she asks.

“Not really. Just a few odds and ends. Maybe a couple more things I can mail to my parents in Chicago.”

As I watch, someone from security strolls to the glass double doors from the inside, ready to turn the latch.

A ripple of excitement runs through the crowd. Right at ten, a baby cries just as the cuckoo clock chimes. The doors swing open, and I’m swept along in the onslaught. As soon as I get past the entrance, I jump to the right of the velvet rope that separates the children’s path from the makeup department. Once the first battalion has passed, I follow at a safe distance, ready to fall back if necessary. We cross under a high archway—and into a snow globe.

Stained glass makes up the ceiling of the massive space, at least ten stories up from where I stand. The store is configured in stacked figure-eights on one side, two departments per level, with balconies that look down on the main floor. Each floor is smaller than the one under it, and elevators and escalators connect them all in the center.

The toy department on the ground level has been renamed Peppermint Plaza for the season, and includes an elaborate set up for kids to visit Santa, complete with a full-sized sleigh and animatronic reindeer on a platform. Enormous Christmas trees cocoon the space. Child-sized train cars from *Polar Express* form a half circle behind the raised area with the castle from *Frozen* on one side and a giant display from *Nightmare Before Christmas* on the other.

The buzz in the air is fueled by excited murmurs and shrieks, accompanied by expensive perfume mixed in with the scent of holly and pine.

My heart is pitter-pattering faster than the little kids'. Not that I'm going to take a seat on Santa's lap or anything—that would be super creepy, especially if I need to act age-and-job-appropriate.

My phone dings, and I pull up my group chat.

Zoe: You inside?

Me: Yep. All set.

Callie: Will you get an employee discount? There's a pair of shoes over there that has my name on it.

Me: Not sure yet, will let you know if I do!

I quickly scope out the rest of the space and climb the wide curved stairs to the mezzanine level, home to the store coffee shop and book section.

I'm the first person at the counter. Morning caffeine is a must. I scan the mounted sign. Fancy drinks I rarely indulge in are organized by type, top-to-bottom, left-to-right. Christmas music fills the space. The scent of fresh pastries hits my nose, and my mouth waters. *Pace yourself, lady. You're here for the long haul.*

The barista, a woman in her early twenties, smiles. "Hey, there. I'm Tami. What can I get you?"

"Could I have an Americano, please?"

"To go?" she asks.

“No, actually. I’m going to be doing a little work. Can I sit over there?” I gesture to a square table that overlooks Peppermint Plaza.

“Of course.” Tami eyes the line forming behind me. “You should get settled. I’ll bring you your coffee.”

“Thanks, Tami.”

I head for my stakeout spot, even more ideal than I thought, at just the right angle to observe the goings-on below. More velvet rope creates an inverted-V path to the sleigh—kids enter on one side, climb up a few steps to a platform, get their photo taken with Santa, then exit the other way. A nice bonus? One of the big screens that will stream Santa’s interactions with the kids hangs only ten feet away from me.

Perfect.

I plop down into my seat, smooth down my skirt, and try to wipe off some of the leftover lollipop stickiness.

Channeling my inner Pussy Galore, International Woman of Mystery is more complicated than it looks. I lay out the appropriate props: a notebook, a tablet, and a set of colored pens and highlighters—my arms in trade—and settle in. All things considered, this is a pretty cushy gig. If I do well, I may even get a chance at some of the international opportunities. I’ll finally be able to travel. The world will be my oyster.

All I need to do? Stalk Santa.

CHAPTER THREE

ZACH

How is it only 10:40? It feels like I've been here for hours.
Eons.

Even so, they keep coming—a march of children. I snort under my breath. More like a murder of children. Crows, picking away at my dignity, one by one, with no end in sight. The line of little people goes out the door, and their minders don't seem to be minding them all that well. These are the pinched faces of parents who refuse to admit buyer's remorse. Children do not come with return policies as generous as the ones we offer at Forrester & Sons.

Fallacy: Children are cute. And charming. And cuddly.

Truth: Sticky. Little. Terrors.

I had nothing against children at the beginning of this. Hell, at some point in the very, very far-off future, I'll be required to produce a couple of them myself. But maybe it's time to rethink that position.

One of the little monsters kept trying to pull off my mustache. Another took one look at me and burst into tears. Thankfully, his mother gave me an apologetic shrug and carted him off. Fingers crossed, he develops a lifelong aversion, and I won't end up seeing him in half an hour.

The current occupant of my lap is a girl in a princess dress, complete with a rhinestone tiara that pokes into the base of my chin as she bounces in place.

She's what? Five, six?

I clear my throat and drop my voice for the hundredth time today. “How old are you, little girl?” I ask in my “Santa” tone.

“Four.” She holds up the correct number of grubby fingers to illustrate.

Four?

Her poor parents have another fourteen years of this?

A line forms between her brows. She’s annoyed I’ve interrupted her list of requests. So far, she’s asked for a hair salon playset, a Disney princess (a real one, not a doll), and some kind of pony. Girl knows what she wants; I’ll give her that.

“...but most of all, I want a Barbie Dream Castle.” This is punctuated with yet more bouncing and poking.

This castle seems to be the running request. My fingers itch to fish out my phone and have my personal assistant check the in-store-to-online inventory ratio.

“Time for your photo with Santa!” Alice, my helper, calls. She’s your typical sexy Santa elf. Pretty enough to keep the dads in line, but so sweet that the moms don’t hate her. Her primary task is facilitating transfers of the kids on and off me.

The blinding flash that goes off is compliments of Steven, the official photographer. He’s maybe in his mid-twenties. Hard to tell for sure, his lanky frame is stooped over, weighed down by the DSLR camera looped around his neck. The sweater he’s in would make even ugly sweater collectors balk. Tommy rounds out our little quartet.

Various other employees cruise the floor—salespeople, floor managers. The store general manager, Alfie Mendoza, is the only one of the staff I’m familiar with from my occasional walk-throughs.

The little girl is returned to her mother, along with a ticket to purchase the sparkly Forrester & Sons frame with our photo. I wince when the big screen above me momentarily displays the same still image before reverting back to the livestream of my interactions with the kids (all with the appropriate parental consent)—some marketing exec’s bright

idea. I may need to hunt him down and murder him. Thank fuck no one can tell it's me in the suit.

I sneak a peek at my phone before the next kid gets into position.

Already a page and a half of new emails. And two new meetings. I accept one invite and decline the other. *No, I do not need a sit down with the head of accounting. That's what my CFO is for.*

"Santa..." Alice's voice jerks me to attention. She's holding out a wriggling package. It's the smallest one so far, and suddenly, it's impossible to swallow.

"Santa?" she repeats when I make no move.

More beads of perspiration join the ones already dotting my forehead and temple. My limbs refuse to move, to reach out for the creature. The jacket constricts my movement, and the foam padding is a brick on my chest. I choke in a lungful of air.

Alice grimaces, and she plops the little bundle onto my lap. My hands spring to catch it before the squirming thing can hit the floor.

The moment we make contact, it emits a screech rivaling a 6-train pulling into Grand Central. The thing is of indiscernible gender, dressed in a yellow onesie with the hoodie covering its hair.

"Ho, ho, ho," I croak past the cotton in my mouth in a weak attempt to calm it.

The creature only screams louder. I raise panicked eyes, searching for its owner.

"Prop her up a little, Santa," Steven calls, fiddling with his camera. "I need to get her face."

Another girl, then. I slide her up my sleeve so she's at an angle and anchor her with my other hand across her belly.

She quiets for a moment. As per my script, I ask, "What do you want for Christmas?" Blue eyes open wide. She has the

stare of a White Walker, knowing my every fear and feeding on it.

She peers at me for one more moment, but then her bottom lip trembles.

I think mine wobbles harder beneath my fake facial hair.

Another bawl escapes her. Thankfully, Alice whisks her away just in enough time to stop me from howling myself.

I gulp in a steadying breath. There's not even any wallowing in secret shame because of the boom cam constantly suspended in my face.

I can't help it—my middle finger comes up to push the glasses higher on my nose as I glare into the reflective lens. Beyond it, my eyes catch on a pair of green limbs about thirty feet away. Feminine limbs. I trace the bright tights to a skirt in a darker shade and up to full breasts, then farther up to blonde hair that frames a perfectly oval face—with pink lips twisted into a scowl directed straight at me.

I squint. It's impossible to make out her eye color from here, but there's no mistaking that down-turned mouth. What the hell?

Fine, so I have to behave around kids, but fuck it—Adults are fair game.

I glower right back.

The pixie's jaw snaps shut, and her angled brows scrunch together. Her face whips around to check behind her. Half a second later, it swivels right back to me, frown even more pronounced.

I cock my head to the side in challenge.

Our stare-off is broken only when a tinkling bell signals my first break. Alice is already holding the next kid when I jump to my feet. She gives me a pleading look. I respond with a beseeching one of my own. *If you want a live, working Santa, you'll give me this time.*

She sighs and thrusts the kid back at his dad, goes to the little gate, and with a huff, flips the sign saying "Santa will be

back in fifteen minutes.”

A collective groan rises from the waiting parents, which I ignore as I grab my phone and rush off the small platform. A shit-ton of messages await my response. I scan the space for some privacy. Cell signal in the stockroom is shit, and work can't wait. My eyes find the coffee shop on the floor above.

Kids in line shout “Santa” as I pass. I muster up a weak smile and wave and then make my way to the wide, curved steps.

The scent of cookies and cake greets me when I reach the top and my stomach growls. I haven't eaten yet today. I join the line for drinks behind two women. They smile at my costume and wave me ahead—finally, one perk of the suit. I go back to staring at my phone, tapping out quick responses. When my turn comes, I grab a protein bar from the counter display.

“Hey Santa, great to see you this season. Can I get you a drink to go with that?” the barista asks.

I don't normally indulge in the middle of the day, but it's got to be 5 p.m. somewhere, right? “Please tell me you have bourbon?” I make sure to keep my voice low and growly.

Her lips quirk up on one side. “Sorry, Santa. No liquor license at Forrester & Sons.”

Another thing that needs to get rectified, pronto. I sigh. “Then a coffee, please. Decaf.” More caffeine, and I might self-combust.

“Coming right up at the pickup counter.”

“Thanks.” Before I take a step, a throat is cleared behind me. “Um, Santa?”

For fuck's sake. Breaks should be sacred.

But I turn anyway. Instead of a parent or some weird adult Santa fan, it's the pixie from the balcony wearing an expression I'd call conciliatory yet determined.

“Yes?” I raise a brow. But the look that typically has grown men quaking in their boots does nothing for me now,

hidden beneath my bushy white mega-brows.

Her features are even more delicate up close. She's got the sweet-sexy look of a fairy. A Tinker Bell, tiny, with clear, cornflower blue eyes that sit above a pert nose and those plump, pouty pink lips I noticed earlier. A sharp indrawn breath has my gaze dropping to her chest. Full, high breasts are emphasized by the arms crossed under them.

She clears her throat again, and my gaze snaps back to her face.

Her earlier scowl's back. And for good reason. I was totally ogling her. I'm about to apologize, but before I can, she says, "Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

Nope. *Bet you'll tell me in the next ten seconds.* I mirror her combative stance and wait.

Are we talking a mild case of dementia or full-on deranged here? Should we call some medical staff? Just my luck—day one of this nightmare, and nutsos are already crawling out of the woodwork.

I groan. There are what, seven minutes before I have to rejoin the hordes?

"The kids..."

"What about them?"

"You aren't paying any attention to what they're saying."

That stops me. *That's* what this is about?

"And you care because...?" I respond in my snottiest voice.

Her hands slice through the air, exasperation obvious. "Because they've waited all year to see you! And you're barely listening to them."

We're starting to attract attention. Bodies twist in our direction.

"And?"

“You’re Santa!” she hisses, sliding a quick glance around us. “You’re ruining the Christmas experience.”

Fucking hell. A card-carrying member of the cult of Christmas. A Santa fanatic. “Well, what would you like me to do?”

She doesn’t miss a beat. “Better.”

Specificity, aren’t you scarce today?

“Lady, I have billions of kids the world over. Would you have time for each and every one of them?” It’s as if all my frustration has come to a head, and the only target available is the woman currently giving me attitude.

“You need to do better,” she repeats stubbornly.

“Says who?”

“Says...says...the store policy!”

I blink. “The store policy?”

“Yes.”

“*This* store policy?” I snicker. Somehow, I doubt we’ve got a Santa *clause* in there.

Her frown deepens even as she nods. A very swift, very decisive nod. If she decrees it, it must be so.

I refuse to smile. Not a chance. “And what would you know about the Forrester & Sons Santa policy?” I drawl.

She opens her mouth, but nothing emerges. Her teeth sink into her bottom lip.

I barely resist the urge to crow and say, “You see!” Instead, I raise bushy eyebrows.

“I can get the parents to sign a petition.” Her back’s in danger of snapping.

My pulse skitters, and I slide a quick glance at her hand. No ring. *Huh*.

“And where’s your kid?” I ask, just to confirm.

That shuts her up.

“Well?” I goad when she doesn’t respond.

“I don’t have kids.”

“Then what makes you an expert?”

“It’s just not done. You need to work on your performance.” Her expression is mutinous.

My performance?

Don’t do it. Don’t laugh. But this is the most fun I’ve had all morning. Hell, the most fun I’ve had all month. “No one’s ever complained about my *performance* before.” The innuendo in my words is unmistakable. Suddenly, all the frustration of the morning vanishes.

Her eyes flash. A sudden vision of her blazes through my mind—her blond hair loose around her face, brilliant blue gaze sparkling with passion and not fury, pink lips swollen, not from her teeth but from my mouth on hers.

Thankfully, before I can go too far down that road, the barista approaches, eyeing us both warily. “Santa. Your drink. Decaf black.” One corner of her mouth lifts. “Sorry again it’s not boozy.”

“Thank you.” I accept the cardboard cup with a smile.

When I turn back to the blonde, she’s taking deep, slow inhaleds—and maybe counting under her breath? “You ordered alcohol? On the job?” she sputters the moment the barista is out of earshot.

Pixie might need the booze more than I do. I roll my shoulders in the most exaggerated shrug I can manage and take a sip of coffee being careful not to get it on my newly acquired facial hair. Not bad. Should come over here more often. Or get one of these machines installed at work. Actual work.

“You need to do better. Take some initiative.”

So, we’re not done yet. Time to shut this down. “Initiative, huh?” I drawl, meeting her stare over the rim of my cup.

“Yes?”

I lean forward. “Happy to. You going to provide me with some incentive?”

She looks puzzled.

Incentive. I give her another long, appraising glance. Yep, I’m acting like a total boor now, but I can’t seem to help it.

“You...you...pig!” she snarls, loud and clear.

Conversations around us come to a screeching halt.

I suspect the only reason I don’t end up with my drink dripping down my face is because of our audience, but to be sure... “Watch the suit. You don’t want to be responsible for ruining the *Christmas experience*, do you?” I waggle my eyebrows for effect.

She plants her hands on her hips, her breasts bouncing with the movement. Her pink mouth opens to blast me again. Three. Two—

“Why’s that lady yelling at Santa?” a little voice pipes up from a few feet away.

The lady in question’s eyes flare, but her mouth snaps shut, and she takes a small step back.

My lips quirk. No one gets away with yelling at Santa, no matter how shitty he is.

I lower my head until we’re a whisper’s width apart. I’m hit with the scent of vanilla, cinnamon, and absolute fury. “Sounds like *some* people find my performance up to par.”

A strangled gurgle leaves her as she balls her fists. “I won’t let you get away with this,” she vows.

I wink. “Oh no? I think you just did.”

CHAPTER FOUR

KRISTA

I WATCH, open-mouthed, as he struts away, giving no fucks. What. An. Asshole. My breath heaves, and I force it to slow.

Cool. Calm. Collected. Yep. That's me.

I slink back to my spot overlooking the toy floor, my face flaming as I avoid the assessing eyes that witnessed me berate Santa. How am I the bad guy here? A few helpful tips. That's all I intended to share, but before I could stop it, my mouth was running ahead of me again. It's the first day of work for both of us. We could have helped each other. Not that Santa knows that I'm here for work.

My firm, Boyer & Bleecker Marketing, has been contracted by F&S International, the parent company of Forrester & Sons to evaluate their Christmas department. There's no one I can register a complaint with. The managers here aren't supposed to know I've been hired. In any case, I'm not supposed to influence the action. And yes, I recognize I was totally trying to influence the action. I'm the furthest thing from impartial.

A roar comes from below. Santa—Satan—is back in his sleigh. He looks bored out of his mind. I don't even attempt to hide my disgust. What's the point?

How the hell did that, *that* disinterested douchebag manage to get a job as Santa? Doesn't Forrester & Sons screen their employees? The man could *try* to fake it better for the kids. He's playing one of their formative characters. Santa, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny. The childhood trifecta.

Moments like these are emblazoned on a child's mind forever. That first letter scrawled when a tooth goes missing. The first colored egg at Easter. A stocking full of presents on Christmas morning.

Give the kids that, for now. Because heartbreak follows soon enough. Everyone goes through the trauma of learning Santa isn't real. Adults should at least let the children down easy.

Downstairs, an adorable little boy in a Spider-Man costume is on Santa's lap. Does Santa give a shit? Nope.

He repeats his spiel by rote. "Ho-ho-ho, what do you want for Christmas?" Ugh. It's no better than a voice at the drive-thru. Now that I have some distance, I attempt to examine him more objectively. I was too annoyed when we were toe-to-toe. He was taller than I would have expected, and it was hard to determine how old he was under all that facial hair.

He's sneaking another peek at his phone. That's at least the eleventh time in the last fifteen minutes.

He looks up and catches me staring. He winks. I snap my gaze away. Rude.

Me: OMG, the Santa here is a disaster.

Zoe: At least you're not stuck evaluating bank tellers.

Callie: Better than trolling a mall food court. [vomit emoji]

Me: Free food!

Callie: My diet!

Zoe: Eh. That's what New Year's resolutions are for.

Callie: Are they still New Year's resolutions if they've carried over from last year? And the year before that? And the year before that???

The second the sign flips announcing Santa's going on break again, I'm out of my seat. The schedule the corporate offices provided my boss shows that Santa's got a good two hours off. Pretty generous, but I'm not complaining—my break's as long as his.

I review my notes over a sandwich at a nearby diner that holiday cheer forgot—the basement-level specialty food hall at Forrester & Sons is crazy expensive. After lunch, I wander back into the store. I’ve a few minutes before the afternoon session starts, so I browse the perfume aisles. Gorgeous smells meld, but somehow the resulting combination is harmonious. I bring a bottle of a scent my mom might like to my nose, but when I’m told the price, it’s promptly set back down again. Yes to the sample, no to the bottle.

Eventually, I head back to the bookstore. It’s much larger than I thought. An end-aisle showcases the latest bestsellers. Another display has a stack of children’s picture books, along with a few box sets pre-packaged in Forrester & Sons wrapping paper. A parent flips through the pages of a fairy tale, but her little girl—a child maybe around five or six—tugs at her skirt and points at Peppermint Plaza. *Another one who prefers Santa.*

The mom turns, and our eyes catch. She gives me a shrug and a slight “What can I say” smile and allows herself to be hauled down the stairs. *Hope you won’t be too sorry, kid.*

I scan the marketing and business books available. But my eyes keep drifting to the section a few shelves over—travel.

Madrid. Milan. Monaco. Nice. Oman. I trace my finger along the spines. Paris has the most books by far. *Paris Architecture. Things to See in France. Paris on a Budget.* I pause—okay, that’s more like it.

I slide it out and thumb through the glossy pages. Yeah. Not *my* budget. At least not in the near future. I sigh wistfully as I picture it. The cafés, the Moulin Rouge, the Louvre. And Paris at Christmas? God, a dream come true.

Plus, it’s also the city of love. Not that I have a lover to see it with. I’m a serial monogamist, and my last couple of dates were only interested in hookups. I can’t do casual, not with the way I was raised. The guys wouldn’t know what romance was if it bit them in the ass. Zoe and Callie say I should give up the Hallmark holiday movies and set up my Tinder profile instead. No, thank you.

My shoulders slump as I return the book to its spot.

I manage to snag the same table at the balcony and settle down with another coffee right at 2 p.m. Another line of kids, even longer than this morning's, has formed behind the velvet rope. There's some entertainment going. A juggler wields green and red balls, tossing and catching in perfect arcs. An elf prances back and forth on a tightrope strung between two Christmas trees. A ballet dancer in her Sugar Plum Fairy costume performs an abbreviated number with her entourage.

Parents and a few kids clap, but the restless energy climbs with every minute. No Santa yet. I slide a quick glance at a nearby clock and frown. It's ten minutes after. Where is he?

I flip open my notebook and turn to the page with my pre-written checklist.

Punctual. *Nope.*

Polite. *Nope.*

Professional. *Nope.*

A ruckus sounds from the floor. Ah, so his majesty has decided to make an appearance after all. But is he in a hurry to make it to his post? Nope. He's strolling along, all la-di-dah. What a Grinch.

The only consolation is that once the children start coming, all that arrogance vanishes. It would be entertaining if it wasn't downright horrifying.

One kid starts crying. My heart cracks. The asshole responsible doesn't even have the grace to look regretful. He just sneaks another look at his phone. That does it.

I jot down a few more comments, then snap my notebook shut.

Hasta la vista, Santa.

CHAPTER FIVE

ZACH

I'M BACK in my own clothes and tugging my Yankees cap lower over my forehead as I exit the store, navigating past tourists ooh-ing and ahh-ing at the window displays. I stalk across the street and through the glass double doors of the F&S headquarters. A grim-faced security guard tries to intercept me. I spear him with a glare when he blocks my path.

His eyes widen, and he retreats a couple of steps, lifting his hands in appeasement. "Sorry, Mr. Forrester. Didn't recognize you for a second there."

I pause in my quest for the elevator. "No worries," I say, trying for a more pleasant expression. No need to take my shit out on the people who work for me. I'm not an asshole.

No? You sure came off as one today.

With the woman in the coffee shop.

Fuck.

I hit the button for my level, and the moment the doors slide closed, I squeeze my lids shut tight and rub my hand across my face. I really was an asshole, like she said. Sure, I can be a hard-ass when it comes to business, but I like to think I'm not an absolute dick to people, especially not women. "Charm goes further than conceit" is a lesson you learn early in my family. A suave presence generally smooths over any hard feelings when wheeling and dealing, and everyone walks away smiling and with pockets a good deal heavier.

Still, I can't stop my lips from twitching at the memory of the horrified expression on the blonde's face earlier. She was

my one spot of entertainment all day. Anyone else, and I'd have apologized immediately, but the red suit seems to have brought on more nasty than nice. Anyway, it's not like I'll ever see her again. A quick pang flashes through me at that. Gotta find some other form of amusement tomorrow, or I'll lose my mind when the kids attack me again. Just the thought makes me shudder.

Thank fuck not many people are around once I get to my floor. There's only so much tact remaining in my bones.

My PA, Mia, hurries to her feet when I approach my office. "Mr. Forrester?"

"Hey, Mia. Any messages? I saw the transcripts of the meeting today with the Martin Group. Can you get me the files?"

"Of course. Printouts are on your desk, and I also sent them to you via email."

"Right." I did see those documents come through, but it's not like I could sneak off to read forty-five pages on my phone screen.

My morning started at 5 a.m. I've been called a workaholic before but squeezing my typical workday of twelve hours into four is a challenge even for me. Now's when Santa's Christmas time-bending abilities would be handy because shit's still got to get done. I count on people to deliver, which means I expect the same of myself. Lead by example. No rest for the wicked or weary in my world.

"Also, Mr. Callahan wanted to know if you'll be attending the benefit on the fifteenth?" she inquires from behind me as I enter the comforting crispness of my glass and chrome office.

"Sure. Whatever." The door shuts on my last word.

My cap lands on one of the chairs facing my desk, and I walk to the sideboard to pour myself a tumbler of Scotch. Today calls for a twenty-five-year-old vintage.

When I sink into my ergonomic chair, I groan in relief, savoring the scent of the rich leather. Need to see about getting

something better to park my ass on at the store if I'm going to be there all week.

My shoes land on the glass surface as I recline with my stack of papers and get to work.

Sometime later, Mia's voice sounds through the intercom, interrupting my perusal of the asinine contract on my lap. "Mr. Forrester—"

My door bangs open and a tall gray-haired version of myself strides in.

My assistant is hot on his heels. "—the other Mr. Forrester." Her high-pitched tone echoes over both the speakers and in person.

Harold Forrester, my grandfather. The inspirer of pain and suffering, far and wide.

It's fine. Do the little song and dance as necessary, just for a little while longer. Or not. He's planning to stick around as chairperson of the board, coming and going as he pleases even after I take over as CEO. I'm not going to let him get in the way once I'm in charge. I have plans for the company and the employees.

"Grandfather." I slowly swing my legs off the table and sit up straight, my only concession to his age and position. I'm not standing on principle. Not after what he made me do today.

"Zachary."

I cross my arms, waiting for him to reveal the reason for his appearance.

"How did it go?" he asks.

"How do you think?" Apparently, today's passive-aggressive attitude hasn't been fully depleted.

"Not well," he states. It's not a question; there's not even a hint of doubt in his tone. I grunt.

He saunters over to the sideboard and examines the bottle I just uncorked before pouring himself two fingers. He picks up

my cap by the bill and tosses it onto the desk between us then settles down directly across from me.

Not a fly-by visit, then.

“You weren’t a hit with the kids.”

“Nope.” I match his belligerent tone.

“You were also rude to the staff.” He leans back and knits his fingers together with all the authority of an octogenarian determined to keep his tentacles in every part of this company—and my life.

I raise my brows at this, plant my hands flat on the glass surface in front of me, and frown. “What are you talking about?”

He pulls out his phone. It’s the latest model, with one of the extra-large screens—the only concession to his advancing age—and reads. “The Forrester & Sons display was exemplary, and the sales staff were knowledgeable and competent. However, the current Santa was argumentative and displayed little aptitude with the children. In addition, he arrived late, interacted poorly with the parents, and was uncooperative with his colleagues. It is our objective opinion that to maintain the highest quality customers have come to expect from Forrester & Sons, the store would be better served hiring a replacement Santa for the season, someone who will take more initiative.”

Initiative.

A picture of Tinker Bell flashes through my mind. Understanding sets in.

“You had me watched?” I narrow my eyes at my grandfather.

He doesn’t answer.

“You... “Ass. So, it’s an inherited flaw, then. Part of the family DNA.

“What firm are you using?” I ask.

“Some new-ish shop. Boyer & Bleecker Marketing. A Ms. Krista Parr did the honors as today’s secret shopper. Her report was extremely comprehensive.”

Boyer & Bleecker. Not one of our usual vendors. “How long do you have them until?” I strive to keep my voice even.

“They’re contracted through Christmas Eve.”

“Then un-contract them. Or I will.”

Unblinking blue eyes stare back at me. “The agreement stands. Otherwise, yours doesn’t.”

“That’s blackmail.”

He shrugs. “I prefer to think of it as leverage.”

“I don’t need a watchdog.” I glare. He’ll have me dancing to his tune long after this is over. For a second, I feel a glimmer of sympathy for dear old Dad.

“Think of it as incentive. Or take some initiative, like the review said.”

“You can’t do this.”

He picks up his drink and salutes me. “My company. My rules.”

CHAPTER SIX

KRISTA

“*ARE YOU INSANE?*”

My boss, Bill Boyer, stands behind his desk in purple-faced shock. Right now, I’m pretty sure if the table wasn’t between us, he would have lunged across and wrapped his meaty hands around my neck. Sweat pours down his temples, and the collar of his shirt is a damp, mottled indigo. It’s hard to tell if it’s perspiration or pomade keeping his thinning blond hair slicked back from his forehead.

I instinctively shrink back. My eyes fly to the glass divider that separates his office from the rest of the floor, also known as the pit. The faint hum of voices is audible through the partition. Ergo, it would be fair to assume people outside can hear Bill go off on me, too. But no one seems to pay attention. They’re either so used to his blowups or don’t care.

An email was waiting for me when I woke up, summoning me to the head office of Boyer & Bleecker Marketing, so I’m spending the morning here instead of Forrester & Sons.

“You gave F&S International a three. *A three!*”

“Well, yes.”

“You don’t give a client like that a three and expect to stay in business. That report went to the higher-ups!”

“Their Santa—”

“I don’t care if their Santa fucking rips lines of coke off an elf’s ass. F&S does not get a three!”

“But aren’t they paying us to give them objective feedback they can act on?” Life skills like keeping my mouth shut at times like these would come in handy right about now.

He snorts. “They *hire* us to make them feel good about themselves. Not that we’d ever give them a perfect ten—an eight or nine will do. Just enough to make them feel like there’s room for improvement and to keep us coming back, and not low enough for them to write us off and think that we know more about their businesses than they do.” His volume picks up.

My face scrunches into a scowl before I can smooth it out. I clench my fingers and keep my voice neutral.

“But I thought—”

“I don’t pay you to think!” Bill continues, “If I want your opinion, I’ll give it to you!” He blinks, and then his eyes light up as if he realizes he’s said something witty. I bet he wants to write it down. Bill Boyer sees himself as the Don Draper of the twenty-first century, crafting billboard-worthy lines in his head. His favorite phrase is “Spin for the win.”

He sucks in another deep breath. Is he attempting to calm down or load up on more air to blast me? “Look, Krista, this was a simple assignment. I mean, how fucking hard is it to watch fucking Santa Claus listen to kids whine about what they want for Christmas? I’m not asking you to poke around in people’s garbage, Princess. This assignment is gold. Anyone would kill for it. You’re lucky Marla went on early maternity leave, and everyone else was booked. But if you don’t think you can manage Forrester & Sons, maybe you’d prefer assessing sex toys in Las Vegas?”

For a second, his eyes run over me, and I’m all too conscious of the wrinkled pants and creased shirt I threw on this morning. Today’s spy outfit is more Melissa McCarthy than Mrs. Smith—not that I’d ever expect to pull off an Angelina Jolie ensemble.

Even though I’m quaking on the inside, I lift my chin in response. “No, sir.”

I take a step back to avoid droplets of saliva flying from his mouth as he spits out his next words. “Know how much F&S International is worth? Billions. Know how much they’re worth to us? Millions.” He points a stubby finger at me. “And what are they worth to you? Your job. And remember, marketing is a small world, Ms. Parr.”

He flails his arms around his office at the posters from various campaigns. Some of his own mingle with images from the ’60s.

He’s right. If I tank this assignment, I’ll lose my best chance to travel. I shudder at the thought of my parents’ disappointed expressions. Not that they’d be surprised. They’re of the opinion that I should do God’s work. Well, I am. Making the world a better place, one evaluation report at a time.

I wait, sure Bill’s about to fire me.

“Are you sending someone else in, then?” My voice is small, even as my mind pounds in panic.

“No,” he bites out in disgust. “They want the same person back.” Before I can react, he tacks on, “And no, despite your recommendations—” his tone makes it clear that the report I submitted was my own testimonial to live and die by “—yesterday’s Santa isn’t going anywhere. So sit back, enjoy the gig and suck it up!”

I think he expects me to click my heels together and salute him with an “Aye, aye, sir.” The best I can manage is reluctant nod instead.

Shit. I’m stuck with Santa.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ZACH

“EYE OF THE TIGER” plays through my earbuds as I don my costume for day two. *I can do this*. I drop into a couple of squats to psych myself up. All that does is make the fat suit blubber over my abs. Shit. I’m still half-convinced this is all a miserable nightmare, and I’m just one snooze button from waking up, laid out on the couch in my office.

I crack the door open an inch and peek out the stockroom. My stomach plummets, and a ball of nausea hits me at the sight of the already assembled mob. My eyes sweep up to the glass balustrade of the mezzanine floor. I frown. My sexy little stalker isn’t there.

A strange disappointment bubbles in my gut. Sparring with my pixie was probably the most fun I’d had yesterday. Until I’d found out she was sent there to spy on me.

I retreat and prowl the room—three steps, then an about-face. Fucking space is too damned small to even pace properly. Still, I take another turn, managing four strides this time.

Out with the earbuds. I yank on the hat and beard, feeling around to ensure none of my dark hairs are visible. I roll my shoulders a couple of times before lowering them into a slouch.

The crowd cheers when I walk through the door. I deepen my voice. “Ho, ho, ho.”

Alice waits with the first batch of kids. She greets me with a bright smile and a cheery, “Hi, Santa!” that the children

echo. For one moment, I allow myself to bask in the attention. It's all a mindset. You can't control your circumstances. All you can control is how you react to them.

Yep. Piece of cake.

The rest of my motley crew is all in place. Steven gives me what I think is an encouraging nod from the photo area. A glance at the closest exit shows an impassive Tommy stationed with his arms crossed. I'm still not sure if his job is to protect the kids from me or me from the kids. He eyes me back. Lucky fucker is in a dark suit, while the rest of us are in clown costumes.

I settle into my sleigh. A little ergonomic backrest has been strapped to the velvet cushion alongside my whip. God bless Meredith. I send her a quick thank you text with another request, and my lips curl up in my first genuine grin of the day before I motion to Alice.

“Hit me.”

X kids later I wouldn't say I'm getting the hang of things, but the morning is less painful now that my focus is on how the department is running rather than the rug rats using me as a jungle gym. I grimace on cue with the toddler on my lap, and a flash goes off. When Alice bends to retrieve him, I beckon her closer.

Time to make Santa my bitch.

“Hey. Tell Steven to get the mom's email address. We'll be sending all the parents the photos for free, along with links to the items their kids wished for and a discount coupon valid for twenty-four hours.”

“But we can't—” Her eyes slide to Alfie, the GM, chatting with a customer by the LEGO display.

I follow her gaze. “I'll take care of management.”

Whipping out my phone, I wave it at the kids. “Santa needs to send a quick message to the North Pole toy factory!”

There's a collective frown from the parents, but the children cheer. *Finally, some appreciation around here.*

A second later, Alfie excuses himself. He fishes his phone out of his pocket. His forehead scrunches up, and then he hurries to the rear of the store. *Good.* I quickly check my inbox to see how the rest of my company is faring. No major fires, thank fuck.

Another glance up at the coffee shop reveals my stalker has finally turned up. So much for punctuality. I expect her to frown at the latest stunt with my phone but get nothing. *Huh.*

Here I am, showing *initiative*, and all she's doing is staring right through me. Not that I'm surprised after my comments yesterday. But she seems a little bedraggled. Maybe her conscience kept her up all night. She *did* try to get Santa kicked to the curb, after all. *You'll have to try harder, Shopper.*

A little kid spits up on me, and I roll my eyes and groan. I catch sight of Krista again. Her lips twitch for the first time all morning. She raises her cup, takes a sip, and turns her back to me. So much for doing her job. I occupy myself with wiping off the drool and Life Saver residue that's congealed into a molten mess on my chest.

The moment I'm back in the stockroom for my lunch break, I tear off the rectangular glasses. I'm back in my suit faster than Superman switching into Clark Kent mode.

I slip out a side door. A chorus of "Good afternoon, Mr. Forrester" greets me when I re-enter from the main entrance, along with a few alarmed glances from the floor managers. I'm not in the habit of dropping in unexpectedly.

Alfie shows up by my side. "Sir. We weren't expecting you. Though Ms. Carter sent along your message about the discounts. Brilliant idea to use the photos as a loss leader."

Kiss ass.

But I just respond, "Sometimes, people just need to be provided with the right incentive."

He smiles and makes noises of agreement.

I pretend to look around, peruse the store. I tip my chin at Tommy, still on duty. "He doesn't seem to fit in with the rest of the staff," I comment. "Not as...jolly."

The GM follows my gaze. “Ah. I’ll get that taken care of ASAP.”

I nod my thanks, then turn to the stairs leading to the mezzanine. “I might grab a drink. The coffee shop does some Christmas specials, right?”

“Right, excellent ones. Let me escort you up.”

“No need.” I wave him off.

After a slight hesitation, he steps aside and melts into the background. “Of course. Of course.”

Adrenaline surges through me with every step. Excitement. As if I’m getting ready to crow victory and not about pull the rug right out from under her. I skip the counter entirely, ignoring the admiring looks I’m accustomed to.

My quarry is bent over a book with her bottom lip pinched between her teeth. She taps her pencil on the page and mouths something under her breath. I saunter closer.

“Sey oon pre-na-it oon verre oon des ses quatre?”

Where can a girl get a drink? A slight grin spreads over my face. “I believe it’s said, ‘*Si on prenait un verre un de ces quatres?*’”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I ALMOST CHOKE on my so-called French. My gaze flies up. And up. And up until it crashes into brilliant blue eyes framed in a face so perfect it could belong to a model. The man's gorgeous, head to toe, with tanned skin, inky hair that curls just the slightest bit, and the tiniest cleft in his chin to complete the picture.

Maybe he's gotten lost on his way from the designer men's department? No—his suit fits his broad shoulders like it was made for him.

And he's smiling. *At me?* Heat rushes up my chest and face. I've been staring like a sex-struck kitten. And I am. Sex-starved, that is.

I sit up straighter, pressing a hand against my belly. *Butterflies, be still.* But do they pay attention? Nope.

“Je serais ravi de t'offrir un verre.”

Who knows what he's saying? But who cares? His voice is delicious. Low, sexy, and stern. The type of voice that just invites naughtiness. It brings to mind vibrating sex toys and star-filled sunsets. Skinny dips, so I can savor every bit of his... Yep, sex-starved, for sure. Whatever. Just please keep murmuring. Sweet nothings in French or English, unintelligible grunts and mutterings, even the latest directives from the IRS—I'm not picky.

Something must give away my thoughts *and* my lack of understanding because he translates, “I'd be happy to take you out to drinks.” He smirks.

My butterflies sprout butterflies as his words register. “Ummm.” I push a lock of hair behind my ear. My mouth opens again, but no other sound emerges.

Unconcerned by my lack of language, he continues, “Or would you like that drink now? Maybe another one of those?” He nods at the empty cup in front of me. All that’s left is a cube’s worth of melted coffee, topped off with a paper straw, mangled from my chewing.

When I don’t respond, the space between his brows crease. “*Parlez-vous français?*”

That jolts me into action. That much I understand. “No. I mean, I’m trying to learn...”

He cocks his head at the book in front of me. “Got a trip planned?”

I snort, and not delicately. The noise is what I imagine a reindeer fart sound like. My hands fly to cover the lower half of my face.

Mouth, meet foot, thigh, and throat.

I look up. A smirk threatens his face, but he waits. How have I not scared him off?

“No...not yet. Maybe someday. You speak? French, I mean...you speak French?” Oh, tongue, there you are.

He shrugs, but his eyes gleam. “Only enough to be dangerous.”

Tingles spiral up my spine. *Dangerous* with this guy sounds downright delicious. Is he flirting? His gaze slides down me, its heat burning away every ounce of my professionalism. Of all the days to look like a schlep...But he’s definitely flirting.

“Have you been?”

“A few times.”

I swallow, and my lashes flutter. His gaze fixes on my mouth, now dry as the dusty Sahara. Men don’t look at me like

this. Not men like *him*. I don't do casual but this guy could make me rethink that stance.

A brief pause to honor my muteness.

"You're sitting?" he asks. "Shopping?" Unlike the neighboring tables teeming with people and their gift-wrapped booty, I have no bags around me.

"Uh...just taking in the ambiance." And what an ambiance it is. Right at this moment, I'm happy to bestow Forrester & Sons all the gold stars for the vision before me. What would it be like to touch him? But I restrain my fingers from reaching out and flap them toward Peppermint Plaza instead.

"Maybe you'd like a turn on Santa's lap?"

His playfully wicked tone sounds like a mangled piano. I almost gag at the thought of sitting on Santa's lap. "No way."

"Not a fan of the fat man?" Is that derision in his tone?

"Not that one." I wave at the balcony.

"No?" That smirk again. There's something familiar about it.

I ignore his question and return with one of my own.

"What about you? You shopping for friends? Family?" As inconspicuously as possible, I check his fingers for a ring. And what fingers they are. Fingers that promise thrumming and throbbing and thrusting. Long and elegant. Thankfully, bare.

"No. Just checking things out as well."

Okay. I take a deep breath. His eyes flicker down. Did he just look at my boobs? Is it bad that I'm not offended?

His gaze flashes back to mine. "So, would you like that drink now, Ms. Parr?" he drawls.

Wait. My eyes narrow. "How do you know my name?" Creepers come in pretty packages, too.

"Zach Forrester." He reaches out. Those lovely long fingers now seem like coiling serpents.

My brows and hairline meet and marry in that moment. “Zach Forrester. Forrester as in...” I stare at his hand. What am I supposed to do with it? Instead, my index finger rises, almost of its own accord, and pointing up, then circles as if to encompass the building, the air, the very atmosphere.

“Yes. That’s me,” he confirms.

The door clangs on my butterflies, and they all drop dead.

Zach Forrester. That Forrester. And he knows who I am. Ergo, he got my report. Ergo, he knows what I said. *Errgh*. Sick swirls in my stomach. When Bill said it was going to a higher-up at F&S International, I never dreamed it would go to the *highest* higher-up. Blood whooshes in my veins, a rapid, rising current.

“Thank you for sharing your thoughts with the executive team. They were very...insightful,” he says when I remain silent.

How is he making even those words sound dirty? A gift. One that’s a complete waste.

Shit. Shit. Shitastic. The pads of all ten of my fingers press into the counter surface to keep me from swaying.

“So, Ms. Parr.” He draws out the “aaarrrr.” That vibrator voice now sounds like a tractor running over my body. I’m roadkill.

Leave me to die in peace. Please.

But, no. Instead, he takes the chair directly in front of me and settles in so close that our knees brush.

That movement sets my heartbeat ticking again. The beats come faster, then faster still, until they’re all one long, constant, incessant thud in my temples.

“Sounds like you’ve been having difficulties with the store Santa.” He tips his chin down at Peppermint Plaza. I follow his gaze, almost happy for the distraction. But my nemesis is nowhere in sight.

“While I appreciate your recommendation...” Zach draws the words out.

My heart rate picks up. If Bill hears about this, it's goodbye, job. Goodbye, New York. See you in my next life, Paris. *Maybe.*

I fight to find something inoffensive. "It's just that your Santa..."

He sighs. "Yeah. That's the one thing I'm not able to change."

My nose wrinkles. "No?"

"Contracts are in place."

"I see." I don't, really. But it doesn't matter. My mission is clear. "My job is to remain impartial. Observe and report." *There. That sounded professional, right?*

"And it seems like you have. Observed. Reported."

Is it me, or is there an edge to his tone?

"Um. You don't need to worry about the report," I say.

"No?"

"Yeah. My boss spoke to me this morning. He made me aware of your...um...*understanding*. That's why I wasn't in on time." *And now confess you were late, why don't you?*

"And what did he have to say?" Zach's forehead pinches in confusion. But this can't be news to him, can it?

"Just that you guys have an agreement. I'm sorry I wasn't aware of it before."

"What agreement?" For a second, a scowl crosses over his features.

"Uh...Just that this is all just a formality." I wave another limp hand at Peppermint Plaza. "I'll be withdrawing yesterday's report. You won't have to worry about anything going forward," I promise.

For some reason, his frown deepens.

"You're just going to let me—my company—off the hook?"

I shrug. "That's the job, isn't it?" I look down at my nails.

“No, it isn’t. I—we—rely on honest feedback. Where there is room for improvement, I want it. F&S International didn’t become what it is today by resting on its laurels.” His voice is sharp.

I look up. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Zach tips his head to the side.

Another silence.

“What about improve, then?”

“Huh?” I blink.

“The whole point of the secret shopper concept is to gain insights that allow businesses to improve.”

“Er...yes. Of course. But that usually happens once the client has all our...um...findings.”

He strokes his chin, bringing my attention to the slight cleft there. My finger tingles, craving a tour of the little crevice.

“It does F&S International little good to get a final report after the season’s over. Santa’s long gone at that point. I prefer action to words, and it sounds like you have some ideas. I’d like you to take charge of working with Santa and helping him do better.”

My eyes widen at his words. “Me? I don’t think so. Maybe one of the floor managers? Or you?”

“Sometimes we need to hear from an outside source. Think of it as remedial classes. I’ll have him come up and see you after his shift today.” His tone brooks no argument.

I try to hide a grimace. Not successfully because Zach’s gaze narrows. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“It’s not part of my job description.” *Oh, look—some backbone.*

“There’s nothing wrong with going above and beyond. Taking *initiative* like you recommended.” Zach winks before tacking on, “and I want your unfiltered reports.”

I want you, too. I shake my head to get a grip.

“After all, I should get my money’s worth out of Boyer & Bleecker.”

Oh. Yeah. That. I crash land back to earth.

Zach picks up my phone, and it lights up with a background wallpaper of the Eiffel Tower silhouetted against a pale pink sky. A small smile pulls at his lips.

“May I?” He holds the screen in front of me. I blink obediently at the front-facing camera, and it unlocks.

He flips it to face him and punches something in. Hits the call button and his own phone buzzes. A no-nonsense ping. You can tell a lot about a person by their ringtone.

“My number, Ms. Parr. Any more difficulties, you inform me directly. Oh, and let me know if there’s trouble from your boss.” It’s a command, not a request.

“*A bientôt*, Ms. Parr. Krista.”

My name sounds like a kiss on his lips. I’m not vain, but I could listen to him repeat it forever. If only he wasn’t walking away.

* * *

ZACH FORRESTER. My boss. Well, not *technically* my boss. My client. I’m on loan to him through Christmas Eve.

And I’m drooling. Not the most attractive trait in a professional. Not the most attractive trait. Period.

But right now, I have bigger problems than excess saliva.

Me: SOS

Callie: What’s wrong?

Me: Cover blown. Cover blown.

Zoe: Aborting mission?

Me: No. Made contact with the boss.

Callie: Why’s that bad?

I pull up the official F&S International website and grab Zach's photo from the "About the Company" section, where he's shown alongside his grandfather, Harold Forrester, and send it to the chat.

Callie: [Big eyes emoji] Holy shit.

Zoe: Christmas came early, and Santa delivered!

Quite literally. Because Santa's the only reason Zach Forrester approached me to begin with. It's a good thing I knew Santa wasn't real, otherwise I'd be questioning what I did to end up on the naughty list. Because as pretty as Zach is, there's no way this whole remedial class thing is going to work out in my favor. Rehabilitate Santa, indeed! The thought of facing off with him again makes me shudder. No way he'll be receptive to any kind of feedback, well-meant or not.

Me: This is a disaster.

Callie: Why?

Me: Zach Forrester wants me to train Santa.

Callie: ???

Zoe: Are you allowed to do that?

Me: [Shrug emoji] No idea. I've never done anything like it. But Bill said to keep F&S happy no matter what. He'll kill me if he finds out they want to keep getting my version of the reports.

Callie: Does he even have to know? All he cares about is keeping F&S on as a client.

Zoe: Callie's right. Think about it—you help Santa do better, and you won't even have to lie in your reports. You'll keep Bill happy, you'll keep F&S happy, and you'll keep yourself happy with all the eye candy.

She's got a point. I can put together a simple list of pointers for Santa, can't I? After all, wouldn't he want to do better? Really, this is a win-win situation for us both. As long as I hold my temper in check and keep it professional. How hard can it be?

With that, I throw myself into my new mission and watch Santa like a hawk for the rest of the day, taking copious notes and making no secret of it. Every so often, he looks up with a sardonic tilt to his head I suspect is meant for me. I'll be fair but firm. We'll just need to establish who's in charge.

CHAPTER NINE

ZACH

WELL, that was interesting. Ms. Krista Parr wasn't quite the seething virago of yesterday. First, she was all soft and dreamy as she fingered the pages of her book, and then there was her wide-eyed shock when she realized who I was. Oh, sweet, sweet revenge.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning and glance up at the mezzanine. Now that I'm back on my sleigh as Santa, there's no trace of that uncertain shyness of earlier. But she's no longer ignoring me like this morning. Her frown's firmly in place, and if I squint enough, I imagine I'll see her laser-focused eyes and those pouty pink lips.

My dick twitches. *Down, boy.* I grit my teeth and shift in my seat. Thank fuck I don't have a kid on my lap. The last thing I need is for some parent to notice and complain. Bet Krista would just love that. The list of current offenses is long enough.

Speaking of offenses—the whole point of going up there was to scope out the opposition and figure out how best to neutralize the threat. Turns out Krista's boss has gone ahead and done all the dirty work for me. An easy win like this, though? Feels like the game was fixed.

So what if it was? Too much is going on for me to be looking gift horses—or in this case, reindeer—in the mouth. It's not like I don't have other things to do. Hell, my calendar is a mess with juggling meetings and deals between the time here in the store. Relief—that's what I should have been feeling. Thankful.

And so you tacked on remedial classes for Santa? My ass. Just admit you want her already.

My gaze drifts up to her again. She's studying me like a frog she can't wait to stick her scalpels into. Idiot that I am, I'm looking forward to seeing what she's got planned—because it's obvious there is a plan. *Bring it.*

BUT BY THE AFTERNOON, I'm feeling less confident. A boy, older than most, tried to grab my beard. I swatted him off, but he danced out of my way. I glared as he skipped back to fist-bump his waiting friends, sniggering the entire way.

A toddler, docile-looking at first glance, transformed into a little cannibal and almost chomped my hand off when I attempted to take her letter to Santa.

One kid was so rude I told him I'd be skipping his house at Christmas. That sent his mom into hysterics, the third episode today. Seriously, the parents need more handling than their offspring.

A girl came up to me, her face serious, while her dad waited below. In a no-nonsense voice that reminded me of someone else in the vicinity, she declared that she'd been a bad girl and that I could give her gift to someone else. After a tight hug to seal the deal, she hopped off my lap. My laugh that time was real.

When 5 p.m. rolls around, I groan in relief. I need to head back across the street and use what little time and energy I have to deal with the tornado brewing in my office.

A quick peek at the mezzanine finds Krista furiously scribbling in her notebook.

And what do I do? Stay in my Santa suit and haul myself back upstairs. A few minutes extra in the costume won't kill me because, apparently, I've become a glutton for punishment.

The café area is packed with shoppers taking late-afternoon breaks. I ignore curious eyes and cut a path through the crowd straight for Krista's table.

She straightens at the sight of me, and her chin tips up.

I plant my palms on the back of the chair across from her and raise a brow.

She puts her elbows on the wooden tabletop, clasps her hands together, and meets my gaze with a challenging glare of her own. No trace of those lusty looks when I'm not in my Zach Forrester persona. So much for my dashing personality sparkling through.

I peer down at her through my smudged glasses. "I hear you're running the show around here now?" Might as well get the first word in.

Her face goes red, and then she purses her lips. "No, of course not."

I cock my head to the side.

"I've been asked to oversee your...rehabilitation."

Rehabilitation? I'm pretty sure all I asked for were remedial classes. How far gone does she think I am?

"You need to learn to be a better Santa. And I'm going to teach you how," she says with all the zeal of the Christmas crusader she is.

My lips twitch. Rather than backing off—the smart thing to do—I drop into the chair and cross one leg over my other knee. This is going to be good. "Are you?"

"I am."

"Therefore, I'm stuck here instead of going home to dinner?"

Dismay fills her eyes. "I'm so sorry. I didn't even think!" She jumps to her feet and takes a quick peek at the counter. "I'll grab us something. What would you like?"

Wait—she wants to feed me? "It's fine. I'm good."

Right then, my stomach growls in protest of my protest. We both squint at my enormous belly.

"Really, it's no problem," she insists.

Guess I do need to eat. When I stand to accompany her, she motions me back into my seat. I sink down again and raise my hands in surrender. This Secret Shopper gig is wasted on her; it's clear she's a drill sergeant at heart.

Her hips sway as she walks to the counter. Her pants outline the curve of her bottom, the material cupping the globes of her ass. As I force myself to glance away, my gaze crashes into one guy at the next table. His eyes are fixed on Krista's backside as well. I growl, and he turns to me, at first taken aback when he sees my Santa getup. But then he grins conspiratorially. Fucker thinks I'm an old lecher.

My focus switches back to Krista's stuff. Books and pens are strewn across the table. I snort at the sight of a Paris guidebook, discreetly tucked under another marketing hardback. An identical copy is waiting to be read in my office. Maybe I'll ask her for the Cliffs Notes.

Krista returns a few minutes later balancing egg salad and arugula sandwiches, along with two coffees.

"Thanks." I reach for my wallet.

She places her bounty down and waves me off. "Don't worry about it."

Owing anybody for anything makes me uncomfortable, but I don't argue. I unwrap the sandwich, the crinkling of plastic the only sound between us.

Krista does the same. Her tongue peeks out as she takes a dainty bite, calling my attention to her full pink lips. It's all I can do not to groan. Instead, I chomp into my three-tiered concoction and moan for an entirely different reason. Fuck, I'm starving.

"You've got something right there." She taps the corner of her mouth.

I try to brush it off with my finger and almost end up dislodging the corner of my mustache. She laughs. "Let me." She stands and leans over. Vanilla, cinnamon, and the scent of warm, warm woman assault my senses. My gaze slides past her throat, drawn to the slice of skin between the lapels of her

shirt. Pink lace bra. My dick comes to life. I shift in my seat, sitting forward. Down. *Down.*

“Do you want to change into your street clothes? It can’t be easy to eat with all that facial hair.”

I blink, registering her words. “Nah. I’ll stay in the suit. Keeps me in character. You know, like Daniel Day-Lewis does when he plays a role?”

Her teeth clack as her smile drops.

Fine, no Oscar for me, then.

We chew in silence, assessing each other from opposite ends of the table. We finish at the same time. I cross my arms over my chest and lean back, balancing my chair on its hind legs.

A click of her tongue signals disapproval. The edges of my mouth tilt up, but my pose doesn’t change.

Unconcealed hostility burns in her gaze now. *Good luck, Shopper. Better people have tried that tactic on me and failed.*

“Now tell me, how much experience do you have?” As expected, Krista caves first.

“Plenty,” I say huskily. We’re clearly not talking about the same thing.

The crease between her brows deepens, and she crushes the leftover plastic wrapper. “Playing Santa, I mean. How much experience do you have?”

“Ah. This is my first time.”

She purses her lips, probably wondering once again why a place like Forrester & Sons couldn’t do better. Can’t say I disagree.

“And children? How much time have you spent with kids?” she asks.

“None.”

“None?”

“Zilch.”

“Crapsicle,” she mutters under her breath. It takes extra effort to hold back my snort. Louder, she says. “Fine then. I’ve made a list.”

“Checked it twice?” There’s no repressing my unholy grin this time.

“Yes, but don’t get your hopes up—it’s more naughty than nice.”

Why am I not surprised? I chuckle. “Okay, Shopper. Hit me.” I have no objection to a suggestion or two if it’s good for business.

“Shopper?” she repeats quizzically.

I just shrug. “Better than paid tattletale, don’t you think?”

She flinches, and for a second I wonder if I’ve gone too far. But then, very deliberately, Krista withdraws a folded piece of paper from her notebook. The sheet crinkles as she straightens it.

Fucking hell—at least a hundred items are noted in neatly rounded ink.

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

Her lashes flutter in innocence, but the smirk she’s hiding is evil. “So you’re saying you can’t handle it, Santa?”

I snort. “I didn’t say that, Shopper.”

We eye each other, bracing ourselves for the first skirmish.

But our standoff ends prematurely when my phone pings, and I’m forced to surrender first. I pluck it out of my pocket and scan the panicked email from my head of operations. I want to bang my head against the table.

I’m in the middle of typing out a response when Krista clears her throat. I ignore her and keep going, but now I’m biting back a grin, my momentary aggravation vanishing, just like that.

“What’s so amusing?”

I hit send, but instead of putting my phone away, I keep my eyes on the screen just to rile her up.

“Aren’t you a nosy one?” I give her a sidelong glance.

“No, I’m not!”

Finally, I glance up, taking in her flashing eyes. How shocking that her head hasn’t exploded yet.

“Thought you wanted to go through your list?” I taunt.

Krista’s lips stay mutinously tight. Now’s when she’ll say to hell with all this and stalk out. “What’s the point if all your attention is on your phone?”

“I can multitask.”

She harrumphs before trying again. “Look, help me help you. Don’t you want to do well? There may be a bonus in it for you. Or maybe they’ll ask you to do it again next year,” she says winningly.

Yep, she’s not selling it. “Fine. Top three. Take it or leave it.”

She looks like she wants to bargain for more but thinks better of it.

“No more threatening to put the children on the naughty list.”

“No more eye rolling.”

“No more phones.”

With that last item, she points at my phone, then opens her hand, palm up. “Hand it over.”

My mouth drops, and I clutch my phone to my chest. “Not on your life.” And I tack on a grunt for effect, too.

“Why not?”

“I’m doing Santa’s business. Kids use email, too. How’d you feel if your letter remained unread in my inbox?” I aim for a tone of perfectly pious.

Her frosty glare could strike me dead. But she looks at me and takes slow, deep breaths.

“Wait, are you actually counting to ten?”

Krista won't respond, but disappointment is clear in her gaze. I heave out a sigh and tuck my phone in my back pocket, safely out of reach. “Fine, I won't use it as much, okay?”

All I get is a huff of disbelief.

“Cross my heart.”

After a final, appraising glance, she gets to her feet. I can almost hear her think, *Hope you die.*

CHAPTER TEN

ZACH

I ROLL MY SHOULDERS. Exhaustion fills me, even though it's barely eight. And all I did was spend the day sitting on my literal fat ass.

By the time I finally get some actual work in, I'm zapped. When did I turn into such an old man? *Oh yeah, when I started wearing old man clothes.*

I'm almost tempted to skip my weekly poker game with the guys, but I manage to drag myself to the Polaris Premier hotel. At the very least, the booze will be top-shelf.

When I enter the executive suite we usually use, the game's already in session. Ryker, Luke, and Thorne sit on one side of the oval green baize table. Across are Logan and Connor, players for the New York Titans. Noah, who owns the team, along with this hotel, lounges at one curved end.

Luke folds, grunting as he tosses down his cards. He pushes to his feet and stalks to the bar. "I'm making a drink. Want one?" he offers.

"I want the whole damned bottle." I sink into the plush chair he's just vacated with a groan. The room is dim. Quiet. Adult. No millions of colors assaulting my brain. No chorus of "Jingle Bells," looping over and over. Fuck waterboarding; those incessant electric tones are the real torture.

For the first time all day, I feel like myself. Luke passes me a crystal tumbler and I nod my thanks. I take a deep hit of the amber liquid and hold it on my tongue with my eyes closed. It's a match head on my taste buds, but I welcome the

heat. I slowly let the fluid burn down my throat until I can't hold it anymore, then I open my eyes to see Noah throwing down his cards. He's not happy. Time's a-wasting whenever he's not winning.

"You're late," he states brusquely.

"And a good evening to you, too," I drawl.

"You in?" He tips his chin at the cards.

I give him a curt nod. Anything else is beyond me. Logan deals me in, and Ryker slides over a stack of chips. Ten thousand—the regular buy-in.

Half an hour later, I'm down to my last grand.

"What's with you? That's three hands in a row." Ryker frowns. "You might as well just hand over the money."

My head's not in the game. To avoid the curious, concerned looks all around, I lift my glass to my lips.

"Well?" Thorne repeats.

Or not.

"I've been spending more time at the store," I mumble, eyeing my remaining chips. Maybe I'm better off pressing a couple of the flat disks to my aching lids.

"Retail?" Noah shudders. "At this time of the year?"

"Tell me about it," I mutter. Before I can elaborate, the last straggler breezes in. Jake Cunningham, the running back for the Titans.

"Hey, man, haven't seen you in ages. How you been?" Thorne stands and slaps him on the back.

Jake rubs a hand over his face and yawns. "Sleep would be nice. Twins, man, you have no idea."

"Oh, I know," I heave out, leaning my head back. Fuck, I'm exhausted.

Everyone swivels to me with expressions ranging from speculation to horror.

Ryker's brows draw together. "Don't tell me you've found yourself a baby mama?"

My eyes widen as his words register. I shudder. "No way." And after enduring this holly jolly hell, not ever. Then I can take this fucking Santa ritual to the grave with me.

"So?" He waits.

Might as well confess. "Fuck it. I'm Santa. At the store." I say the words under my breath.

He blinks. "Say that again?"

"I'm motherfucking Santa Claus. St. Nick. Kris Kringle. Take your pick," I almost shout.

Out tumbles the story of the stupid tradition.

"You've got a Claus *clause!*" Jake-the-fuckwit thinks he's so witty. *Really, buddy? You gotta come up with your own material*

"Now, this I have to see." Logan grabs his phone and pulls up the official Instagram account for Forrester & Sons. I recognize the shot of me with a toddler from this afternoon. Seconds later, he's doubled over, laughing.

Noah snatches the phone out of his hand. "No doubt about it—red's your color." He strokes his chin, and I'm hit with the urge to sock him right there.

Connor's teeth flash wide. He's barely keeping himself from rubbing his hands together. "What are your hours? IRL or it didn't happen."

My head snaps up. "No fucking way. The last thing I need is one of you jokers showing up at the store."

"Oh, no?" he responds.

"If you want access to my place in Aspen, you'll stay away. That's how."

That makes the little shitter lose his grin. "Fine."

"I get a pass. I have kids," Jake pipes in. Smug asshole. I'm tempted to remind him it's not all that difficult to father

children. I've been surrounded by proof all day.

"No."

Luke takes a turn with the phone and scrolls to a photo with Alice. "She's hot. Not a bad way to spend the season."

I pin him with a glare. "Are you kidding? She's an employee."

He shrugs. "If you've got the right HR policies in place..."

My jaw clenches so hard it's in danger of snapping. "We're not all horndogs like you. Besides, I have a secret shopper on my ass all day."

Luke almost spews out his drink. "What?"

"A secret shopper," I repeat. "Well, not-so-secret anymore."

"Wait, you got Big Brothered?" Ryker is bug-eyed. Not a good look on him.

"How the hell did that happen?" Connor asks.

"Granddad. He's a prick." I growl.

"He's always been a prick," Noah says, and Luke nods. The three of us went to the same private school, and our families have known each other for years. They know what an asshole my grandfather can be.

"Prickier than usual."

"So, how is life as Santa?" Logan asks. The idiot can barely hide his stupid smirk.

"Let's just say the next guy's getting hazard pay and leave it at that. Hell, the entire crew deserves it."

There's more teasing and ribbing the rest of the evening. It's not quite midnight when Logan stands. "I'm out. Boss'll be pissed if I'm late to practice tomorrow." He smirks at his team owner.

"Sure, leave before I can make my money back," Noah grumbles.

Luke follows. "I'm out as well. I need my beauty sleep."

Connor and Jake get up as well, and the other guys make noises about calling it a night, too. Once upon a time, no one would care if it was a school night, but now most of them have paired off and would rather go home to their wives and girlfriends.

When I reach home, I kick off my shoes, not caring where they land. I'm falling asleep on my feet as I brush my teeth. Finally, I collapse into bed with a grunt of exhaustion. But the Zs don't come. I toss and turn. Long moments are spent staring up at the ceiling.

I pick up my phone. The Hang Seng index is humming. A quick check of the markets in the UK shows they are fine as well. The customary number of work emails wait in my inbox. I'll deal with those in the morning before my Santa shift.

A pained groan escapes me. I have weeks more of the suit. Which means weeks more of my secret shopper. Krista. I try to eject her from my mind, but it's as if she's wormed her way into my skull and set up camp. Weak, weak fool that I am, I surrender and pull up her contact info.

The numbers burn into my brain. My eyes flicker from the digits to the clock on the upper left of my display. It's past one. She'll be asleep.

Me: How did it go with Santa earlier?

No answer. I'm about to set my phone back on the nightstand when a ping sounds. My heart thumps.

Krista: Mr. Forrester?

Me: Zach. Yes, it's me.

Dots light up the screen and then stop. Then start up again.

Krista: The meeting went well. It was very productive. We've reached an agreement.

An unwitting laugh breaks out of me. I suppose she's not lying, the little tyrant with the pink plump lips, bright gleaming eyes, and high full tits. Tempting, tempting tits. Instantly, my dick springs to life and my mouth waters. Fuck. I squeeze my lids shut, fighting a wave of lust.

I roll over so I'm lying on my back and rest a forearm over my head. But the fingers of my other hand skim down my chest. My abs. I suck in a lungful of air through my nose and blow it out through pursed lips. Doesn't do jack shit to help because without my permission, my fingers glide down further. Maybe a quick tug or two?

Don't go there.

But I do. One single stroke, and that's it. But it felt far better than it should have. Somehow, I ball my hand into a tight fist at my side, ignoring my hammering pulse and my bunched muscles as I try to catch my breath.

Krista's trouble. In more ways than one. The smart thing to do is put a stop to this before it gets out of hand. Tell her there is no need for more Santa lessons.

Me: Glad to hear it. Let's discuss the details of your engagement tomorrow. I'll see you in my office at F&S HQ.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KRISTA

BE MORE INTERESTED, I mouth the next time Santa glances up. Yep, I'm in mommy mode, waiting in the wings, anxious to make sure my charge remembers all his lines for the kindergarten winter pageant. I lean over the railing and pantomime a giant grin, pulling the edges of my lips wide with my index fingers. *Smile.*

But does he pay attention? Of course not. I should ask for one of those wireless headsets a couple of the employees strut around with. Make it official, be the voice in Santa's head, his little Jiminy Cricket. An earpiece will match today's ensemble too, since I'm channeling Dana Scully from the *X-Files* reruns in pants, a jacket, and a silk camisole. Femme without the fatale is the look. My aim is to adopt her take-no-prisoners attitude, the best way to deal with Santa.

Plus, the outfit should be appropriate enough for a business meeting with Zach Forrester.

After hours.

In his office.

Alone.

Don't think about it.

How am I supposed to think of anything else? I have to give him a report up close and personal.

Though I don't know how I'll find something complimentary to say about Santa. Ugh, barely lunchtime, and I'm already a wilting mess. He's been bungling things all day.

First, he showed up late—again. Then he told a kid that a lump of coal was a better choice than the gift requested, and then he even adjusted his junk right there in the sleigh! It's clear he'd rather be anywhere but here. Well, guess what? So would I!

This situation is beyond me. Beyond my capabilities. How's it possible to be honest with Zach Forrester AND keep my job? No, I'm not lacking in self-confidence. I'm just self-aware.

I stare gloomily at my notebook that chronicles day three. Inky tally marks count up Santa's offenses. Maybe I should rebook my flight, take an earlier plane back to Chicago for the holidays? My shoulders droop at the prospect of more time with my parents. I love them to death, but they can only manage me in small quantities.

I always suspected they thought I was mixed up with some other kid when I was born, but unless the midwife at my home birth ran around with spare blonde babies to swap out with other newborns, I was the spawn of their loins. If I go home now, they'll only shake their heads at this latest failure. Not that I'm not used to criticism about my choice of profession. Doesn't mean it doesn't hurt. They believe I get paid to be judgy—which I do. But I try to use my powers for good. I have excellent training. Dad's a minister, and of the fire and brimstone type, too. While my approach isn't quite the same, I'd never outright lie on a report, no matter what Bill tells me.

I glance down in time to observe a parent pass her toddler to Santa's helper, whose name I've learned is Alice. The little girl's yelling and holding her hands out to her mother. "I wanna go potty."

Alice stiffens for a second before whipping around to return the child. But the mom crosses her arms and takes a step back, on a mission to ensure her kid sees Santa.

"I wanna go potty," the girl screeches again. Her wail reverberates over the loudspeakers. Shoppers pause mid-conversation and turn to watch the unfolding drama.

Alice holds her out as far away as possible and pirouettes, plopping her on Santa's lap, and retreats, leaving him no

choice but to hang on to the kid.

“Wha...what do you want for Christmas?” he squeaks, the words running together.

She bites her lip hard, tears forming in her eyes as she reaches, once again, for her exasperated mother, who just stands there. “Karina! Tell Santa what you want!”

“I want to go pottttteeeee!” The child howls, and then her features scrunch up tight. She’s holding it. The crowd holds its collective breath alongside her.

I see Santa’s face freeze. Slowly, it shifts into an expression of horror as he looks down at his legs. I bite the inside of my mouth in sympathy.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” he yells.

Children go wide-eyed and parents’ jaws drop. And just like that, any pity he may have earned is blown to smithereens.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ZACH

EVEN THOUGH I'M in new Santa pants, I swear the stench of pee lingers. The memory of the sodden velvet over my junk has me shuddering again. God, I miss my suits.

When my shift ends, I'm off my platform in a blink, ready to bolt, but Krista stands in my way, a sentry barring the exits as if she thinks I'll make a run for it. Smart girl.

"Santa." She plants her hands on her hips.

"Shopper," I grunt.

Krista tilts her head to a corner and I follow her. I suspect our conversation will not be PG. Once we are in relative privacy, she spins to face me, her arms crossed.

She's only a couple of inches away, and I stare down my nose at her. She lifts a stubborn chin up, blue steel in her gaze, totally unfazed.

She strikes first. "It didn't go well."

"Ya think?" I scowl. I'm in a piss-ass mood and am tempted to pick her up and bodily move her out of the way.

Her nostrils flare. "You're an asshole."

I point at her. "An asshole *you're* apparently in charge of."

Krista eyes my finger and growls. Actually growls. Is she going to bite it? I watch her closely. Bit by bit, fascination replaces my frustration. Do I want her to? I tilt my head to the side. Hmmm...I think yes.

She stares blood-lusting daggers at me. “I’m not a miracle worker.”

“Not what I’ve heard.” Her statement has a slight grin pulling at my lips. It tickles under the mustache. If only I could rip the cursed thing off.

“You need to take this seriously. There are consequences to bad behavior,” Krista continues, her words dripping with righteous indignation. I’m surprised steam’s not blowing out of her ears.

“Are you saying I should be punished?” I drop my head and murmur low in her ear, making sure to keep my Santa voice firmly in place.

She backs away and gapes at me in disgust. Dammit. Flirty lines bomb when wearing white pornstaches. A great life-lesson I hope to never need again. Not that I ought to be flirting with Krista at all after fantasizing about her last night.

What the hell’s going on with me? It must be all the stress I’m under with playing Santa and gearing up for the CEO position. Tons of women out there can help relieve that stress. Women who are not Krista. Women that I can forget the moment I’m done with them, not blue-eyed pixies that look at me as if they have the right to expect better.

Realization lashes through me like an icy wave and my ribs clench tight. I have to let Krista go. I lurch backward, so I’m not directly in her space, under her spell. The last thing I need is her getting wind of my inappropriate thoughts. Now *that* would send her up in smoke.

Time to settle this once and for all. I steady myself and cross my arms over my chest. “Fine. Let’s make this quick.”

She inhales deeply, sucking in more air than should fit in her petite frame. *Here we go.*

“So,” she starts, “your language.”

“English.”

Her exasperated glare tells me she doesn’t appreciate my snark.

I raise a bushy eyebrow.

She taps her foot. “Your language. You can’t be saying things like fuck or shit or asshat.”

“Can’t I just stick a dollar in a swear jar?” I flash her an innocent, owlish stare. Despite my noble intentions, it’s impossible to keep from riling her up when she makes it so damned easy.

Krista shakes her head like she wants to stuff my ass in a jar. “Nope.”

“But what if I forget?”

“Just...think of something else. Use some other expression.”

I stroke my beard, impersonating an old-school villain. Hmm, there might be something to be said about facial hair. “Fuckwit?”

“No.” She hisses out a breath.

“Fuckwad?” I keep my gaze wide-eyed and guileless.

She glowers and scrapes a thumbnail over her bottom lip, drawing my attention to its pink fullness. “How about...fish?”

“Fish?” I blink.

“Yes. Fish.” Her features brighten as if she sees merit in the notion.

Man, this girl’s got some kooky ideas. “You want me to put fish in a swear jar?” I repeat slowly. Perhaps my previous assessment wasn’t wrong, and we *should* be calling for medical help.

She rolls her eyes as if she thinks I’m thick. “No.” But then a glimmer of a grin forms on her face. “Whenever you feel like saying fuck, you say fish instead.” She’s warming to this. “You can use shirt for shit, gas for ass.” Her nose wrinkles as she decides “gas” might not be a suitable substitution. “Maybe not that one. But all the others.” Her enthusiasm bounces back into place.

Something in my posture must indicate my doubts because Krista's smile falters.

"And this works?" I ask.

She shrugs. "They say it works."

"Who's the 'they'?"

"*They*." Her arch look is entirely too appealing.

It slams into me again that she's gorgeous. So stunning all I want to do is to haul her against me and crush my lips against hers, discover if they are soft as they appear. Since that's out of the question, I give her my best patronizing sneer. "Is that it?"

She flinches, and a flush rises to her cheeks. "Yeah, you're released," she mutters, retreating a step.

I offer her a mock salute and saunter away. Self-disgust knots in my throat and I force myself to swallow past the swell. I'm a heel. It's my own fault she's on my case. I sent her on this crazy path to begin with. And the only way to save us both is to end this madness now.

I feel her frigid glare on my back as I take sedate, measured steps to the stockroom as if I don't have a care in the world. Moments later, I'm dashing across the street, business suit jacket in hand.

It takes me seven point three minutes to make it from the store to my office—I counted. I'm still rubbing my cheeks free of the makeup as I stride past my open-mouthed assistant.

The moment the door shuts behind me, I drop into my chair and tip my head back, thunking the base of my skull against the smooth leather.

Fish. A reluctant smile tugs at my lips but promptly dies when my brain reminds me that I'm about to cut ties with her. Ruthlessly, I do up the rest of the buttons on my dress shirt and yank a tie into place before buzzing outside. "Mia? A Krista Parr will be over shortly. Please show her in."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KRISTA

AT THE APPOINTED TIME, I drag my feet across the road to the F&S International headquarters. Security provides me with a temporary badge and waves me toward the elevators. The button for the executive level, naturally at the very top of the building, is already lit.

My heartbeat accelerates with every floor I pass until a final pop in my ears synchronizes with the ding of my arrival. The doors whirr open into a world of white. But a winter wonderland this is not. It's all pale marble floors, stark walls, and sharp-edged counters. And completely devoid of humanity but for a lone woman at a Corian desk. I approach slowly, my heels echoing on the cold surface.

Inside my gloves, my hands go sweaty. I strip the damp things off and stick them in my coat pocket, then wipe my palms on the wool as unobtrusively as possible.

Before I can let the lady know of my appointment, she rises to her feet.

“Ms. Parr?”

“What? I mean, yes. That's me.” *At least the last time I checked.*

“Mr. Forrester is expecting you. Can I take your coat?”

“Uh...I'm okay.”

When I enter Zach's office, he's sitting behind a glass-topped desk. It's free of clutter, with only a laptop on the spotless surface, lid shut and off to the side. He's just as

impressive at second glance. His expression is stern, business-like, with little sign of the charming guy from yesterday. Still, my lady-bits go all tingly. I guess stern does it for me too.

He stands as I approach. A true gentleman, unlike *some* people in his employ.

“Hello,” I say, for lack of anything better

“Krista.” Crisp severity brands his tone. My stomach drops. He’s probably already heard about today’s incident. There was literally no way of keeping it quiet. My already-thumping heart’s in danger of beating straight out of my chest. Crapsicle. And here I was hoping to make it through this meeting before I expired.

He motions me to a chair across from him, but I remain standing. I’ve got a speech all prepared, sandwich formula-ed and everything: Start with the positive. Go into the negative. End on some kind of high note. Who knows? I might even make it home in time to catch a live broadcast of *Shark Tank*.

I take a deep breath. “As you know—”

Zach cuts me off. “Didn’t you submit a written report yesterday?”

“Oh. My notes. I need to...um...reorganize them.” They require Shakespearean wordsmithing before I can share them with Bill.

Zach pins me with his laser stare and raises one brow. “Didn’t we say I’d receive unfiltered reports?”

I maybe, *maybe* recall the Boyer & Bleecker handbook stating something about work product produced during billable hours belonging to the client. “Fine,” I mutter. Really, things aren’t going to get much worse. I reach into my bag and extract my ratty notebook.

Only once Zach’s plucked it from my cold, pinched fingers do I plonk into the seat, suddenly unsteady.

He reclaims his own chair, continuing to peer at me curiously until he switches his attention to my scribbles. He

tilts his seat back and flips through the pages as if he knows exactly where to go. I examine him through lowered lashes.

His hair's a mess, as if he's run his fingers through it too many times. Maybe he's having a bad day, too? I finger a loose thread on my cuff as I observe him, absently making a mental note to email the shop's customer service department. It's only the third time I've worn this top.

Bit by bit, the tension around Zach's mouth dissolves, and the corners of his lips turn up at the edges, almost as if they can't help it.

My frown grows as his grin widens. What the hell does he have to be so amused about? The report on Santa is abysmal. He flips to the next page, his smile now in full force.

Finally, Zach glances back up. "You've got quite a way with words. 'Santa is an ass. Hole.'" His eyes dance. "Why, Ms. Parr, is this your professional opinion?"

My face is a burning mess, and I duck my head to hide my cheeks. "You were aware I didn't have the proper training for this," I mutter. "Plus, the student in question..."

"You think Santa's that hopeless?" The words are softly spoken.

My eyes snap back to Zach's. A new warmth appears in his gaze, a knowing softness.

"No. No one's *that* hopeless." Sure, I have my doubts about certain people, but it's true. I'm forever trying for improvement, in myself and in others. But those who can't do shouldn't teach, no matter how the adage goes.

Maybe Zach feels sorry for me, because his next words are, "You tried."

I'm always trying. I just don't seem to be able to get anywhere. I'm like a hamster on a punctured beach ball.

He takes a deep breath, and his severe expression returns. "I realize it was unfair of me to ask you to teach Santa when you were meant to be a silent observer. I apologize for that. I'll make sure to forward your recommendations to the

management at the store and ensure they are implemented. You no longer need to be inconvenienced.”

My lungs contract. “Wait—are you firing me?” Panic and helplessness and unfairness roil within me. Shit. And Bill? He’s going to kill me. Papercut me open with his posters.

Zach’s eyes widen. “No, of course not. You evaluated fairly, and Boyer & Bleecker will naturally be paid in full.”

Firing by another name is still firing. He clearly thinks I’m incompetent. Failure is inevitable. Didn’t I myself think so earlier?

“You know what? Give me another chance with Santa.”
What are these words? Whose mouth is this?

There’s a pregnant pause before a short, shocked laugh bursts from Zach. “You want to keep working with him?”

I straighten my back and give him a pointed stare. “You can’t hire another Santa.” It’s not a question.

“No.” His nostrils flare in obvious irritation.

“Well, then it’s clear you need the help,” I say loftily.

Zach’s eyes narrow. “I thought training wasn’t part of your job description?”

“I’m taking initiative. Going above and beyond. Isn’t that what you told me?”

A momentary silence reigns before he softly murmurs, “Touché.” But his expression remains suspicious.

I lift my head. “What’s the alternative? Let him ruin Christmas?” *And my life?*

“What’s in it for you?” Zach inclines back, steeping his fingers under his chin as he studies me. Something in my belly flutters at his gaze. The return of the butterflies? I ruthlessly stomp them out. I don’t need the fluttering dead around while I try to salvage my career.

I refuse to blink. “Isn’t it enough that I want to save Christmas?” I keep my voice light, ignoring the bead of sweat that drips down my spine.

The twin lasers of his stare cut through me again, and more of the truth leaks out. I huff. “Fine. I’d also like a few more weeks of pay. My boss at Boyer & Bleecker Marketing hasn’t contracted me for the next season. And even if he does keep me on, a decent recommendation from F&S will determine where I land up next.”

“Aren’t you a permanent employee?” Zach frowns at this information.

“None of us are. We all take posts wherever they come up.” I shrug. “The demand for secret shoppers fluctuates.” I really can’t blame Bill too much for trying to keep F&S as a client.

“You don’t live in New York?” Zach asks.

“No. Most gigs last a month or three, and we go anywhere the job takes us.”

“And you have nothing else lined up?”

“Nothing concrete.” Unless Bill exiles me to Las Vegas. God, Dad’ll have a fit if I end up in Sin City.

“Hmmm.” Zach runs his hand over his jaw. No way is he going to go for this crazy proposition. How did I even have the nerve to suggest it?

He tips his head to the side. “You actually think you can get Santa into shape in a month?”

“If he can deliver a billion toys in a night, a month’s plenty. Good things can happen in the blink of an eye.” I paste on another big, fake, confident smile.

Zach peers at me like I’m deranged. I don’t blame him. “You sure?”

“Watch me.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ZACH

BY THE TIME I leave the office, it's another late night. I wave off the driver waiting outside F&S and trek home instead. What's a mere thirty blocks to my place on the Upper East Side? Yep, I couldn't be more cliché if I tried.

Bitter subarctic winds batter me, making the exposed skin of my face string. I draw my thick overcoat tighter around me. Fuck, I hate winter. This season needs to end so I can move on with the next phase of my life. I have plans. Lots of plans. Going to make my mark on the company, drag it kicking and screaming into the future. Revamp outdated standards my grandfather has in place and usher in new ones. Thousands of employees worldwide will depend on me getting my job right once I take over.

First, I need to survive my current gig as fucking Santa Claus. I wince at the memory of the pee incident, and know more shit's to come. *Please, God, let it not be literal shit.* But all I can do is grit my teeth and forge ahead. No question about it—I'm going to annihilate this superstitious bullshit custom and all its accompanying idiocy.

When Krista had shown up at my office earlier, I'd been grim but determined to let her go. For both our sakes. I'd have dealt with my grandfather—pretty sure the fine print didn't stipulate the presence of secret shoppers a hundred years ago.

My lips twitch at Krista's reluctance to share her notes and then at what she'd written. There was no keeping my face straight after that.

Not that she was wrong—I *am* an asshole. But hell if I want to be responsible for getting her fired from her marketing company. The guy she works for sounds like a real piece of work.

So when she all but demanded another chance to civilize Santa, I seized the opportunity to have her stay. How could I have said no if it meant her job?

Yeah. That's the real reason you agreed. As if you couldn't have offered her boss some other contract to keep her on.

Boyer & Bleecker Marketing. I make a mental note to look it up and see what other crappy policies they have in place. Hell, why does Krista even need to stay with that two-bit outfit? I could've just appointed her the ambassador of Christmas at one of the other Forrester & Sons' locations.

At the following light, I skirt out of the way of oncoming revelers and cross the street so I'm parallel to Central Park. I pass doorway after doorway of decorations; all while being assaulted by the varying scents of New York. Chestnuts and pretzels and pine hit me first, escorting in the Ghost of Christmas Past. Once upon a time, I walked this route with my parents.

Weed's the next thing I sniff. I smirk at the memories of my younger years with Thorne, Luke, and Noah.

Speaking of—the Titans won their game against the Houston Hawks tonight. I pull up my phone and arrange for a case of limited-edition whisky to be delivered to the players' homes. Not that they won't be drunk enough after celebrating the win at Pinks as per usual. Noah only gets a congratulatory text. He can buy his own booze.

As I continue to stroll, hints of vanilla and cinnamon seem to come waft of nowhere. Krista's scent. I can't believe she even *smells* like Christmas. Is it a year-round perfume? Or does she switch it out with the season?

What does she taste like? Sweet? Tart? I groan.

My brain's gone on hiatus, and my dick's taken over. At the next corner, I pause again and reach for my wallet. All the

cash I have ends up in the red kettle of a Salvation Army Santa. I offer him a commiserating nod. He gives me a broad smile in return for the stack of green.

Things are fine. Under control. The situation just requires some cognitive reframing and self-control. A little Christmas goodwill isn't going to go amiss. Because while this may not be my brightest idea, an extra helping of holiday profits along with a side of Krista to see me through the next month isn't going to harm anyone. I grin at the thought of all the fun I'm about to have.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KRISTA

I APPROACH the next day with a multi-pronged strategy for success. Observe, assess, educate. Rinse, repeat. I chew on the inside of my cheek and drum my fingers against this morning's cappuccino cup. It's all about baby steps. KISS. Keep It Simple, Stupid. That's the plan.

Peppermint Plaza is bustling with activity. Everyone's reveling in the holiday spirit. Voices of children and grownups are high and excited as they wander through the massive toy displays. Even the burly security guy is wearing a brown onesie with antlers and a spongy red ball attached to his nose. Rudolf?

No major disasters so far. But that only makes me more antsy, like the calm before the storm. I have a newfound sympathy for my mother, always watching me, never quite knowing when or where disaster might strike next. Note to self: one more Christmas present for her. Maybe some nice, expensive wrinkle cream to help with the stress lines I'm no doubt responsible for.

I puff out a deep breath, blowing a stray strand of hair out of my face. I still can't believe I asked for another shot at Santa. Yet again, I put my mouth ahead of my brain and signed up for stupid. Sure, I wanted to save my job, but there are limits. However, one look from Zach Forrester, all full of sympathy and sexy, and I'm jumping into the fray, ready to wrangle the fat man.

At least Zach's aware of my paltry teaching skills, so he won't expect miracles. I peer down at the lesson plans

scribbled out in blue ink. It's A-plus content for sure. Will he reward me for the effort if nothing else? Electricity sings down my spine at the thought of being the sole focus of his piercing stare. He's not at all like the men I've been with before. Gorgeous, no question about it, but more than that, Zach is... kind, generous. So a little light crushing? Absolutely warranted. And as long as I ogle without being obvious, why not enjoy the ride? Just to get me through the month.

To the side of my notebook is a new phrasebook. Not that I'm going to impress anyone with my French skills, either. My existing vocabulary is woefully limited to phrases like *Voulez-vous coucher avec moi*, and asking Zach to sleep with me falls outside our agreement.

Zach: How goes the Santa surveillance?

I snap to attention. Is he watching me watch Santa? I sit up straighter and pull my shoulders back, glancing around covertly. A couple of strategically placed security cameras are mounted to the ceilings. What if he's tapping into the feeds?

For God's sake, Krista, the man's worth billions. He's not going to idle about Peppermint Plaza all day. He's probably buying and selling small countries while supermodels cater to his every desire.

My chest constricts at the thought.

And if he is?

None of your business. Your job's to monitor and mentor. Possibly throw yourself between Santa and possible murder.

My eyes return to Santa, watching him the way someone would track a rabid partridge. He keeps checking his phone, but other than that, he's managing the kids well enough, doing better than I've seen him thus far.

Me: No issues.

I see Alice take a scowling boy's hand and help him into the sleigh. He obviously loathes the idea of sitting on an adult's lap and instead leans against the dashboard, facing Santa with a scowl. Santa scowls right back. Furious, garbled whispers crackle through the loudspeakers.

I hold my breath, my heart thumping in trepidation. And then it happens.

The kid kicks him. Right in the balls. Steven winces in sympathy, and even I cringe at the clenched-toothed agony on Santa's face.

He opens his mouth, and I shut my eyes, squeezing the lids tight. I can't be a witness to murder. My fists clench around my cup, and it crumples. A bit of coffee dribbles out onto my fingers. I bite my lip, bracing myself for the inevitable scene ahead and the corresponding fallout.

“Fiiiiisssh!”

It's a long, low, drawn-out hiss.

Wha? Did I hear him right? One of my lids pops open on the stunned expression on Alice's face. I want to jump up and cheer.

Santa glances up, wrinkling his nose. I beam and give him two thumbs up. He rolls his eyes, the motion clearly visible on the big screen—along with the tiniest hint of a grin, pained but unmistakable, under his mustache.

I grab my notebook and turn to a new sheet. This Christmas miracle deserves a page all of its own.

Santa has made an effort to connect more with the children and is using more child-appropriate language.

I want to punch the air in victory but manage to contain myself. Still, I can't resist a quick response to Zach:

Me: He's showing marked progress.

I sneak another peek at the cameras just in case Zach's watching, then allow myself one more smug grin. But quickly wipe it off. Humility is a virtue and blah-di-blah. But I'm totally nailing this tutoring thing. Why was I so worried?

Zach doesn't respond for a long while, so I amuse myself with thoughts of the best-selling training manual I'll write. I even begin to think up potential chapter titles when a ping sounds.

Zach: Oh? Tell me more.

Me: Let's just say my methods are working.

Zach: I look forward to hearing all about it.

Me: Would you like me to come to your office this evening?

Zach: Actually, stick around. I'll meet you in the store after closing. You can give me your report then.

Me: Okay.

I'm about to put my phone away when it dings again.

Zach: Does Santa **still** need more lessons then?

My eyes flicker back to the man in question, and my smile disintegrates. Once again, he's tapping away on his screen.

Me: There's always room for improvement.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KRISTA

AFTER THE OFFICIAL CLOSING TIME, Forrester & Sons' personnel restocked shelves, threw drop cloths over displays, cleaned, and dusted. Adult-sized elves in action. A hive of activity that concludes as promptly as it begins. Now the store is still, almost eerily so, with the lights dimmed and the music off.

I dither, taking my time putting stuff away. The Paris phrasebook gets tucked into the back corner of a shelf, the section I've secretly labeled "Krista's to-buy." Hopefully, no overzealous employee embarks on an alphabetizing spree in the meantime. I toss my long-abandoned coffee cup into the recycling bin, shrug on my coat, and sling my bag over my shoulder before heading down to Peppermint Plaza.

I wander around the ground floor, past Elsa's castle and stacks of beautifully boxed presents—whoever wraps them would make a fortune with some "how to" YouTube videos. The sleigh beckons as I orbit closer. I even climb a few steps up to Santa's platform. All eight animatronic reindeer are frozen, hooves suspended mid-kick. The sleigh has been brushed and vacuumed free of child debris. Will anyone notice if I take a seat on the velvet cushions?

A quick check reveals I'm the only person present. A man from security was informed I'd be sticking around. He eyed me suspiciously before giving me instructions for who to call once I was ready to leave.

Another glance at the sleigh has my feet itching to step aboard. But best not to chance it. It's the cocoon of trust, the

sacred confessional where children share their misdeeds and promise to do better. I bite my lip. There's also the whole "he knows when you've been bad or good" bit.

Santa's whip rests alongside the seat. I lift it and inspecting the snowflakes embossed on the handle more closely. Should probably be grateful he hasn't been tempted to use it yet.

Tingling at the back of my neck makes me look up at the mezzanine. There, in the shadows by my usual table, stands Zach Forrester. Even at this distance, his long, lean, commanding presence is unmistakable.

He's studying me with a predator's stillness. There's no looking away, I'm captive in his gaze. My skin tingles, my breasts go heavy. Heat cascades down my back then slides high between my thighs, and I instinctively clench. It's all but impossible to resist squirming.

My exhale is a long and ragged breath. I stick on a wide smile. "Hi! I didn't realize you'd arrived. You never said where exactly we were supposed to meet." My voice echoes in the cavernous space as I hurry toward the stairs.

Zach lifts a hand to stop me. "Wait. I'll come to you." He saunters down the steps. If this whole corporate persona thing doesn't work out, he can always model underwear or pose for starving artists looking for excuses to drool. If all else fails, Times Square's got room for an extra Naked Cowboy.

Air heaves out from between my ribs in a long, lusty sigh. He's a fine, fine specimen.

Moments later, he's at the opposite end of the aisle from me. A near-giddy sensation rises in my chest and my knees wobble as he closes the gap between us.

He stops short a couple of feet away, a roguish glint in his narrowed eyes. "Is that a whip?"

Crap, I'm still clutching the prop. My gaze darts to the ground and back up again as heat rushes to my cheeks
"Ummm..."

"BDSM, Miss Parr? I'd never have guessed. Maybe we should rethink your spot on the nice list." The suggestive

gleam in his eyes glows brighter while a smirk plays on his lips.

My face is on fire, but at this point, might as well brazen it out. I lift my chin haughtily. “All the better to lash Santa into shape.” Okay, so my methods are questionable.

Conscious of his perusal, I sashay back up the platform and replace the whip in its rightful position, silently cursing the Parr penchant for blushing the entire time. No wonder I can’t keep a secret.

When I return, Zach and I stare at each other for a long moment. The heat in his gaze is tangible. It skitters over my skin before settling between my legs. I catch a hint of the evening stubble that darkens his jaw when he tips his chin at the next lane. “Walk?”

I swallow. “Sure.”

He offers me an arm. How gallant.

My fingers find his elbow; it’s the barest of touches, but even through the luxurious material of his suit jacket, the muscle beneath is rock-hard. Zach covers my hand lightly with his free one. Electricity ping pongs through me as we promenade through the store.

“How did it go with Santa today?” he asks when we cross to the aisle of stuffed animals.

“Fine. He did fine,” I say distractedly. Zach’s still touching me. Yes, it’s all very fine.

He whirls around so abruptly I almost stumble.

“Just fine?”

“Better than yesterday,” I backtrack.

“So, some improvement.” A teasing glint lights his eyes.

“Some,” I allow, holding my index finger and thumb the tiniest bit apart. But then I fold my thumb down, and I point at him. “But don’t you dare tell him that. Otherwise, there’s no way his head will fit down a chimney.” I poke Zach in the

chest. Once, twice. I'd have gone for an even three, but really, what's he sporting under those suits?

He gives a crack of laughter before his mouth settles into a smug smile. "But Santa did better," he reminds me. Again. "So, how did you manage it?" Zach asks after a moment, his eyes dancing.

"Told you, I worked my magic." I do little abracadabra hands.

His lips quirk as if he's trying to contain another laugh. "Is that so?" he drawls.

"Mm-hmm."

I'm shocked speechless when he leans close enough that his breath tickles the shell of my ear. "I bet I can make you tell me."

The low rumble of his voice hums down my spine.

I swallow. "You can try." My words come out husky. Yes, torture me. Make me talk. Make me tell you all my secrets.

We continue to stroll through Peppermint Plaza and then expand our exploration, passing through the cosmetics section and designer kiosks in silence.

We halt at the first set of stationary escalators. Zach glances at them then back at me. When I give him a brief nod, he motions for me to precede him.

I start to climb. He's right behind me and the weight of his stare is heavy on my back. I stop and turn my head, catching his eyes on my ass. My breath catches when his gaze flickers up to mine, not a shred of embarrassment in them, only dark wanting. He's a step below me, putting us exactly at eye level. Lip level.

Electricity coils around us, drawing us closer, until we're only a whisper apart. Awareness hums in the hollow space that separates us. The air thickens and tension builds, hot and sweet. and my heartbeat skitters at the fire in his gaze.

The sudden blare of a siren makes me jerk. For a second, I'm not sure if the warning wail comes from inside my head or

some emergency vehicle on the street. Whatever the source, the spell's broken. I clumsily spin forward and scurry up the rest of the way as if nothing happened. Not that anything did. Not really.

When we reach the next level, we loop around and proceed up the following flight to the third floor.

Once we get there, I stop. "You don't come to the store often."

"How do you know?" Zach glances at me out of the corner of his eye.

"You pause whenever we enter each department, as if you have to catalog everything. Survey your domain."

"Like a lion?" He faces me fully, his teeth flashing all bright and white and perfect.

"If the shoe fits." My gaze is momentarily drawn to Zach's black leather shoes. Don't they say big feet, big...other things? "But I'm right, right?" I rush to make my point before he can guess my thoughts.

He nods. "There's always something to tackle in the main office. But I do check in, just not quite as often as I should."

"What about your Christmas shopping?"

"Mia takes care of all of that."

"Mia?" Was that a squeak?

The edges of his mouth lift. "My assistant. You've met her."

"Oh yeah. Mia. I know Mia." I draw her name out, ducking my chin and paying unnecessarily close attention to the tiny white crisscrosses on his gray tie. "And who buys presents for Mia?"

"She gets a bonus check."

But of course. I slant him an oblique glance. "Do you at least put it in a nice greeting card?"

"No. It's a direct deposit into her bank account."

“Well, aren’t you just the king of efficiency?”

“I try.” Zach’s voice is dry, but there’s a hint of amusement in there.

“So you never do any of your own shopping?”

He shrugs.

“Not even for your grandfather? Some kind of token?” I press.

But I don’t wait for him to respond, already knowing the answer. I grab his hand and tug. There’s the strangest desire to show off how well I know the store. It’s true, though—if they ever started Forrester & Sons tours, I’d rank as the number one guide.

I lead him to the men’s department. Artful displays of apparel and accessories dot the floor.

“Pick something,” I command.

His side eye is decidedly patronizing. Clearly, the man never gets ordered around. If this wasn’t so important, maybe I’d be embarrassed.

For a long second, I wait, breathless, for him to call me out on it. But then he says, “We’ll see.” Ah, so he’s decided to grant me the honor of humoring me.

“Excellent!”

His soft snort tells me not to get my hopes up.

Still, he slows as we pass a circular stand with ties arranged in a multi-spoked starburst. “How about this?” Zach fingers a navy bit of silk.

“Boring.”

Next, he nods at a pair of silver cufflinks before slanting me a questioning look.

I make a face. A shopper’s work is never done. I head for a nearby table loaded with ugly Christmas sweaters. Wait—are these cashmere? Oh, rich people.

“Maybe you can get a matching set?” I grab a striped navy and aqua one with red ornaments that says “Go ahead, touch my balls” and hold it in front of him. “This would totally bring out those blues.” I waggle my brows suggestively.

He snorts. “No way.”

“The Forrester family doesn’t do the uglies? They’re practically mandatory this time of the year.” I bite back a grin at his grimace.

“I wouldn’t be caught dead in one of those.” Zach shudders, backing away as if he’s afraid the colorful yarn might go all Medusa on him.

I laugh but refold it and put it back in place. We continue to peruse the rest of the offerings, wandering from the sweaters to a rack of pocket squares and gloves.

“I suppose you’re all done with your shopping?” Zach picks up a pair of gloves and strokes them. Never have I wanted to be dark leather so badly.

“Yeah. Everything’s been wrapped and shipped.”

He returns them to the display and eyes narrow speculatively. “I know you.”

“Oh?”

“You’re one of those people who starts shopping for next year’s holiday the day after Christmas, aren’t you?” The teasing timbre of his voice brings to mind cocoa on Christmas morning, hot, creamy, and sweet.

My cheeks prickle. “Maybe.”

“Santa must have given you some pretty epic presents to earn such lifelong devotion.”

I clear my throat, swallowing a sudden lump. “Actually, I always knew Santa wasn’t real. My parents didn’t subscribe to all that.” But I don’t want Zach to see me as all tragic and sad, so I keep my words light and breezy. “And, since I was a little know-it-all, I told a bunch of my friends. Their parents were sooo pissed. I’d have ended up on the naughty list anyway.” I shrug like it’s a foregone conclusion.

“And are you?” Zach cocks his head to the side, examining me like I’m a very, very interesting creature. “Naughty?”

Yep, no way I’m answering that. How does he make naughty sound so naughty?

“What about you? When did you figure it out?” I deflect, desperate to break the sexual tension brewing between us. Because there’s no mistake, this is sexual tension of the worst kind. Forbidden.

“Well, when Santa’s presents come wrapped in Forrester & Sons paper...” Zach’s voice trails off.

Aww, you poor little rich boy.

He makes a sound of amusement.

I cringe. “Sorry.”

His smile is easy. “All good. It’s the truth.”

Still, my heart pinches for him.

Zach leans against a glass case of wallets and belts, his hands on either side of his hips. A small, delicious grin hovers on his lips. “So, tell me more about you, Krista Parr. What else do you like besides fat men and holiday seasons?” Blue eyes sparkle. “And I definitely want to know more about zee French fetish.” He ends with a fake Parisian accent and waggles his brows.

The pressure in my chest from the moment before dissolves, and I burst into laughter.

“I don’t have zee French fetish,” I say, mimicking his tone. Though I do suspect I have a Forrester fetish coming on. Much more dangerous.

Our eyes lock as we share a grin. For a second, I’m terrified he’s able to read my mind. Hurriedly, I say, “As for fat men, I’ll continue to work on the disaster you’ve hired. The kids need to believe for as long as they can.”

Zach’s features soften. “You really care about all this, don’t you?”

“Of course! Don’t you?”

He rolls his shoulders noncommittally. “It’s good for business.” He might as well have said he kicks puppies for fun.

“Doesn’t all this make you happy?” I gesture down at Peppermint Plaza, glass ornaments and tinsel still shimmering in the faint light.

Another shrug, this one indifferent. “If it helps my company’s bottom line, I’m freaking ecstatic.”

“I swear, you’re practically as bad as your Santa,” I utter under my breath.

For some reason, that makes Zach huff out a laugh. I harrumph. It’s not anything to be proud of.

But I can’t help but try again. “You don’t believe in the magic of Christmas and all that?” I ask, tentatively.

“I believe in the magic of Christmas profits.” Zach slides me another glance. “But something tells me you do.”

It’s my turn to shrug even though my cheeks flame. Great, now he’s going to think I’m an idealistic twit. “What would life be without a bit of magic?”

Zach gives me an inscrutable look before responding with a question of his own. “So what do you want to find under the tree come Christmas morning?”

You. Underneath my Christmas tree with a strategically placed bow. Mistletoe optional.

But since I can’t say that, I go for the next best thing. “I’m more into experiences.”

“What kind of experiences?” He seems genuinely interested.

“Travel, for sure,” I say.

“France?” He flashes that perfect smile again.

“I wish. Most of my assignments are within North America. But I’ll take all the airline miles I can get. You must have tons.”

Zach's expression is sheepish. "I use the jet."

Oh. Of course. He's got a plane.

"It belongs to the company," he tacks on. "My trips are all work."

"And you?" I prod. "What would you wish for?"

He stares out into the distance, almost as if beyond the vast offerings of this building. "Nothing I can't buy for myself."

Oh yeah. Billionaire.

Still... "You really don't want anything?" I press.

Zach's quiet for a moment. "Well, if things go as planned, I'll get what I want. I'll be announced CEO on New Year's Eve at the annual F&S reception."

I perk up. I'm glad he's going to celebrate something. "You're looking forward to it?"

"I suppose. I've been working towards taking over the company my entire life. Feels like my every decision has been towards that goal."

"And it's almost within reach, right?" I give him an encouraging nudge.

"It's not a done deal yet."

"No?"

"This next month is the determining factor. As long as I don't fuck anything up in any of the divisions I run, including this store."

"It's a lot of responsibility." I can't even begin to imagine the hours he must work, the pressure he's under.

Zach tips his head the slightest bit in response but says nothing more. Grim lines of determination bracket his mouth.

We resume our stroll, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Our steps naturally match each other's pace. It feels familiar.

When we finally reach the store exit. I'm almost reluctant to say goodbye. I turn to him. "Thank you for taking another chance on me. I hope you get your every wish." My voice is

whisper soft. I'm ready to double my efforts to tutor Santa if it will help Zach get his CEO position.

No pressure. None at all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AND SO, my campaign to reform Santa takes on new life. I'm determined to get Zach the CEO position, even if it means carving instructions onto Santa's skull.

To explain my constant presence, a few employees have been informed I'm working with Santa. They've been told I'm a "character coach," whatever that means. Alice prays for a personality transplant, Tommy watches me as suspiciously as he does everyone else, and Steven has me pose with the whip in hand. If I come out of this season alive, the photo's going on a wall by my diploma.

An older woman, beautifully put together, visits from the head office. When I grow up I want to be her.

She introduces herself as one of the longtime assistants, and that I'm to reach out for any assistance. Her shrewd eyes twinkle when she asks, "And you're helping...Santa?"

"I...um...I'm trying to?" It's more squeak than statement. I straighten. "That is, yes, ma'am. That's what Mr. Forrester has asked me to do."

She gives me one more assessing nod. "Carry on, then."

So I do.

My days become a blur of activity. Mornings are for documenting and dissecting Santa's behavior, and prepping sterilized versions of reports for Bill. Afternoons, I work with Santa, sharing my bullet-pointed feedback and squabbling with him about my methods. Often, I leave these meetings

ready to shoot myself in frustration. He has the uncanny ability to push all my buttons with unnerving accuracy.

Evenings are no less disturbing, for that's when I share my updates with Zach. Sometimes I'll go to his office, sometimes we'll wander around the store talking, laughing. And in between, texts fly furiously between us, attraction building with each exchange.

Every day is an adventure.

21 Days to Christmas

“No, you can't say ‘Your baby's resting bitch face’ is fierce.”

“It's the truth.”

“How about next time you use ‘resting baby face’ instead?”

18 Days to Christmas

“The poor kid was just shy.”

“Right—so shy, she spat in my ears!”

“Come on, it was a whisper...”

“Bah! Let it be known that going forward, I prefer sweet nothings instead.”

11 Days to Christmas

“Wait, are those binoculars?”

“All the better to see you with...”

“Enough spying already!”

“Give them back. Ugh. You're just being a killjoy now.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ZACH

THE BEST PART of my days are the interactions with Krista. There's always some new experiment she wants to try on Santa. I'm forever waiting for her next bit of outrageousness.

She's given me meditation and deep breathing lessons but took offense when I suggested she might need them more. Shortly after, a plush toy of Donkey from *Shrek* appeared in my sleigh with instructions to stroke it every hour on the hour—an attempt to “heal my inner child and get in touch with my softer side,” of course. For some strange reason, I didn't believe her. One day, she made me sit through *Miracle on 34th Street*. Both versions. There was an honest to God quiz after.

She usually debriefs me—as Zach—after work. Most of our meetings happen at my office or in the store, but we've also ventured further afield.

During New York's annual SantaCon bar crawl, I watched her gape at all the drunken Santas stumbling through town. Some screeched off-key parodies of classic Christmas carols. A couple tried out truly original material, asking if we'd been naughty or nice. One red menace even offered to show her what was inside his “sack.” I sent him packing with a death glare.

Krista spent the rest of that evening telling me how much better I—Santa—was in comparison, a veritable angel. I snort. Yep, the bar is set real high, just need to avoid public urination and trauma to small children.

On days Krista and I can't meet, we text, always under the guise of discussing Santa. But our conversations have progressed, and we never seem to run out of things to talk about. She teases me about my workaholic tendencies, and I tell her about my travels. When she speaks about all the places she wants to explore, I find myself jealous, because even though I've visited most, I will never see them through her eyes.

When too much time passes between messages, I end up drumming my fingers against my desk. Sometimes, I play a game with myself to see how long I can resist texting her first.

I play other games as well. It's like I've been afflicted with some kind of bizarre case of immaturity because riling up Krista Parr as Santa has become my new favorite hobby.

Some days, I'll even screw up on purpose just to see her familiar frown, the one that adds just the tiniest crease between her brows. One that I want to caress. I wonder how deep it will get in the years to come.

Beneath it all, the constant sizzle of attraction thrums between us and only continues to grow.

Guilt and lust are permanent residents in my brain, living side by side in tight quarters, constantly stepping on each other's toes. It's getting more and more difficult to resist Krista. Lines are blurring, and what was once a lark has turned into a genuine fascination with this Christmas-crazy woman.

But while I may be an asshole, no way am I taking things further while keeping the truth of my identity from her. I've pictured revealing myself as Santa a million times. Ripping the buttons of the velvet suit apart like I'm some kind of Superman with a suit and tie beneath.

Yeah, that'd go down real well. Not that it would matter much. Our time's winding down. Every day, I'm cognizant of how much closer we are to Christmas, and with it, goodbye.

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* * *

“SANTA?”

I blink out of my daze. Alice’s lips are frozen in a farce of a smile. She gives a tiny nod in the direction of a stroller. A double stroller.

Oh, fuck no.

“Santa, look! We’ve got twins coming to meet you for the very first time!”

How the hell is no one else hearing the false cheer in her voice? I glance at the babies, panicky again. *Come on, Alice—don’t let me down. Get rid of them.*

But she does nothing. Shit. This is going to be a disaster. My gaze flies up to Krista. A smirk’s replaced her customary frown.

My brows draw together, and I scowl. *Fine. I can do this.*

I flex and relax my fingers a few times, then hold out my hands. “Okay. Hand one over then.”

Alice swallows. “The parents want photos of you holding them both. Together. At the same time.”

My arms drop to my sides. The parents—a young pair, too young to be procreating—look harried and stressed, like they haven’t slept in—I eye the stroller’s occupants with my newly developed child-assessing abilities—four months? And now the walking dead want to foist their little hellions on me?

Yeah, no. Not happening.

I inject all the authority of the North Pole into my bearing and voice and speak directly to the couple. “I’m not sure that’s the safest thing. The store has a policy. Only one child at a time on Santa’s person. For their own safety, of course.” And my own. Must check with Meredith if the workers’ comp for seasonal employees has kicked in yet.

“But...” The mom’s bottom lip trembles. “Just one photo. Please. We need them for our Christmas cards. There wasn’t time to schedule a family portrait and... and, just look at us!” she ends on a wail, fanning a hand at what was once a pristine designer outfit, now dotted with drool and other stains of unknown origins.

Her husband, also on the brink of tears, slings an arm around her. “Hon, it’s okay. We can get photos of them with Santa individually. As long as the cards show him holding a kid, it’s fine. They’re identical.”

His logic doesn’t quite make sense, but whatever.

“But I can’t pick! We’re not supposed to have favorites. Even though Joey sleeps better than Jason. And what do we tell them when they’re older and look at their baby books? That we picked one over the other?”

I raise an eyebrow. Lady, it’s not exactly *Sophie’s Choice* over here.

“We could photoshop it?” her husband suggests weakly.

For fuck’s sake. “It’s fine. Give them both to me.”

Yep, it’s official—the Santa suit has softened my brains.

“Are you sure?” Alice hisses under her breath.

Of course, I’m not sure. I aim a baleful look in her direction—a little confidence in my abilities would be nice.

Oh ye, of little faith.

Sweat breaks out on my forehead as she gingerly places a kid in each of my arms. I hold on to them as tightly as possible. They squirm more than a sack full of cats.

Fine, so I may have bitten off more than I can chew.

Steven lifts his camera off the tripod and comes closer, positioning it, so the babies’ faces and my feeble attempt at a smile are exhibited in their full splendor.

The flash goes off. It must startle one of the kids because he lets out a scream of indignation and starts flailing hysterically. I try to retain my grip on him but end up knocking

his head into his twin's skull. All hell breaks loose and they howl in unison. *Ear plugs*. Must add that to the Santa survival kit. I jiggle the kids, desperately trying to calm them. That just has them yelling louder.

One of them spits up on me, and the stench makes me almost barf. I nearly drop him.

The mom yells and rushes up to my podium. Her face is wrath personified as she snatches the children out of my arms.

“You, *you!*”

Me? Lady, this was all you.

I force myself to suck in a deep breath. “Ma’am. I told you I couldn’t handle both together.”

This may be the first time I’ve ever said something is beyond me. I pride myself on handling high-stress situations. For fuck’s sake, I manage a billion-dollar company. And this is what it’s taken to bring me to my knees?

Impotence fills me. Total helplessness. My carefully crafted control is deserting me, and I can’t do anything but watch it go. I swallow.

“Told you to take them one at a time,” Alice mutters, giving me a doleful side-eye. And here I thought we were supposed to be a team.

My eyes find Krista. Her mouth’s a perfect O. And not of the good kind.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I MAKE arrangements to meet Santa on the toy floor during his break. Today's lesson is more of a practical one in nature. It's all I can do not to cackle as I march him down the doll aisle: American Girl, Barbie, Bratz, and a whole slew of others I don't recognize.

"So, what are we doing here?" He shuffles along beside me, his eyes flitting about at all the plastic eyes boring into us. "These things are creepy."

I'm barely able to mask my wicked grin. "You're ready to progress to the next step."

He halts, fixing me with a suspicious glare. He folds his arms across his chest. "I thought we'd sit. Talk. I know how you like to lecture."

"Nah. I think it's time to level up." I march on, and after some muttered cursing about know-it-alls, his stomps follow.

Our destination is the Reborn Shoppe display. The brand specializes in creating dolls so realistic they could pass for actual babies; the same type expectant parents get at prenatal classes to practice carrying and diapering.

I pick up the *Teresa* model and cradle it in my arms. It's roughly the size of a newborn, with eyes scrunched shut and bowed limbs. Santa takes one step back, then another as I advance.

When I hold the doll out to him, his hands shoot out in front of him to ward me off. "I've already held babies."

“And almost dropped them, too. I’m surprised no one has sued yet.”

The space between his snowy brows creases, and a look of concern crosses his face. Finally, something is making its way into his thick skull.

Still, he doesn’t move to receive the doll.

“Come on. It’s just a toy,” I cajole. This is way more fun than I expected.

“I’m standing up.”

“And?” I’m puzzled.

“Every time I’ve held one of those,” Santa nods at the baby cradled in my arms, “I’ve been sitting down. Alice always passes them to me when I’m in the sleigh.”

Huh. “So what happens if Alice isn’t around?”

“Why wouldn’t she be?” He frowns.

“Well, if she had to go to the bathroom or something,” I say.

“She can do that during our breaks,” he responds, shaking his head stubbornly.

“I don’t think Forrester & Sons would ask employees to hold it. Think of all the labor laws the company would be breaking.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. They’d never do that!” he says fiercely. Frankly, I’m surprised at his defense of the store.

I glare.

He huffs out an exaggerated sigh. “For fish’s sake.”

“Better.” I give him a nod.

He shakes his head like I’m the bad guy here.

I wait, channeling the patience of Job until Santa eventually stretches both arms out, hands turned up like he’s some kind of robot. As if I’m going to drop an infant into them and hope for the best.

He mumbles something about all this being ridiculous. I roll my eyes. “Stop being such a baby.” I position myself so he has no room to escape and thrust the doll out. “Here’s how to hold it. Slide one hand under the neck and head.”

A long, drawn-out, painful sigh heaves out of him, but finally, *finally* his hands cup mine from below. They are big, warm. Familiar, somehow. Once again, I wonder at the man under the suit. Who is he really? His fingers stiffen as I gently drag mine out so that the baby rests directly on his palms.

“Okay. Good. Now slide your other one under its bottom and scoop it up.”

He shoves his hand under its knees.

“Its butt, not its thighs!” I warn when the doll starts to sink in the middle. Santa gingerly puts a hand under it, almost as if he’s afraid.

“Okay. Spread your fingers wide. And lift her to your chest so you can hold her against you.” He follows my instructions. “Now shift a bit. Let the head and neck slide along your forearm into the crook of your elbow.”

He obeys, though his movements are awkward and jerky. A real baby would be bawling by now. But I’m all about positive reinforcement. “Okay. Keep the other hand where it is.”

Finally, he’s got the doll secure in his arms.

I beam. Santa shakes his head in exasperation. But his mustache twitches. There’s a smile underneath all that hair. I’d stake my life on it.

My eyes drift to the display behind him that highlights all the features of the toy. “Okay, now rock it.”

Lines appear on Santa’s forehead. “Why?”

It’s not like I’ve asked him to disarm a bomb. “What if it cries?” I challenge.

If looks could kill, I’d be a dismembered carcass on the ground. Santa sways the baby back and forth once, and then again more vigorously.

A high-pitched, keening cry escapes the object in his arms.

His hands spring open.

Poor Teresa begins to fall.

Seconds before it slams to the floor, I grab it, trying desperately to hide a laugh behind tightly pursed lips. His expression is pure, perfect horror.

“It cried,” he says in his defense. “It’s a zombie baby!”

“It’s a doll! The fully featured model. Rocking triggers the crying.”

“You didn’t tell me that!”

“Gotta keep you on your toes.” There’s no more masking my smirk.

“You’re evil.” He pauses, looking at me long and hard. But then he gives me a deep nod of approval. “Well played, Shopper.”

“I try, Santa. I try.”

We’re adversaries finally able to appreciate each other’s strengths. I hope.

“You’re doing much better these days, you know?” Let it not be said I don’t give credit where it’s due.

“Why, thank you, Shopper.” Santa grants me a mock bow before he turns and treks back to the sleigh—A full five minutes early.

Progress indeed.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ZACH

Krista: Zach, I'm so sorry to bother you, but Santa hasn't shown up yet

TELL me something I don't know.

Christmas Eve is in three days. I had to take the morning off from my Santa duties. It was the only time the China, Australia, and EU divisions could get on a conference call at a reasonable hour, and I like to think I'm not an asshole.

For some reason, the Forrester & Sons GM couldn't find a replacement Santa so late in the season. I'd been tempted to suggest Tommy take my place, but I don't want the children scarred for life, so other entertainers were arranged.

It's past noon and I'm struggling to concentrate. The senior vice president of finance clicks to the next slide of his presentation and drones on about something or the other to do with new tax incentives.

Krista's probably going to ding me for punctuality again. My lip twitches. Krista. I'm bouncing my leg at the thought of seeing her. *Get a grip, for fuck's sake.*

Me: I heard. Don't worry, he'll be at the store soon. What do you have in mind for him today?

Krista: I've got a few new ideas...

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning. Ms. Parr, always all business. She's tenacious, I'll give her that. And the crazy part is some of her lessons... stick.

I've gotten to know some of the employees at the store better, people who work the lower-level jobs, not just the

execs I usually interface with.

I've had Mia send me the list of Christmas presents she'd planned on my behalf, and marked it with my own suggestions—shopping myself was going too far. Baby steps, as Krista keeps saying.

But the season is almost over. She'll be moving on to some other far-flung place for her next appointment.

Or there's plenty of work in New York.

Even right here at F&S. Some division or the other always needs improving. She could come in again to evaluate. I glance around the room. I could even sic her on some of the VPs.

Me: Gonna give me a hint?

Krista: A marketing master never reveals her secrets. But they'll be good, I promise.

Me: Promises, promises...

A quick glance outside reveals overcast and gloomy skies.

Me: How are the kids doing?

Krista: They seem to be okay. There are other characters on the floor entertaining them right now.

Me: Gives you a little time to study some French.

Krista: No can do. I'm on the clock working for some billionaire dude.

I snort under my breath.

Deliberate throat clearing has me looking up. The SVP is barely suppressing his scowl at my inattention. The man seriously needs to work on his poker face.

Me: Got to go. I'll see you later.

The meeting finally concludes a full hour later. Outside the office tower, the snow's turned into a sleety mess.

But what alarms me is the sight of two police cruisers parked in front of the store. I dash across the street, drenched in seconds. A couple of men in NYPD uniforms stand alongside Forrester & Sons security personnel under the awning.

One of the officers bars the door, stopping me from entering. “Store’s at capacity. No more customers allowed.”

Okay. My gut churns. Something is really wrong. Before I can identify myself, an employee recognizes me. “Mr. Forrester, sir!”

He informs the cops of my position, and I’m rushing inside the moment they clear me. At first glance, nothing seems out of the ordinary, but then I spy a sweaty Alfie speaking with two police officers and a dark-haired woman in a plaid coat in a corner. They are accompanied by Tommy and more staff from store security.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, striding over.

“A kid’s gone missing.” Alfie’s voice stutters.

My blood runs cold. *Shit. A Code Adam.*

“What information do we have?” I’m all business.

Tommy, in full-on reindeer gear, minus the antlers, answers, “Five-year-old boy, Ethan Summers. His mother—” he tips his head at the woman in the coat “—reported him missing approximately twenty-five minutes ago. As per protocol, the police were contacted when the child couldn’t be located within the first ten minutes.”

We keep our voices low. Operating procedure for this type of situation requires us to keep things as calm as possible, not raise any alarms. Nothing that might tip off a kidnapper. As unobtrusively as possible, all entrances and exits are shut except for the main one, and no unauthorized persons are allowed to enter. Any adult leaving the premises with a kid is checked. Employees are instructed to examine the shoes of all kids matching the missing child’s description. Abductors are often known to change the victim’s clothes—easy enough in a department store of this size, with a whole floor dedicated to children’s wear—but they’ll often overlook swapping out the kid’s shoes. All we can hope for is that we aren’t dealing with anyone who’s done this before.

“Cameras?”

“We’re reviewing the footage now.” Tommy points at the massive firs that flank Peppermint Plaza. “Turns out the temp trees introduced a couple of blind spots.”

Slowly, I face the mom. She’s around my age and is visibly trying to hold herself together. “Can you tell us more?”

She swallows. “My son, Ethan—he just wanted to meet Santa. But it was taking longer than we expected, and I needed to head back to work. I was texting my boss and looked away only for a moment. But when I turned around, Ethan was gone.”

The bottom drops out of my stomach. It’s all I can do not to rear back. This is her worst nightmare come to life. And it’s my fault.

“Has he done this kind of thing before?”

“No, never.” Her voice breaks as she gazes at me beseechingly.

I’m barely able to hold her glassy stare.

Alice and Krista are chatting in hushed tones a few feet away. Relief fills her expression when our eyes meet, and she hurries over.

“Did they find him?” she asks quietly.

“No. What do you know?”

“Not much. I was waiting for Santa to show up. But then some kind of commotion broke out over here, and I thought it had something to do with him, so I came down to investigate. Alice told me about the boy, and I was hoping I could help.” Her eyes are wide with worry.

Everyone available is scouring the store, going over it with a fine-toothed comb. But any additional assistance is welcome. All I care about is finding the kid.

Krista and I join the search, splitting up to cover more ground. I scout the toy section, walking through a familiar aisle of dolls. Plastic eyes follow me, judge me, condemn me.

My gut churns with guilt even as I rack my brains. If I were a five-year-old, where would I go...?

I first check the most popular spots—LEGO, Marvel, and Harry Potter. Nothing. I weave around a pregnant woman looking at stuffed dolphins, almost knocking over a man carrying his son. He glares, and I mutter a quick “sorry.”

Where could he be?

Trains.

Lots of kids have told Santa they want trains for Christmas. I rush to the *Polar Express* display, right behind the sleigh and reindeer, where it serves as an additional backdrop. It's child-sized, similar in scale to rides at an amusement park, made up of a locomotive and six cars. The whole thing is a good fifty feet long and positioned atop a white waist-high platform. I scramble up, not even bothering with the steps just a few feet away.

The main car is empty, but I check each one. The fourth one has a padded bench inside, with an apron-type covering that hangs to the ground.

The cloth twitches, and my heart leaps. I inch forward on my knees and slowly shift the material.

And there he is. Crouched under the seat, one side of his head pressed to the ground.

“Hey, buddy.” I keep my voice as light as I scan the boy up and down. No visible damage, and from the look of things, he is utterly oblivious to the turmoil he's caused. Blue headphones cover his ears, and he's tapping away on an iPad. He pushes one earpiece off and eyes me curiously.

“Ethan?”

He nods slowly. My body sags at the confirmation. I swallow reflexively, and plaster on what I hope is a reassuring smile. “Wanna come out? Your mommy's looking for you.”

“Is Santa back?” he asks.

“Hmmm?” My heart's still thumping wildly against my ribs.

“Santa.”

“Oh. Not yet.”

Little denim-covered knees curl in more tightly. “I’m staying here then.”

“Why is that?”

“My list. I have to give it to Santa.” He retrieves a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. “I was waiting for him to come back. But Mommy wanted to leave.”

A full-sized bullet train of shame slams into me. “There’s a letterbox for anyone who doesn’t meet Santa by the big tree. Did you see it?”

He shrugs. If he did, he doesn’t care.

“Can you come out?” I try again.

He shakes his head. Yeah. That mulish tilt to his chin tells me I’m not going to get anywhere like this.

Well, I’m nothing if not a good negotiator. “Tell you what, Santa’s gonna be back in less than fifteen minutes. Why don’t you come with me? I’ll make sure you meet him.”

Suspicion burns bright in his eyes.

“My name is Zach Forrester. I’m the owner of the store. I’ve got an in with Santa. If there’s anyone who can get him here, it’s me,” I say.

He considers me long and hard.

“You promise?”

“Pinky swear.” I hold out my little finger. After a moment, he twines his around it.

Tears pool in his impossibly large hazel eyes. “Mommy’s going to be mad. She’ll say I was bad. I won’t get any presents.”

My throat tightens, and I have to clear it to respond. “Nah. She just misses you. And if she’s mad, it’s because she was scared. Why don’t you explain to Santa? I’m sure he’ll talk to

your mommy and tell her it's his fault that you were a naughty boy. He was the one who was late."

The boy's face lights up. "Yes!"

"Want me to help you out?" I hold out a hand.

Little front teeth, one MIA, bite into a full lower lip. At long last, Ethan tips his chin in agreement.

I slide my hands under his arms. Sticky fingers clutch at the shoulders of my Tom Ford suit, but I don't give a shit. I cradle his head to make sure he doesn't hit it against the opening of the train as I lift him out.

Moments later, the kid is back in the arms of his sobbing mother. I duck and whisper into her ear. She nods, still clutching her son to her chest. I speak with the police and in-store security, keeping my tone even and firm. All the while, my pulse hammers in my ears with the force of a hundred war drums.

Krista's waiting close by. Thank fuck. I want to crawl into her arms and howl.

As soon as the team I'm with disbands, my feet find their way to her, stopping only when we're inches apart. I heave in my first full, cleansing breath since entering the store. When did my brain start to associate her voice, her scent, her very *presence* with comfort?

"You found him."

I nod, unable to speak. My gut's a tornado of fury and relief and guilt. All at once I want to be worthy of the awe in her eyes even though I'm the dumbass who caused the kid to go missing in the first place. I manage to find my voice and mumble, "I guess so."

"I knew you would."

The confidence in her tone sends another shard of shame through me. I want to tell her I'm sorry. I want to confess and pray she'll forgive me. I want to send her away so she never has to know. But for now, I push all those desires away. "I've got to go."

Krista takes a small step back. “Of course.”

But then she surges forward a second later. “Wait!” She places her hands on each of my shoulders and rises on tiptoes to give me a soft kiss on my cheek. The lingering press of her lips ripples through my skin, both searing and soothing.

My trembling fingers instinctively find her sides, clenching tight as I squeeze my eyes shut, allowing myself a brief moment of undeserved solace.

“Thank you for finding him.”

I nod again, throat tight. I don’t want to move. I don’t want to let go. Swallowing past the lump, I croak. “Can we meet later? After the store shuts? I need to speak with you but I have to do something first.”

“Yes,” she whispers.

I force myself to release her. I’ve got a promise to keep.

Minutes later, I’m in my Santa suit.

Ethan is first in line.

“Hi, Santa.” His gaze is wary as he fishes a familiar letter out of his pocket. “I wanted to give you my list. I know I was bad. But maybe I could have just one train?”

I huff out a laugh. Is this normal with children? Feeling like a big fat failure one second and then on top of the world the next?

I cross my legs and lift him higher on my lap so we’re face-to-face.

His mouth falls open.

“It’s you!” he whispers in wonder. He fingers the edge of my hat, touching my real hairline. In my rush to get dressed, I didn’t check to make sure everything was on right.

Busted. I flick a gaze about and draw the velvet hat lower over my forehead. My voice drops. “Yep. Told you I had an in with Santa. Gotta have a secret identity, you know?”

“Like Spider-Man?”

“Exactly! It’s my disguise. Otherwise, kids might only be good when I’m around. How else can I keep track of who’s naughty or nice?”

Ethan gives me a slow nod of understanding before his lips break into a conspiratorial grin. He pulls back to examine me. “I thought you’d be fatter.” He pokes at my side.

Ouch. The other thing I skipped was the fat suit and his small finger jabs between my ribs.

“You’re right. Thing is, it’s difficult to fit down a chimney if I get too big.”

His expression turns troubled. “We don’t have a chimney, just a radiator. Mommy says not to touch it.”

I laugh. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you get your gift. Just remember, this is our secret, okay?”

“I promise not to tell.” It’s his turn to stick out his pinky. I wrap mine around it. We nod to each other in understanding before exchanging more manly first bumps. After one last toothy grin, Ethan hugs me tight, then jumps off my lap and rushes into his mom’s waiting arms.

* * *

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LITTLE BY LITTLE, the adrenaline drains out of me. All that remains is a sick acid swirling in my guts. My heart’s still thumping like mad, and my chest feels tight. I’m struggling to pull in full breaths. Struggling not to throw up.

Meanwhile, Christmas goes on all around me. My palms go clammy as Alice hands me another child. A precious bundle.

It’s been a lark all this time. Playing Santa. Playing with Krista.

And she's been telling me to take the job seriously since the very beginning. In my arrogance, I decided it was unimportant compared to the "real" responsibilities I had running the company.

But shit's gotten real. Too real. Real people. Real consequences.

God, when I think of what could have happened...I reek of self-disgust and shame. It's a fucking miracle no one's noticed.

And my feelings for Krista—those are real too, no matter how much I want to deny them. I'm an idiot for imagining I could get away with this.

How did I blind myself to her appeal? At first, I couldn't look past all that seething, passionate indignation. Add on my smudged Santa glasses and the itchy facial hair, and voilà—blindness.

It's time to take them off. Face the many hard truths—the ones I've been keeping from her. And the ones I've been hiding from myself.

I swallow. She kissed me, looked at me, all soft and luminous like I was a damned hero. At that moment, all I'd wanted was to bask in her gaze. How much more of a bastard does that make me?

This whole time I've made light of her work. Acted like the regular jerk I am. Disappointed her time and time again. And I thought that was *fun*?

The incredible part is I'm here as Santa—and I don't hate it. Truth is, I haven't in a while now.

I don't even know when I stopped. Aren't I a prize—Scrooge in a suit. And it's comfortable. How pathetic is that? I have no clue how to be anything else. My whole life's been the company.

And now, I'm completely undone. There's no pretending I can let her go. Not at the end of the season. Not ever.

How the fuck do I untangle this mess?

Should have been upfront from the start.

And said what? “Hi, I’m Zachary Oliver Mitchell Forrester, Number One Asshole. Nice to meet you. Oh, and I’m Santa too. You know, the guy you keep recommending we fire? By the way, I’m into you.”

I snort. Yeah, that would’ve gone over real well.

But there’s no more putting it off. I need to make a plan. I have to confess. Today. Man up and take responsibility for my actions. Even if it means I’ll lose all her respect. Because it’s no more than I deserve.

So maybe show her you’re not a complete douche. That you’re redeemable.

Right. She already believed I was an asshole as Santa. Add this deception on to those sins, and I don’t know if there’s any coming back from that. Krista thought Santa was fucked up? Wait until she meets the real Zach.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KRISTA

UNDERNEATH THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE, a pall cloaks the store. The tension hasn't quite dissipated. Santa is subdued for the rest of his shift, although he makes a real effort with the kids.

Anger. Disappointment. Guilt. They all churn within me. Directed at Santa, at myself. It's as if all our lessons were a waste. Nothing stuck.

He may well have had a good reason for being late. But if he'd arrived when he was supposed to, we wouldn't have had to deal with all this drama. Thank God for Zach.

I let out a long whoosh of air.

In a fitting display to cap off the afternoon, I kissed Zach Forrester. But it was a relieved sort of kiss. Nothing that read "I want to consume you like a stocking full of chocolate." A "thank you" peck. Not entirely appropriate, but professionalism be damned; I barely held back from leaping into his arms when he appeared with Ethan.

But is it going to ruin everything?

What does he want us to talk about tonight? Another Santa update? What on earth for? We both saw how things went down earlier. No need to broadcast it from the top of a Christmas tree, is there?

Crapsicle, what if it's because of the kiss? The very public, very inappropriate kiss I gave him in front of the whole world?

Thank God only a handful of people know I'm temporarily employed by Forrester & Sons. As far as other employees are

concerned, I'm just the stalkery squatter on the second-ish floor who went full-on PDA with the hero of the hour. I mean, who wouldn't fangirl?

Plus he totally hugged me back, right?

He held you tight. Maybe that was to keep you from jumping him.

But we have chemistry.

The guy's the equivalent of a combustible agent. Seriously, who wouldn't go up in flames?

But he also looked so tortured. And he said he had to go. Multiple times.

Oh yeah. That.

By the time the day ends, I've ping-ponged between dread and anticipation so much that I'm a dizzy mess. A million scenarios have blazes through my brain. Maybe he wants to discuss the perils of mistletoe in the workplace. Or the secret lives of holiday elves. Bet there are some Kardashian-worthy episodes among them.

Or maybe, just maybe he liked the kiss.

Zach's already outside, hands tucked in his coat pockets as he surveys the windows. In profile, his features are severe. Stress lines bracket his mouth. Who can blame him? Today was a lot.

He turns when I approach, almost as if attuned to my presence. But there's the slightest tightening of his jaw, and the creases around his eyes seem to deepen. My stomach drops.

I clear my throat and mutter, "I...uh...could have come to your office."

His expression shifts from solemnity to one of subtle intent. "It's a nice night. How do you feel about a walk?" he asks.

Is this equivalent of taking me behind the barn to shoot me?

He cocks his head when I don't immediately respond.

"Sure. Yes. That's fine." Walking. Yeah. I can do that. You put one foot ahead of the other and hope for the best.

A starless sky has replaced the heavy clouds from earlier. As per NYC canon, two minutes after the snowfall ended, roads and sidewalks are covered in black mush.

We stroll without speaking. It's not like we can have a debate in the middle of Fifth Avenue—I mean, we *can*, it just means competing with the homeless guy screaming reform and boisterous choruses of "Merry Christmas," and "Feliz Navidad," and "Buon Natale."

As we're about to cross the street, Zach's hand finds my lower back so we don't get separated in the crush. I suck in a breath at the possessive gesture. The warmth of his skin seeps through my thick coat, solid and protective.

"There?" He motions to Central Park, only a block away. "Or we could get dinner?" He tips his head at the Columbus Circle building, home to at least three world-famous restaurants.

Zach's features remain solemn. I rack my brains for something to lift the mood. "There's a Christmas fair. We can grab something there," I say. Not that I'm really hungry.

We enter the park, skirting couples and families enjoying the only remaining area of pristine snow. It's quieter now, but we still haven't spoken. I look down and kick a stone. It goes skittering off the path. Looked like a piece of coal anyway.

"I'm sorry about earlier." The words burst from me.

He halts, turns me to him. "You're *sorry*? You can't think anyone holds you responsible? Fuck, you're the only reason Santa's done as well as he has." Zach's laugh is harsh. "Not that he's done well at all."

"Still. I could have emphasized punctuality. Or something."

"You're taking on too much responsibility for something you had no control over. It was Santa's fault. It was *my* fault,"

he says fiercely.

His fault? I sometimes forget the pressure Zach must be under running a business the scale of F&S. He's always made it look effortless. His body is tight with self-recrimination. It oozes from every pore.

"I...uh...wasn't talking about Santa. I meant the other..." I mutter.

"Oh."

Oh? I risk a peek at Zach from under my lashes. His eyes are locked on my face. My tongue goes dry.

"I'm not," he says simply. Matter of fact.

My head jerks up. Energy sizzles in the air between us, more palpable somehow. Want races through my veins, hot and thick, ending in a throb at my core. I lick my lips, remembering the feel of his skin against them. Is he going to...?

A little kid bashes into us, followed by a torpedoing snowball. I careen backward. Zach quickly braces me, cursing under his breath as he checks me for damage. But the moment's gone. *Seriously, snowball, you couldn't have waited just one more second?*

We resume our stroll, our feet crunching over the shoveled paths. We make our way to the Christmas fair and sample the hot chocolate they're handing out. A stall specializing in stocking stuffers grabs my attention. Nothing is larger than a fist on the shelves. I try on one of the soft finger puppets and admire the charming New York-themed snow globes before moving to the next stand. It boasts a collection of holiday ornaments. I pick up a miniature Empire State Building with a red cord strung through its spire and rummage through my purse for my wallet.

"I thought you were done with your shopping?" Zach asks.

"Well, this one's a gift for me, actually. Sometimes the best gifts are the ones you give yourself."

“Agreed. But isn’t it a bit late in the season to be decorating?”

I shrug. “I just like to collect the ornaments, kind of how some people buy magnets from places they travel to. You’d be surprised how many cities have Christmas shops all year round.”

”Your tree must be overflowing.”

“Umm...I don’t have one.”

Zach’s open-mouthed stare is almost comical. “How’s that even possible? You’re Ms. Krista Christmas.”

I laugh at that, delighted at the comparison. “We marketing nomads have to travel light, you know. But I have a whole box of these things at my parents’ place in Chicago. You know, for someday when I have a home. A proper family...” Zack’s expression is bemused. “Not for a while, still,” I tack on hurriedly. I don’t want him to get ideas that I have ideas. “But until then, I’m all footloose and fancy free. There are adventures to be had!” I kick up my heels for effect and am gratified at his answering laugh.

“I still think it’s unbelievable you don’t have one,” he says.

“It’s not like I’ll be in New York much longer. I head home for a quick visit right after submitting my final report, then come back, get details on the next gig, and then it’s *adieu*.”

Zach’s lips tighten for a long moment. Then a long, ragged exhale whooshes out of him. His attention returns to me. “No tree...” He shakes his head, as if still unable to process this revelation. “Well, we’re taking care of that now.” He grabs my hand and tugs me in the direction of a Christmas tree vendor.

“Oh no, it’s fine.”

“No,” he says stubbornly. “Pick a tree. It’s a thank you.”

“You’re thanking me? You’re the one who found the kid,” I tell Zach.

His jaw clenches, but he doesn’t say anything.

I slant him another look. “You realize it’s a little late for a tree, right? Christmas is in a couple of days.”

He takes his time responding. When he does, there’s an intensity in his eyes. “So? Isn’t what little time you get worth it?” His words are a soft caress.

And I realize I want all the time in the world.

I swallow. “Yeah.” Truth is, I’d love a tree. “How’s that?” I point at a little one in a pot that comes to my knee. Nice and portable.

He turns up his nose at it. “Nah.” He points at a giant fir. It must be at least twelve feet tall. “How about this?”

“It’s too big. It won’t fit.”

Zach smirks.

I want to slap my hands over my mouth. Where’s a giant snowdrift when you need one?

“We’ll make it work,” his voice is low and wicked. *Dark with promise.*

My cheeks flame, and I abruptly turn around and resume my inspection of the trees. “How about that?” I point at one that’s about as high as my waist. Pickings for regular-people trees are slim, given it’s so close to Christmas.

“It’s lopsided,” Zach says after a lengthy examination.

The tree’s got a bald spot on one side, as if someone reached into its guts and pulled out an organ. The thing’s running on life-support. I instantly fall in love.

“I think it’s missing a limb or two.”

“So what?”

“Nothing to write home about.” He slides me a cheeky grin.

“Size doesn’t matter in the grand scheme of things.” I keep my voice nonchalant even though I’m dying of embarrassment. “All it needs is a little TLC.” I run a finger over one of the bald spots.

“And you’re just the person to provide it?”

“I’m the reformer, remember?”

“If you say so.” Zach still sounds doubtful but pays for it and a stand anyway. He tells the tree guy we’ll be back later to pick it up.

We head toward Bethesda Fountain, then move on to Belvedere Castle. I take photos of all the major attractions.

“Have you heard about your next placement yet?” Zach’s voice is casual as we continue along the path.

“Not yet.”

“Hmmm...” is all he says.

I watch him from beneath lowered lids, tempted to ask if he’d want to see me again if I found some other gig in New York. Even if I didn’t, the city *is* kind of the center of the universe, a travel hub. We could be ferries on opposite harbors, crossing routes on some predetermined timetable.

There is a pause. Then he says, “So, as I said earlier, I need to speak with you.”

My breath catches. Maybe he’s going to bring it up himself? Bells chime nearby. A sign?

Nope. It’s a spontaneous acapella of carolers. *Now?* For the first time in my life I want to rush them off. *Now’s* not the time for Jingle Bells.

I’m about to suggest we take an alternate path, but Zach’s the one who stops and says, “let’s listen.”

I eye him doubtfully. Since when is he all “Dreaming of a White Christmas?” But given that this is probably a rare occurrence for him, I don’t argue.

The music no sooner ends when the snow starts up again. Light flurries flutter all around us. Ignore the undertones of garbage and dog pee and the scene would be almost too romantic for words.

We hurry back to the tree seller and reach him just in time; he’s packing up for the evening.

“I was wondering when you lovebirds would get here. She’s all waiting.” He gestures to my little tree, all netted up and ready to be transported home. I reach for it, but Zach snatches it up before I can, giving me a chastising glare in the process. He slings it over a broad shoulder, propping it in place with one hand. And what does he do with his other? Takes mine like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Shockingly, I don’t melt into a snowy puddle. We walk to the edge of the park, both staring straight ahead, no more words passing between us.

Once we’re by the street, I grab my phone. An Uber will cost the earth, but there’s no way I’m subjecting my tree to the frenzy of the subway.

Zach shakes his head when he sees the app. “I’m taking you home.” It’s a declaration of intent. Swoon.

Moments later, a black Bentley rolls up, and the driver hops out and opens the door for me. I get in and scramble across the backseat. Zach slides the little tree in after me, then settles on the other side. The car shifts into gear with barely a whir.

I recite my address, but that’s the sum total of the conversation for the rest of the ride. Zach’s face is angled so he’s staring out the window, but his jaw is tight. As if he’s battling something.

Is it the same tension gripping me? It must be. It pulses in the air, mixing with the scent of leather and pine.

Twenty minutes later, we pull up by my Murray Hill apartment.

Before I can thank him for the ride, Zach’s got the tree out of the car and is mountain-manning it through the building entrance. I give my doorman a quick wave as we enter the waiting elevator. We exit on the eleventh floor, and I make a sharp right down the beige-carpeted hallway to the very end.

I unlock my door, and he follows me in. When it snicks shut behind him, I release a nervous breath, watching him as he examines the space. He’s actually here. His perusal is over

in seconds—it's a studio with an alcove barely able to accommodate a full-size bed.

The room's not a huge mess, but nowhere near neat. It's not like I was expecting visitors this evening.

“Where do you want this?” He jostles the tree on his shoulder.

“By the window, please.”

“Got something to cut the net with?” Zach asks once it's in place.

I pass him a knife, and he slices open the plastic binding around the tree. I unwrap my mini Empire State Building and hang it on a branch. We step back to admire our work.

“Not bad.”

I slide him a glance out of the corner of my eye. He's looking at me as well. We both smile. Slowly, we turn to face each other fully.

Zach's hair is slightly damp from the snow, and a lock has fallen over his forehead. I can't stop myself from reaching out, stroking it back. His eyes are bright on mine as I trace my fingers along his hairline, down the side of his face to cup his jaw.

There's no mistaking the need in his gaze, I know it mirrors my own. The air thickens and tension builds, drawing us closer together.

My arms loop around his neck. He drops his head, our foreheads almost touching. Zach puffs out a harsh breath.
“Krista, I—”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ZACH

THE MOMENT her lips touch mine, my body reacts. The confession on my tongue dies before my brain can object. In a blink, my fingers are twining in her hair to stop her from retreating.

She stills, her eyes locked on mine, her breath, mingling with my own.

I can't move, I just hold her captive, staring at her in mirrored shock.

A warning blares at the back of my mind—*Not the plan. Not the plan. Not the plan.*

I try to make myself release her, but it's as if my body has locked up tight, resisting. She's so close. Her tongue peeks out, taking the lightest swipe of her lips.

Those perfect, plump lips only an inch away.

Those lips I've fantasized about, the ones I want on my skin, my dick, my very soul.

My jaw clenches as I bite back a groan. My heartbeat hammers in my chest. Tension vibrates between us, so strong I feel it in my abs, my balls, my cock. Everything is tight. Poised.

Let. Her. Go.

“Krista.” It comes out raspy and needy.

Tell her. NOW.

But it's as if I have no other words but her name.

Of its own volition, my thumb strokes her cheek. The softest whimper hitches out of her. She smells amazing, sugar and spice and everything Krista. The swells of her breasts brush my chest, and I suck in a harsh breath.

“Zach,” she whispers, her breath warm against my skin. I go from rigid to rock hard in a second.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She looks at me like I’m every Christmas present she’s ever wanted but couldn’t have. But a hint of insecurity lurks in her gaze.

Doesn’t she know I’ll give her anything? *Everything?*

Something in my face must reveal my thoughts because her soft lips press against mine once more. The kiss starts off soft, hesitant. It’s the barest of touches but it makes me tremble from the inside out. The slight contact feels good, too good. Carefully, her tongue traces across my lower lip, and I’m lost. I part my mouth, letting her in. My eyes close, and I stay completely still, just letting myself feel her. Letting myself allow her to explore me. Learn me.

At the back of my head, I know this is a bad idea, but like a kid who finds a stash of presents before Christmas, I can’t resist.

She moans into my mouth. Heat licks up my spine, along my limbs. I swallow hard, but trying to remain passive is slow, painful agony.

My hands release her hair and glide down. One cradles her neck, the other skims down her back, lightly, so lightly. It’s taking everything in me to stop from crushing her to me.

I press my forehead against hers, breaking the kiss.

“What are you doing?” I brush my lips against hers once because I can’t resist. But then I force myself to draw back, meet her eyes.

“An early Christmas present to myself. They’re the best ones,” she says playfully.

“They are.” I lean into her, just a little, because I can’t help it, because I’m an addict and need her.

“Then...?” She looks at me from beneath her lashes.
“Unless this isn’t what you want...?”

It’s the doubt in her voice that does it. How can she think she’s not exactly what I want?

Lust wallops me in a flash. I break on a harsh, guttural groan and haul her in, bringing her body flush with mine. My lips skim down her jaw until I’m kissing her neck, and her breath hitches. Fuck, that sound. It goes straight to my dick. I suck at the delicate skin of her throat, once again engulfed in her scent.

Her body is all curves and warmth. She clutches my shoulders and arches into me, going on tiptoes.

I steady her, my touch growing bolder. My hands cup her ass, pulling her to me so she’s pressed against the rock-hard bulge in my pants. I want there to be no doubt in her mind it’s all for her.

I squeeze the tight globes, and she moans against my mouth.

It only makes me harder. I push her coat off. It lands on the floor with a soft thump, and then my hands are at the buttons of her dress. In a heartbeat, it’s on the ground.

She stands there in a purple bra. Her breasts lift on a sharp inhale, drawing my attention to their peaked, pink centers, visible through the lace. Blood rushes to my ears.

I cup the warm softness of her flesh and thumb the pebbled crests through her bra before unhooking it and letting it drop to the ground.

Those sweet tits. I need to taste them. Suck on them. Worship them.

I roll her nipples and then lean down to grasp one tight nub with my lips and lightly pull.

She rewards me with a moan, shifting, arching further into me.

Fuck, she's perfect.

I take the other tip between my lips. Lap at it before drawing it into my mouth fully and sucking with long pulls.

She clutches at my hair, which only makes me suck harder.

I alternate from one pointed nub to the other, and then my mouth finds the soft underside of her right breast, and I kiss her there. She lets loose a whimper. She's sensitive in that spot, so I do it once more, scraping her lightly with my teeth. Her moan is so erotic, I have to hear it again.

My hands find her ass again, and I lift her. Her legs twine around my hips. I tumble her onto the bed, only a couple of feet away.

My clothes are off in seconds, and the bed creaks as I follow her down.

My palms revel in the skin of her calves, moving upwards. I hook my thumbs under her panties and draw them down, inch by inch, until she's bared to me.

I pause, taking a second to rake my eyes over her naked form; take in her long, smooth legs, the gentle swell of her hips, the fullness of her tits. My gaze goes to the sweet, pink heart of her, and I groan.

Gently, I part her there and trace inwards with the pads of my fingers. Her breath hitches, and she trembles, but she doesn't stop me. I continue on my path, exploring until I find the seam of her center. I skim the soft slick flesh back and forth. Once, twice, and then I find the hard nub of her clit.

A soft cry breaks from her, and I press my forehead against her chest and heave in a deep breath. I pull away for just one second, grabbing my pants, retrieving a foil packet from my wallet.

Then I'm back between her thighs. The crown of my cock notches against her sex. My gaze lifts to hers, and our eyes lock. Her soft lips part on a dreamy sigh.

The first push is slow, sweet agony, because I want to savor every inch, brand this moment into my memory forever.

Because after this, nothing will ever be the same.

She's tight. I have to work to get inside her, seeking, stretching, pulsing. Pushing until I bottom out within her. I still once I'm balls deep, reveling in her warm, wet heat.

"Oh god, you're big."

A laugh huffs out of me as I remember what she said about the first tree. "I told you we'd make it work," I tease, even as the urge to thrust burns through me. I withdraw, just an inch, before pushing back.

The laugh that bursts out of her turns into a moan as I show her exactly what I can do with my "trunk."

She moans, "Yes, and so good."

Her pussy grips me like a vise. We've barely started, but I suspect I'll never have enough. I want to find all the ways she likes to be pleased. Go through them one by one, and then over again to get them perfect.

"Krista," the harsh whisper is pulled from me almost painfully. I take her mouth, our tongues tangling as I begin to thrust, withdrawing, and surging back in, starting a slow and steady rhythm.

"Zach."

My name on her lips is my new favorite sound. I brace my weight on my hands, push up, and glance down to where we are joined. Wetness coats my cock, and a groan wrenches from me at the sight. I plunge into her, fuck her, watching my dick move in and out.

"More." Her fingers dig into my biceps.

I look up. Eyes, bright with lust, return my stare, and a sharp longing pierces through me. I capture her mouth again and kiss her like I'm dying.

She kisses me back, soft whimpers escaping her. God, I love her little noises.

She clenches around my dick and I have to grit my teeth. She's clasping me so tight I'm in danger of coming. There's no

more talk. Just the sound of my balls slapping against her pussy with each hard thrust.

Her thighs clamp around me and she arches, letting out a sharp keening cry as she clenches around me. It's a pure pleasure that is reflected in her face. She goes taut for a long second before she spasms around my throbbing length. Her pussy milks me, and I grind into her as she comes. I never want to leave here. I never want to leave her. And then I'm lost as I follow her into oblivion.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I LIE ON MY BACK, the cool air weaving over my scorching skin; my lungs heaving with harsh, disjointed pants.

My orgasm has left me loose and light-headed. I'm not sure if I'm actually here, or if I've been reduced to a boneless, mindless mass of mush. And Zach? What if I imagined the whole thing?

I turn my head warily, because if this is some kind of lust-induced dream, I want to savor it for as long as possible. But there he is, watching me thoughtfully.

I'm submerged in those blue pools again. I could drown in them. For a second, it scares me how out of my depth I am. I move to pull away, get my bearings, but maybe Zach sees the retreat in my eyes because he takes my hand. Slowly, gently, his thumb circles the delicate skin of my inner wrist, as if to soothe my galloping pulse.

"Not yet."

I look at him questioningly.

"Don't I get to open my gift as well?" His voice is husky. A sly grin breaks over his mouth. That roguish smile pushes my fears away as the fires I thought banked flare up again.

I respond, keeping my voice coy and playful to match. "Do you?" I bite my lip, pretending to consider the matter. "Hmmm. I *suppose* you were good." Oh my God, as if there was any doubt.

Zach huffs out a laugh, but suddenly he's flipping me, and I'm draped over him. I rasp in a breath as I register this new position, absorbing the sensation of the warm, hard body I'm straddling. Desire ratches up in a heartbeat.

He takes his time raking his gaze over me. My nipples stiffen almost painfully as he eyes them, as if he wants to lick them, long and slow.

He gives me a wicked grin as he raises himself on one elbow and then another, the ridges of his abs rippling under me. I sway forward at his unspoken command and Zach catches one stiff peak between his teeth and flicks it with his tongue. He sucks, and then switches his attention to my other

Gently, he pushes at my shoulders. Obediently, I lean back, bracing my hands behind me on the bed, so I'm tilted, open to his view.

His cock pulses, hot and thick, pressing between the crease of my buttocks.

Blue eyes stare up at me as humor fades, replaced by a dark desire. "Spread those legs, I want a peek." His voice is rough, demanding.

My face burns so hot, I feel almost faint. But slowly, I open further to him, feeling myself go hot and slick.

Zack's answering grunt is low and deep. His body tightens under mine as I present myself to him, and his nostrils flare when his hooded gaze finds my mound.

"Gorgeous."

I'm a full-body flush. I move to shut my legs, but Zach holds me in place with hands on the inner edges of my knees, shooting me a reproving glance before returning his attention to my pussy.

"Wider."

My heartbeat kicks up. But I obey, feeling the stretch in my muscles.

My clit swells and throbs even as the cool rush of air against my core sends a shiver through me. The blunt tips of

his thumbs find my soft center, then part my wet sex.

I hear Zach's rough indrawn breath at the sight of my open flesh. His tongue peeks out and swipes at his bottom lip, as if he can't wait for a taste of me.

I clench, feeling suddenly empty. *Please, please, please.*

Zach's eyes lift, lock on mine. They spark with a carnal knowing. I sway at the heat in them, and his big hands cup my ass, steadying me.

The pads of his fingers dig into my skin as he urges me up. My swollen wetness drags against his rock-hard abs, up his chest. With each slow inch, his breathing grows more ragged. He lifts me, shifts me, so my shins bracket his head as he positions me so I'm hovering over his mouth.

I watch, unable to look away as he draws me down close enough to feel the rasp of his breath on the sensitive skin.

Shudders wrack my frame at the first slow stroke of velvet along my slit. A long, low moan rips from me as pleasure, hot and thick, surges through my veins.

"Oh, God." *Oh God, oh, God, oh, God.*

I squirm against him, torn between begging him to do it again and wanting to escape his questing mouth. He catches my eyes and holds them. I watch, transfixed, as he deliberately circles my opening with the tip of his tongue before licking me once more. It's followed by a lingering sigh, almost of anguished relief, as if he's been waiting, yearning for this too. There's no more denying him. I cant my hips against his mouth, unable to resist a millisecond longer.

"Good girl."

His harshly muttered praise vibrates against the heart of me. I writhe against him. My hands tangle in his hair, and a harsh sound is wrenched from the back of his throat as he eats me, pulling me closer, shifting my knees so I'm sitting on his face. I grab the headboard to brace myself as he closes his eyes and feasts, devouring me as if he's hungry, dying for it. I rock against him, all delirious want and demanding need. He growls approvingly, urging me on.

He keeps me on the edge of an orgasm, lashing me over and over with his tongue. I almost don't recognize the soft, mewling sounds that escape me as I bear down on him, shamelessly pressing against his greedy lips.

“Oh. Oh...Zach.”

I whimper, clenching on his tongue. Fucking myself on his mouth, rocking myself against his lips, making noises of helpless need. The more frantic my movements, the harder he goes, as if he's feeding of my desperation. I circle my hips, uncoordinated in my frenzy. I'm about to break. His eyes snap open as if he doesn't want to miss it. They blaze with an unnamed emotion that sends me higher and higher, and then I'm exploding, coming with a long, harsh, keening cry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ZACH

A CLANGING NOISE WAKES ME—THE sound of an old-school radiator. I shift slightly, but an unfamiliar weight pressed against my side makes me pause. *Krista*.

Her head rests on my shoulder, and one of her arms is draped possessively over my chest. Cinnamon, vanilla, and the underlying scent of sex mixes lingers in the air.

I squeeze my eyes shut as images from yesterday rush through me. The store. The park. *The plan*.

The one that blew up the moment her lips touched mine.

Way to fuck up, asshole.

I groan silently. How could I have gone completely off script? It was supposed to be simple:

Walk Krista through the park.

Show her Zach-as-Santa gets Christmas.

Reveal the truth without things going to shit.

And what do I do instead? Dive-bomb right into it.

Touching her was a mistake. I knew it when it happened. But I was helpless to stop. It must have been the emotion of yesterday. I've never been overtaken like that before.

And now? There's no taking it back. I look at Krista, lying beside me on the bed. So peacefully. Even if I could take it back, I wouldn't.

Krista shifts, and I hold my breath. The sheets pull, revealing the long, shapely leg that was wound tight around me only hours ago. It's just inches away from my very interested dick, who's up and curving the slightest bit in her direction. *Not happening.*

I can't remember the last time I spent the whole night with a woman. In any other situation, I'd have left with a friendly wave and an "I'll see you around."

Now, all I want is to duck under the blanket and wake Krista up with my tongue.

I force myself to inch out from under the sheets and sit on the edge of the mattress, facing her. She stirs again. A crease forms between her brows as she feels around. For me? She ends up tucking her fingers under her cheek and emits a dreamy sigh.

That's the moment when my chest cracks open.

Shit, I'm in trouble. If I don't leave now, I'll wake her up, take her again. Good intentions be damned. I pull my clothes back on, gather up my wallet and coat, and then look at the bed. With her blonde hair spread out on the pillow, she really does look like an angel.

And I'm Santa Satan. A two-faced liar. I didn't use to be. In fact, once upon a time, not long ago, I prided myself on telling the unvarnished truth, no sugarcoating involved.

My insides dip uncomfortably. How in hell do I even begin to apologize? Because I can't envision letting her go, not after this.

Do I wake and tell her now?

No. Not yet. Not right after this. She'll hate me forever. The thought of never having her like this again fills me with dread.

I look away, unable to face her sleeping form any longer, and my gaze lands on the tree. It's stretched, expanded since last night, freed from its rope bindings. The little Empire State Building hangs proudly from a malformed branch.

I can send her more. A mini Chrysler building, the Woolworth. Hell, I'll even commission an ornament of F&S if we don't produce one already. A paltry peace offering.

Wedged next to the window is a small desk. Familiar brown manila envelopes are stacked neatly on one side, the Boyer & Bleecker Marketing logo on the upper right corner in sharp contrast.

My skin goes cold as another terrible thought strikes. What if Krista thinks I slept with her for the reports? She wouldn't. She knows I'd never do that.

And once she finds out how well she actually knows you, what then?

Fuck.

All right. New plan.

Don't confess yet. Give it a couple more days. Avoid her until after she submits the final feedback. That way, there's no suspicion she was biased. And when I finally do admit I was Santa...*Don't think about it.*

I take one step outside Krista's apartment, all the while fighting the urge to turn around, rush back to her. Lock us inside and stay there forever. Fuck Santa. Fuck her job. Fuck F&S. We can just live in her little snow globe of lopsided trees and miniature buildings. We'll allow a random delivery person to stop by with food every now and again.

Instead, I leave with a quiet click of the door and a coward's text:

Me: Had to go. Thank you for last night.

Chump.

* * *

IT'S STRAIGHT TO F&S headquarters from Krista's. I shower in the en suite bathroom and step into the attached walk-in closet for a change of clothes. Half the time, I spend the night in the office, so dozens of suits hang on the racks;

black and gray and blue. Not one ounce of color anywhere. Drab. Like my life will be if Krista leaves.

My gut churns at the thought. But I'm not deviating from the plan. The overall objective is still to confess, even if the timeline has shifted a bit.

I'm late to my first meeting, one I'd specifically requested, at fucking early-o'clock. And then barely pay attention to the discussion. What's the point of hanging out here if my mind's parked across the street?

Oh yeah. CEO position.

I crack my neck. It's stiff from being hunched over as Santa. Plus, Krista needs a better mattress.

Like she's ever letting you share it again.

No. That's not going to happen. I'll make it work somehow. I'll explain about the tradition, how it was a requirement for becoming CEO.

And you think that'll be enough?

I block out the voice and force myself to focus. But my eyes keep going to my phone instead of the presentation.

No response yet. I give her an hour. Two. Irritation spikes through me at being ignored. And then I'm irritated that I'm irritated.

Of course, her message shows up right when I'm in the middle of answering a question posed by the CFO.

Krista: I had a good time, too. [smiley face emoji]

A smiley face? Surely I was worth an eggplant? I wait for a follow up. But my phone screen stays uncooperatively blank.

That's it?

The fucking day only gets worse. That first meeting runs into the next, and shit just dominoes from there. I barely make it across the street on time, jumping out of the way of a speeding yellow cab, already undoing my tie à la Clark Kent.

Today's goal: Don't fuck up the Santa shit. Give Krista no reason for more lessons. Limit all interactions until tomorrow

when her contract is up. No room for more lies. And if that means avoiding her as *Zach and Santa*, then that's what I'll do. Just until she submits her final report.

I'm in my costume in no time, doing up the buttons from muscle memory. My heart thumps like mad in anticipation of seeing Krista again. I crack open the stockroom door and sneak a quick peek at the mezzanine.

And there she is, in her usual spot. The tightness in my chest eases, and I let out my first full breath since waking up in her bed. I drink in the sight of her. White top, pink skirt, red coat. A coffee in her hand. Even her usual frown is in place. The frown that's meant for Santa. Me.

The bell chimes. Yells and cheers greet me as I step outside. I wave to the kids waiting in line as I march over to my sleigh with purpose.

It's showtime.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

KRISTA

Zach: Had to go. Thank you for last night.

FINE, so Zach's text is a little short. But he's a busy man. Those billions don't make themselves. Or maybe they do? All I know is that his mornings are packed. One's gotta admire his sense of responsibility.

Seriously, can Zach Forrester do no wrong? Run a multi-continent business. Rescue missing children. And he can totally *parlez vous* everything French. French press. French fries (yes, I know that doesn't count). French kissing. Is it any wonder I went all swoony?

Still, a pang runs through me at waking up alone. But tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and my last day at Forrester & Sons. And after that, who knows?

My heart drops at the thought of leaving New York. I've grown to love the city. I love that cookies can be delivered at 3 a.m. if I'm in need of an emergency sugar fix. I love watching old ladies "walk" their dogs in fancy baby carriages. I love the cacophony of sounds, like everyone has too much energy to stand still. And the idea of possible hidden civilizations in the subway system...? Fantastic.

As for Zach and me?

I sigh. We jumped the gun. But it was always going to happen, right? So maybe we rushed. Fast-forwarded to the good parts. It happens. But a little voice inside of me wonders if last night was a one-time thing. A result of the adrenaline of

the day. His text was short, so I keep my response casual. Quick and upbeat. Cheery but not explicit.

Me: I had a good time, too.

I stare at the screen, my finger hovering over the send button.

Me: I had a good time, too. [smiley face emoji]

There. A little extra something to emphasize how good it was. It's true. Our stroll was very pleasant. The drive home was appreciated. The sex was...

Well, it *was*.

I hit send.

Then I wait. And wait.

Nothing comes through. Maybe I'll see him at the store? He's dropped by almost every day.

I rush to get dressed, pairing a fitted white sweater with a pink pencil skirt, completing the look with black tights and heeled booties. I triple check my hair and lipstick in the mirror before I leave.

But once I'm at my usual perch at Forrester & Sons, all I do is stare at his message, willing the letters to magically reshuffle. Maybe it's an anagram?

Zach: Had to go. Thank you for last night.

I examine the words objectively. Technically, there's nothing wrong with them. They're just...blah. Practically a robo-call follow up.

Thank you for last night.

No mention of tonight. Of tomorrow night. Was this a one-time thing?

What if the sex was blah? What grade would I get for my performance? I'd started off thinking I might get an "Exceeds expectations," but now I'm wondering if I merit only an "Acceptable."

Subpar?

I wince.

“Inappropriate advances” would go in the comments section for sure. Maybe I should have given him a blow job? I wanted to. That would have gotten the grade up, right? Blow jobs must count as extra credit.

Me: Have you ever slept with a client?

Barely a second later, bubbles bounce furiously.

Callie: Zach? Or Santa?

Me: Zach. Not that I'm saying I did.

Zoe: You just did.

Callie: Was it good?

Me: [eggplant emoji] [eggplant emoji] [eggplant emoji]
[eggplant emoji] [eggplant emoji]

Zoe: *Five* [eggplant emoji]? OMG. So jealous. Corey can barely find my [oyster emoji]

Callie: Maybe you should be giving him lessons then. Take a page out of Krista's book.

I interrupt the exchange.

Me: He was gone when I woke up. He sent this.

Me: [FW] Had to go. Thank you for last night.

Callie: And you said?

Me: [FW] I had a good time, too. [smiley face emoji]

Callie: No [eggplant emoji]? Positive reinforcement, girl!

Zoe: Yep. I agree with C. You want to make sure he does it all over again.

Me: But will we?

Zoe: Why not?

Me: [shrug emoji]

By midmorning, my foot's bouncing against the tiled floor with alarming consistency. Today's espresso may have been a mistake. There's already a frantic rush in the air. Christmas is the day after tomorrow. Anyone who hasn't bought their gifts online is screwed. Kaput. Dunzo. You can smell the desperation of shoppers who didn't put in their orders in time for Prime.

My eyes stay peeled for any kind of disturbance in Peppermint Plaza, but things are moving as smoothly as a well-oiled assembly line. Children are transported from parent-to-Alice-to-Santa-to-Alice-to-parent. Then, it's time to pick up photos from Steven.

Ugh, can't even count on the fat man to keep me distracted. Why'd he pick today to be on his best behavior?

Uneasiness mounts, and I resolutely push it away. But it's a spotlight that keeps returning. A voice booms in my brain, "Here lies she, who slept with her boss." It's chillingly like my father's, which makes it all the more disturbing. Because really, who wants to think about their father and sex in the same sentence?

I massage my temple with the back of my pen. I've been known to be impulsive, jump right into things without a plan. Still, there's a first time for everything.

Well, to be fair, I've made many plans over the years. Problem is, they tend to form two seconds before they must be carried out.

And this one? Possibly the best execution of the worst idea ever. And I've had plenty of bad ideas over the years. I drop my head into my hands.

I tap my screen to life. Again.

The only message is from Callie.

Callie: Nothing yet?

Me: Nope.

No calls, no texts, no nothing from Zach. I examine the bars to make sure my signal hadn't gone AWOL. There they are, all the little soldiers, from short to tall, every single one accounted for. But I still turn my phone off and on.

There's a new message waiting when it powers up. My heart kicks up.

Callie: Was the sex...bad?

Then dips.

Me: No.

Me: I don't think so.

Me: Not bad for me.

Me: He came.

Me: Guys can't fake it.

Me: He was wearing a condom. Maybe he did fake it?

Callie: You could text him?

Zoe: Don't you dare!

Callie: What if he was hit by a car and is lying in a hospital bed?

Zoe: One can only hope.

I snort. Callie's the eternal optimist. Zoe—not so much. My fingers drum against the table again.

My phone rings, and I hit accept even before checking the screen.

“Krista.”

My stomach drops even as I bolt upright.

“Hi, Bill.” The eleventh commandment: *Thou shalt not answer the phone without first checking caller ID.*

“What was the meaning of the report yesterday?”

Oh. That.

“You gave Santa a zero for punctuality,” my boss says.

There's a beat. Does he expect me to take it back?

“I can't say he was here on time if he showed up two hours late.” There's bending the rules, and there's *breaking* the rules. I'm not a breaker. I've been “spinning for the win” every day since that first warning. When Santa speaks to a kid like a grownup, I note it down as “Santa has a mature personality.” When his behavior with a parent is chilly, I write “Santa is exceptional at acting like he's from the North Pole.” Still, my efforts don't seem to be enough.

“Do you *want* to be hawking sex toys in Las Vegas?” Bill's voice is incredulous.

Bring it, Bill. But I don't actually say that. There's no reason to catapult from the frying pan right into fire just

because I can, right?

“No. I’ll make sure the final report is positive.” *Positively honest*. I can manage the next couple of days with a crapsicle moral compass, can’t I? At least Zach knows the truth of it all since he constantly demands to see my notebook and ignores the copies of the manicured reports I send Bill.

There’s a harrumph before the line goes dead. I heave out a gigantic sigh. God, the things my parents would say if they could see me now. My mother would probably host a prayer meeting for my soul. *Sorry, Mom, that ship sailed a long time ago*.

A distraction is in order. Retail therapy. Well, supposedly there’s some good shopping in this place. I slide a glance at the pastry display. Chocolate has healing powers. Or there’s always cake.

I’m in the middle of stuffing my face full of red velvet when I look down at the sleigh. Santa’s making a run for it.

I jump to my feet. Finally, some action around here.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ZACH

THE AFTERNOON IS an exercise in juggling kids and messages. I might as well have a vibrator in my pocket with the way my phone keeps buzzing. A fucking avalanche of work emails requires my attention. Somehow, I manage not to cave and focus all my efforts on the children instead. Still, whenever I can, I sneak covert glances at the mezzanine to make sure Krista's there. She keeps messing with her phone, making me want to check mine even more.

Pull it together, man.

Alice hands me a little girl with blue eyes, almost the same color as Krista's. The kid tells me she wants a drum set. Her mother is off to the side in a navy Chanel suit, tapping away at her smartwatch with a pinched expression.

I decide she would benefit from more age lines, a little more character, so I tell the girl, "Of course you'll get drums for Christmas. You'll have a blast with them." I make a mental note to comp a set of drums and get them shipped to her.

It's almost the end of my shift. After this, I can head back to the office to make up for lost time and escape the temptation of being around Krista. I take a quick peek at the rest of the crowd to see how many more children I can squeeze in before it's time to go.

No fucking way.

Jake Cunningham, his wife, Amelia, and another double stroller of doom have joined the group waiting to see Santa.

“I need to leave,” I hiss at Alice the next time we swap kids.

“Are you kidding me?” she all but screams. “Look at this line, for fuck’s sake!”

Both the little boy she’s holding and I turn reproaching looks on her.

“Sorry, sweetie,” Alice says to the kid, glaring at me out of the corner of her eye. “Sometimes working for Santa’s like being a house-elf where it’s all about doing his bidding.”

I snort, but I’m well aware I’m asking for yet another favor. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“Yeah, right,” she mutters. “Just go already.” Her voice makes it clear she’ll hold a grudge for this forever. *Should I should stay? Face the music like a man?*

But a look at Jake’s almost gleeful expression has self-preservation winning out. I’ll just have to work through the guilt of shirking my Santa duties once again.

My street clothes are back on in moments. I stick my head outside the stockroom. Now, which way out without being seen by either Jake or Krista? It’s not like I can just waltz out the store—neither of my personas is exactly suitable for incognito mode.

I scan the terrain and plan my exit strategy. The quickest route is via the LEGO display and around the Marvel action figures to the side door, and even then, I’ll be in plain sight. Be nice to have some kind of superpower right about now. Teleportation would make leaving this place damned easier. A quick check shows Krista’s not at her table. Thank God for small favors.

I take a deep breath. I’ll need to make a run for it. Maybe I’ll get lucky.

Or not. Amelia and Jake are waiting off to the side. An ambush. I’m cornered.

She wrinkles her nose at the sight of me. “Bollocks, you’ve changed!”

Jake sends his wife a scowl, nodding at the two babies.

I snort when Amelia just waves in dismissal. “Oh, hush. The kids don’t understand anything.”

She turns back to me with a winning smile. “Will you put your costume back on? It’s Landon and Liam’s first visit with Father Christmas ever. And don’t worry, we promise we won’t blow your cover,” she promises, her crisp British accent is coaxing.

Jake’s snort tells me he’s made no such agreement with his wife.

“Nope,” I say.

Her expression twists into a glower. Another addition to the Smack-Zach party. I should just have my face turned into a piñata already.

I point in the direction of the escalator going to the lower level that houses the specialty foods section. “We’ve got Christmas hampers from the UK downstairs this year.” At least I think so, but what’s one more lie in the name of self-preservation?

Amelia’s frown dissolves into a bright beam. “Thank you for stocking up.”

“All for you.” She either doesn’t pick up on the sarcasm in my tone or ignores it. Always hard to tell with her.

She skips off, abandoning her husband and me with her spawn. So much for motherly love.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I direct this at Jake once she’s out of earshot. “Or do you not want to use my Aspen place?”

“Noah bought a chalet in Vail. I’m all set,” my so-called friend says with an easy smile.

I glare.

He shrugs. “What can I say? I’m easily bribed. Besides, he’s the one who signs my paychecks.”

Fucking Noah. Just for that, I might go shopping for a football team of my own.

One of the babies in the stroller starts fussing. Of course, the other one follows a half-second later. I know what this means. I back away, scanning the exits.

But before I can flee, Jake shoves a squirming body into my arms. “Here. You take Liam. I got Landon.”

The only reason I don’t drop the baby is the recollection of how I almost busted the doll. I cradle little Liam against my chest and rock him gently. His cries subside to a snuffle.
Maybe I’m not so bad at this after all?

I glance up, and my eyes slam into Krista’s. She’s only a few feet away. A sweet flush colors her face, and all I want to do is take her in my arms. I frown instead. She flinches, obviously taken aback and bites her lip. Fuck, what’s she thinking?

She’s thinking you’re the douche who’s been ignoring her after running off this morning. And she’s right.

Just one more day. She just needs to finish that damned report. The moment she submits it, I’ll tell her everything. I’ve rehearsed a speech in my head, along with various justifications for omitting pertinent details.

Plus, she’s always known Santa had a secret identity. So when I tell her, it won’t be a complete shock to learn someone’s under the suit, right?

Right now, though, her expression is wary. I didn’t give her any warning I’d be here as Zach. Not that I needed to. It’s my store. I have every right to be here. For a second, I’m tempted to be rude, ignore her entirely.

Then, Jake’s softly muttered “hmmm” registers. I go cold. Krista can’t find out from anyone else—if I’m to have any hope in hell she’ll forgive me, the truth has to come from me.

Of course, that’s when Jake settles Landon back into the stroller and pushes it until he’s right in Krista’s space. Reluctantly, I follow until we’ve formed an awkward half-circle.

“Ummm...Hi. I was looking for Santa.” She flicks a hesitant glance my way but tries for a tentative smile.

“Santa, huh?” Jake asks, skating a sly side-eye my way. I bite back a curse. He stretches a hand out to her. “Jake Cunningham. A friend of Zach’s. And you are...?”

Fuck it. “Jake, this is Krista Parr. She’s helping us with some employee training.” I keep my voice cold and distant, businesslike.

“And you work with Santa?” he asks her, unperturbed.

Krista nods. “I can’t believe he left early. Again! Ugh. And he was doing so well today, too.” She sniffs at this, and for one brief moment, I want to grin.

Jake runs his eyes over her before turning on his trademark smirk. “Is that so?”

Irritation flares and my spine goes ramrod straight. The package in my arm squeaks. I look down at Liam. I’d almost forgotten I was still holding him. A little bit of drool glistens at the edge of his lip. I wipe it away with my knuckle, but then can’t help but run my thumb lightly along his cheek. *Soft.*

He catches hold of my finger, and a cheeky little smile follows.

A good kid, I can tell. Unlike his asshole father. Liam’s grip tightens. I glance up at Krista. Her frown’s still in place, but there’s the slightest softening in her stance as she watches me.

I can’t lose her. What if I never tell her about Santa at all? Send him back to the North Pole for good after tomorrow?

And then when you eventually have kids with Krista, and they have to go through this Santa ritual themselves? You gonna go, “Hey, honey, so remember when we first met?”

Oh right. Crap.

Stick to the plan. And why in hell are we thinking of babies?

I thrust the one I'm holding back into his father's arms and step back.

"I think we should leave Ms. Parr to do her work." My voice is hard.

She stiffens.

I want to kick myself. Self-sabotage? My new specialty.

Jake shakes his head at me. Apparently, he agrees.

The assholery doesn't end with that. Very deliberately, I check my watch and fix a bored expression on my face. "I need to be going as well. *Some* of us have jobs to get back to." I start for the exit before either of them can say more, calling myself all kinds of wuss because, really, now we know all it takes to scare off a billionaire almost-CEO is three hours sleep, two restless babies, and a secret shopper with a Christmas tree.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

OPEN-MOUTHED, I watch as Zach struts to the exit, dexterously weaving through the crowd, evading candy-clutching kids and their parents as if he can't get away fast enough.

The sound of a throat being cleared beside me makes me jerk. His friend, Jake, is still standing there, clearly uncomfortable. Heat rushes to my cheeks at having him witness my embarrassment at Zach's abandonment.

I take a deep breath, but before I can say anything, Jake mumbles, "Zach can be..." he flails his free hand about, as if looking for the right word, "...Zach," he finishes weakly. He grimaces.

"Oh, I...I'm sure he was just in a hurry to get to a meeting or something." *Why am I making excuses for him? Oh yeah, because I make excuses for everyone.*

I will a fat, fake smile to my lips. "In fact, I need to be getting back to my post, too. It was nice meeting you. Your children are gorgeous."

Without waiting for him to respond, I spin and run-walk up to the mezzanine, barely avoiding a coffee-wielding man on my way to my seat.

I'd waited all day to hear from him, see him. Not that I hoped for a declaration of undying passion or anything. (No, really, I didn't. Okay, fine, not much.) But I'd assumed we'd return to our regular banter. Flirt like we normally did. We'd laugh and talk about Santa's latest fiasco. I'd take my cues from him. If he acted like this was a casual thing, I'd suck it

up and smile, and at some point in the far, far off future, last night would become a fond memory.

What I *didn't* expect was for him to look so cold. Expressionless, like I was a stranger. Like he hadn't been with me, *in* me barely twenty-four hours ago. For God's sake, he didn't even want to introduce me to his friend.

I frown. It's not like I'd have jumped him or anything. I can understand a one-time sex thing. But seriously? There's no excuse for rudeness. At all.

And then he had to go and cuddle the baby. That's when I knew I was screwed. I went all soft and gooey like a melted cookie inside. The hurt turned into a different type of ache, twisting in my gut.

Was it me? Yes, I'm overly impulsive... I go through my actions again, but I can't find anything inappropriate. Other than sleeping with the boss, at least...

Still, since I'm a sucker for pain and in need of penance, I make the call.

One ring, two rings, three. I'm about to hang up when a familiar voice answers, "Parr Residence."

I swallow, suddenly at a loss for words. "Hi, Mom." I cradle the phone between my cheek and shoulder while I play with the corrugated edges of the coffee sleeve of my long-empty cup.

"Krista. Hello."

There's some background sound. Voices. My stomach churns some more. I know that tone. "You're busy?"

"No, of course not. It's just that Mrs. Owens is over, along with her daughter."

"It's fine. I just..." *miss you* "...wanted to see if you received the presents I sent?"

"We did. But you know we don't need any of that. But thank you. Your dad already opened his. For some reason, he thought it was a new delivery of coffee. He's been ordering the dark roast from a place called Fosters & Sons."

I switch the phone to my other ear and clear my throat.
“Did he like the belt I got him?”

“He thought it was very nice. He showed it to Mr. Carlston, who admired it so much your dad gave it to him.”

You see? Your gift made him happy.

Idiot. The regifting’s what made him happy.

“So, I was just calling to give you my flight details for tomorrow evening. I’ll head to the airport right after work, might even make it home in time for dinner,” I say.

“Oh yes. We’ll be at the Martins. You’ll take the bus home? The keys are beneath the azaleas, in an orange planter to the left of the side door.”

I barely refrain from saying, “I know.” The keys have been under the same terracotta pot my entire life.

Also, some parents might actually wait to hear arrival information before announcing they won’t be home. A few might even say they’ll come to the airport to pick up their kid.

This is what always happens. I initiate contact, and seconds later, I regret it. Should have known this time wouldn’t be any different. More shuffling in the background. Only a minute on the phone, but it might as well be an hour. Two.

“I’ve got to go, dear,” my mother says when someone calls her name.

“I’ll see you soon,” I respond.

Her absently muttered, “Mm-hmm,” has me feeling even more crappy. The perks of being pre-programmed to love our parents.

“You take care.” Her mind’s already on to the next item on her to-do list.

Never able to conclude our conversations, I wait for her to hang up first and keep the screen pressed tight to my ear, catching hints of her discussion with Mrs. Owens. Then the

voices fade, as if Mom's left her phone in the living room. Eventually, I force myself to end the call.

Loneliness envelops me once more. I check my messages. Still nothing from Zach. Time to stop lying to myself. I've crossed a line, and there's no going back, not without a time machine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ZACH

IT's the day before Christmas. I'm at Forrester & Sons extra early. Didn't even bother going to HQ first. The store is bustling, shoppers rushing around like crazy. I keep looking up, but there's no sign of Krista.

I'm telling her this evening. She'll forgive me, won't she? Being with a billionaire's gotta have its perks, right? Luxury private plane, 5-star private chef, orgasm-providing private parts.

But what if that's not enough? Panic churns in my stomach. What if she's finally had enough and left? I wouldn't blame her if she did. I'd seen the hurt in her eyes yesterday, though she'd tried to hide it with professional nonchalance. Hence one minor adjustment in the plan: Make sure she hasn't run.

As soon as the bell tolls the first break, I'm out of the sleigh like a shot and hurrying up the steps to the mezzanine without even attempting to change out of my costume. Right now, she probably prefers Santa over Zach, anyway.

Usual table? Empty. *Fuck.*

I swing around, but then catch sight of a familiar shape by the bookshelves. Slowly, the tension in my shoulders recedes. Krista is bent almost in half, drawing some book out of the bottom row. Her ass is on display in a red pencil skirt. A red velvet cupcake waiting to be devoured. A low groan seeps out of me.

It's not silent enough because Krista springs to her feet and spins, a scowl on her face. Her expression evens out when she sees me—Santa. Was she expecting Zach? Talk about role reversal.

“Hey,” I mutter awkwardly.

She pushes a lock of her hair behind her ear. “Hey.” Her voice is subdued.

“What's up?” *Really? That's the best you can do?*

She doesn't answer. Instead, she asks a question of her own. “What are you doing here?”

“Gotta get a coffee. Besides, Santa's got a long night ahead.” Feeble joke falls flat.

She glances at the counter, a good fifty feet away, then shrugs. Her attention returns to the book in her hand. A red wheelie bag's by her chair, and my panic rises.

I clear my throat.

She looks up, annoyed. “What?”

“I had questions. About my performance.” *As in, how badly did I fuck up?*

Krista shakes her head slowly. “You realize it's Christmas Eve, right? You're done for the year in what—” she glances at her phone, “—three hours.”

“Still gotta take it past the finish line,” I say, injecting lightness into my tone. “Ain't over until the fat man sings.”

She raises a brow expectantly.

Oh no. We're not ready for that just yet. “Not this fat man.” I thump my belly.

Krista rolls her eyes. “There's no one else in the race. It was fixed.”

Yep. “Maybe. But think of it as an exit interview? I'll even get you a coffee. I'm buying today.”

She eyes me for another moment, then shrugs again. ““Kay.”

I go and put in our orders but keep sliding my eyes back to Krista, just in case.

Finally, I hurry to her. She's back at her usual table. I slide in across from her and push a cappuccino her way.

We sit there in a companionable silence, like soldiers who've come out the other side of a war.

"So, you going to do this all again next year? Do you really think you'll get another go?" Krista asks a while later.

My heart sinks at the thought of another season of abuse from the kids, but I'd play Santa all over again if it meant another shot with her. "Hey, everyone deserves a second chance."

"Do they?" Her voice comes out flat.

"Everyone should get do-overs. That's why Christmas comes every year."

She doesn't respond, instead stares into her coffee for a long while.

"What's wrong?" I nudge her foot with my boot under the table.

She gives it a little kick and shakes her head before downing the rest of her drink. She checks her phone for the time. "Nothing. I think I'm going to head out."

Wait, what? "You're not off the clock yet," I say.

"Nobody cares." She starts to pack up her stuff.

Ouch. All thanks to me. I swallow around the rock lodged in my throat. Finally, I manage an "Of course they do."

"Nah, I'm a paid tattletale. Isn't that what you thought?" A bitter smile pulls at her lips.

Guilt slams into my gut. "Can't say I didn't deserve it. I was an asshole. And assholes can change. I mean, look at me."

She laughs. "Well, I wouldn't go that far."

"Fine. We'll say I'm a work in progress..." The bell dings signaling it's time to return to my post. I get to my feet and put

a hand on hers to still her movements. “Stay the day. Don’t give up on me just yet.”

After a long, searching look, she slowly nods.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

KRISTA

SANTA'S WORDS echo in my head long after he leaves.
Everyone needs a second chance.

Bah, humbug.

I spend the rest of the afternoon browsing the shelves, ambling the store, memorizing little details—who knows when I'll be in here again? Once I drop the final report at the F&S headquarters, it's off to the airport for my flight home.

When 4 p.m. comes, Santa bids a final goodbye to the kids, telling them to look out for his deliveries in the morning and reminding them to be good as insurance for the following year. Then he winks at me, and I smile. Somehow, we've become unlikely partners instead of adversaries over our time at Forrester & Sons.

I lift my hand in a small wave goodbye, but he's already rushing for his dressing room. I wonder for the thousandth time who he is under the suit. Guess I'll never know now.

The heavy knot in my belly tightens further. Time for my own exit. Past time, really. Yesterday, Zach looked through me like I wasn't there. Like I had disappeared. Well, I'm ready to oblige.

I stomp across the street to the glass and chrome tower, dragging my wheelie bag behind me in one hand, and clutching the report in the other. Security has a pass waiting for me, and I'm cleared and en route to the top floor in no time. *So much for drop and dash.*

My stomach churns as the elevator ascends. What's Zach going to say? Or will I be doing all the talking? I huff. My job is to give feedback, so maybe I'll give him a lousy rating and tell him not to treat women like used wrapping paper.

When the metal doors part, Zach's PA is already out of her seat. Did she get her bonus Christmas check already? She takes my bag and escorts me directly to his office. I pull my shoulders back and march in ahead of her, head high.

But when the door shuts behind me, my heart stutters.

Zach's sitting at his desk. I take him in; gray designer suit, white shirt, blue silk tie.

"Hi." His voice is somber.

"Hello," I respond. Silence descends as we stare at each other. Smaller details register. His shirt isn't quite as crisp as usual. His hair, not perfectly in place, as if he's run his fingers through the dark strands. There are hollows under his eyes. *Stop it! we're upset with him, remember?* But all I want to do is plop myself down on his lap.

"Thanks for coming." His expression is stoic. CEO-esque.

Not like I could say refuse, given you're my boss's boss's boss.

I take a deep breath, ready to recite my report, but he holds a hand out. "I'd like to speak first."

What is this? Is he going to apologize?

Zach clears his throat. "As you know, maintaining my position here at F&S International is critical. I pride myself on keeping my behavior above reproach. Thousands of people rely on me to keep the company on track, and..."

With that, the tiny kernel of hope in me shrivels. He's talking about work. Why am I surprised? Zach Forrester is all business all the time. And now he'll tell me I wasn't acting within the proper professional boundaries. A little late, buddy. I already got the message. There's no need for another lecture. I've had plenty.

“...often I need to make decisions. They aren’t always the easiest ones. There’s a lot of pressure every single day, and sometimes—”

I shake my head to cut him off. “Here’s the report.” I thrust out the brown envelope. A brownish coffee ring soils the corner with my firm’s logo. Whatever. “Signed, sealed, and delivered.”

He doesn’t reach for it. Doesn’t even look at the thing. “No. I don’t think you understand. That’s not why—”

“It’s exactly what you asked for.” I ignore him and wave the envelope again as if I’m a matador.

“Krista.” Wide, pained eyes accompany his husky tone as he rakes his fingers through his hair.

I refuse to respond, just flap the report again.

He finally glances at the document and sighs. “I hope it was brutal. If you think we should have axed Santa. Go right ahead and say it. I’ll take care of your boss.”

I snort. “No thanks. I don’t need you doing me any favors.”

A harsh breath leaves him. He gets to his feet. “About yesterday...”

I hold out my hand. “Stop.”

Zach leans over the table. “Krista—”

Before he can say more, the door to his office swings open. An older man enters. Harold Forrester. It’s clear from his resemblance to Zach. His gaze skates past me to fix on his grandson.

“Just got the report from Boyer & Bleecker Marketing. You passed with flying colors. Well done, boy.” A brown envelope, the exact replica of mine minus the coffee stain, is pinched between his fingers—the type of envelope used to deliver an official report.

The official report I haven’t emailed Bill yet.

“Wait, you got it already?” Zach’s gaze darts from it to the one I’m now clutching to my chest like a shield.

“Hand delivered twenty minutes ago. Along with a list of additional services they’re hawking for future reference.”

I must have let out a sound because the older man’s gaze pierces through me. “And who is this?”

Recognition lights in his eyes before I can answer. “You’re the secret shopper?”

All I can do is bob my head dumbly.

He takes me in, top to bottom, then back up again, coldly assessing, before his lips curl in derision. All resemblance to his grandson vanishes. He turns back to Zach and nods approvingly. “Looks like you did what it took then.”

“What are you talking about?” Zach’s brows narrow at his grandfather.

“Seduced the spy. Very enterprising.”

What is he talking about? What seduction? What spy?

My gaze flies from Harold Forrester to Zach.

“Fish!” The curse is a long hiss.

There’s a sinking in my gut. A fuzziness in my brain. I feel the color leech from my face. Zach rushes towards me, an arm out.

“Fish?” I whisper.

The word hovers in the air before crashing into me with all the force of an anvil.

He freezes, his hand suspended between us. The envelope flutters to the ground.

I blink out of my daze, my heart spasming as two pictures meld into one. Santa’s face layers over Zach’s features. My gaze drops to his outstretched hand. Long, graceful fingers. Familiar fingers. Fingers that cupped mine under a doll, held mine in the park. Stroked me in the night

I want to throw up.

“You’re... *You*.” I try to swallow past the lump in my throat. My heart thuds in my ears, each beat louder than the last. This can’t be what it looks like. Did he seriously spend all that time with me, *sleep with me*—

“Krista—” The truth stares back at me from Zach’s eyes—Santa’s eyes—like a gut punch.

It’s exactly what it looks like.

He advances a step, and I retreat one. Waves of hurt and anger alternate, blasting me one after the other, faster and faster. I can’t draw breath before the next emotion slams into me, dragging me under.

I turn and rush out of his office, only intent on escape. Zach follows. He grabs my hand and spins me to face him.

“No.” I want it to be a forceful shout. Instead, it emerges a pitiful whimper.

“I was going to tell you. Here. Now,” he says urgently. “You need to understand—”

I wrench away. *Need to understand? I understand all right.* Fury rips through me at his words, replacing the shock and hurt. I embrace it. “Understand what? That you wanted to play me? Why’d you even bother? I told you it was fine. That you didn’t need to do anything, that Bill was taking care of it. Did you have to go and make a fool out of me for no reason? You should have let me go!” My voice cracks like a glass ball shattering.

Zach sucks in a harsh breath. “It’s only because I hated playing Santa. But then I met you...”

“And you figured you’d have a little fun. Got it. God, and I made it so easy for you, begging for another chance with Santa. You must have laughed your ass off. Is this how you billionaire-types get your kicks?” I include Zach’s grandfather in my glare.

Even I can hear the bitterness in my tone. All I want is to crawl into myself and hide. I jab the button for the elevator, and in a Christmas miracle, it opens.

I stomp in and whip around, my lips twist into a sneer. “And why not? I was stupid. Blind. Naive. Did you enjoy toying with me? Or did you *have* to sleep with me for the grade? To seal the deal?”

“It wasn’t like that at all. It was a condition to be CEO. I had to play Santa to take over.” Panic fills his face. Well, boo-hoo.

I look at him in disbelief. But then I narrow my eyes and shake my head. What kind of fool does he take me for? “I’m done listening to your bullshit. Well, you played your role well. A-plus asshole.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

ZACH

KRISTA STARES AT ME. Gradually, the angry fire drains from her face. All that remains is sadness. Defeat. And I did that to her. It's a kick in the gut.

If I can just reach her, make her understand. I stick my hands on either side of the elevator door pockets but halt when she backs up against the rear wall as if she can't stand for me to get too close. The warning buzzer sounds. My heart falls to my feet. My hand drops to my side. Our eyes stay fixed on each other until the panels slide shut.

Little by little, activity around me resumes. Whispers sound from nearby. Curious eyes watch avidly. I can't care in light of the tsunami I was powerless to elude, even though I knew it was coming. I want to pummel something, and only inbred discipline stops me from putting my fist through a wall.

I spin and stalk back into my office, where my grandfather is pouring himself a scotch. "You want one?" he asks.

My fingers clench. It's all I can do not to grab him by the throat. "What the hell was that?"

He eyes me then takes a sip of his drink before responding. "That, my boy, was you taking initiative. Getting the job done. Acting like a CEO."

"This was all some fucking test?" I roar. I can't believe this.

He scowls in distaste. "The tradition's true enough. We all had to do it."

“My father didn’t.”

My grandfather looks away for a moment before returning steely eyes to me. “He was soft, naive. He didn’t have what it took. And I couldn’t have you ending up like him, could I? After all, who else would be around to take over? Some schmuck the board nominates?” He harrumphs as if the notion is inconceivable. “Forrester is part of the company name for a reason, boy.”

I grab my phone and dial Krista while tugging on my coat with my other hand. How do I begin to ask for forgiveness when I know I don’t deserve it? I put one over on her and called it a victory. I’m embarrassed. Shame-filled.

The plan.

I can salvage this.

I have to.

She doesn’t answer. I try again. And again. “Answer, goddammit.” I punch out a message and hit send. Immediately follow that with another.

All the while, my grandfather calmly sips his drink. “Let her go. You know as well as I do that collateral damage can’t be avoided. There’s always a cost.”

“I can make it work.” *Beg her not to leave.*

“You’ll be too busy.”

Resentment and disappointment bubble in my blood at his words. But they also ring with the truth. I’ll never be able to give her the attention she deserves, the adventure she seeks. I’ll be stuck working here. F&S is who I am. Who I was always meant to be. Gradually, the rage and frustration drain out of me, and a thick sludge of regret takes their place. Because really, why should she stay? For me? Because I’m such a great prize? Anchoring her to me would just weigh her down. Kill the joy that is Krista.

It’s over. We’re over. Hell, we were over before we began, fucked from the start. We never had a chance to get it right.

She thinks I've hurt her. Humiliated her on purpose. I should have remembered that when one makes a deal with the devil, eventually, he comes calling.

You should have let me go. Krista's words ring in my ears.

So I do.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

KRISTA

I STUMBLE out of the building, not even sure how I made it this far, and small mercies, someone's just exited a yellow cab.

"Drive," I bark, like I'm commandeering a vehicle in a Bond movie. Mercifully, the driver of the cab I stumbled into screeches away as if we've been thrust into a car chase. But really, is it possible to outrun one's own stupidity? I've always tried to see the best in people. Obviously, it's made me a blind idiot.

In the rearview mirror, the massive F&S building is silhouetted against what some might call a beautiful, crisp New York afternoon. Another betrayal. It should be snowing, dammit.

Another tsunami of defeat crashes into me. There's no stopping the raw sob that breaks free of my throat as I fumble for my phone vibrating nonstop in my purse. Missed calls and messages flood the screen. I try to ignore them, except the previews burn themselves into my brain faster than I can swipe them off.

Zach: I'm sorry.

Zach: I can explain everything.

Zach: Answer your phone.

It jumps again. I stare at his name, holding my device so tight that the blunt edges leave red marks on my palm and the pads of my fingers. I'd throw the damned thing out the window, except it's a work device, and Bill will take the cost

of it out of my check. Should I care? It's blood money, after all.

I reject the call, block Zach's number, and pull up my group chat instead.

Me: SOS!

I end up going to Callie's New Jersey home instead of to the airport. The thought of dealing with my parents and their constant judgment and disappointment is too much to bear. They take my defection without much complaint. Not that I expected protests or demands to catch the next flight.

I spend Christmas Eve with Callie and her family. Her son and daughter leave milk and cookies on the coffee table for Santa before going to bed, and of course I turn into a leaky faucet at the sight of them. Still, I help place gift-wrapped boxes around the tree for the kids to find in the morning. When her husband dons a Santa hat and pulls her into his lap for a selfie, I choke back a helpless sob. I guess everyone's dressing as St. Nick these days.

Callie gives me an uncomfortable smile. I shrug, and grab a bottle of bourbon before plopping down on the couch. Fuck it, I've earned the damned cookie. I pour the booze into the milk and dunk a hunk of chocolate chip. Yep, I'm bitter. Call me Scrooge already.

Come Christmas morning, I stick a smile on my face as her children squeal at their presents, cheering Santa for a job well done.

A job well done, indeed.

Zoe and her boyfriend drive in from Philly later that afternoon. Callie must have called for reinforcements. Ridiculous. I'm fine, absolutely fine.

By the twenty-seventh, I've had enough. There's too much Christmas cheer to swallow. I make my way back to my Manhattan apartment even though the girls thought it was a terrible idea and made their objections known. Loudly.

On the drive back, discarded trees litter the sidewalks. They've served their purpose.

I spend the next few days walking around the city. I even end up back in Central Park, my boots clomping in black mush. Though the Christmas fair's been dismantled, a lone Santa is still soliciting money for charity.

He ho-ho-hos, and I want to kick something. He must see my expression because he retreats a step. After a disdainful sniff, he picks up his collection bag, and ho-ho-hos at the couple behind me.

Well, at least we're of the same philosophy: If at first you don't succeed, pack up and go, "Thank you, next."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ZACH

IT'S all tuxedos and gowns at the Forrester New Year's Eve gala. As usual, it's at the Plaza. But an extra buzz fills the air. Tonight is the announcement of a new F&S International CEO for the first time in five decades.

Tall pink Christmas trees line the perimeter of the ballroom, Swarovski and Baccarat ornaments reflect off the jewels displayed on bodies toned by the latest cult-exercise craze. It's an annual reckoning where everyone flaunts the past year's successes—the purchase of a new company, a listing on the stock exchange, a new plane, yacht, rocket, insert-preferred-form-of-transportation-in-this-space.

No grubby fingers at this shindig, no one stabbing at Santa, or staining the pristine tablecloths and designer gowns. Not Krista's scene at all. She'd insist on spending New Years at Times Square, watching the ball drop with the rest of the freezing masses. Or we'd end up in Central Park, ice skating while fireworks lit up the sky above us. I smile wryly. She'd probably assess my technique on the ice and find me lacking, too.

My shoulders sag. It's been a week since the debacle on Christmas Eve, and I'm still filled with yearning so deep, it's painful. Like an ache in my very soul.

We wouldn't work, we wouldn't work, we wouldn't work. It's a litany I've repeated to myself over and over like a bad love song, but that look on her face? How we left things? My insides twist every time I think of that afternoon. At the very

least, she deserved an explanation. An apology. Finally, I couldn't stand it and tried calling her again.

She didn't answer. Not that I expected her to. I went to her apartment; she wasn't there. I left her abandoned wheelie bag and a box of ornaments with her neighbor.

When I tracked down the number for her parents in Chicago, they just sounded puzzled that anyone would be looking for her and said she'd decided to cancel her trip.

That sent me into a tailspin of worry until I reached out to her asshole boss. He told me she'd taken the rest of the holidays off and that she would be vacating her apartment soon. He tried to track her down for me, but all he got were out-of-office replies to his emails. The fucker offered to fire her for not responding. Not happening. Not on my watch.

Letting her go was the right thing. Whatever we had was never going to last. She'll go off and have her adventures, travel the world, see Paris for the first time, just like she's always dreamed.

As for me? Tomorrow begins my reign as CEO. Instead of feeling triumphant, hollowness fills me. It'll be more of this same shit, day after day, month after month, year after year. This, here, is the rest of my life.

I take another sip of my scotch, barely tasting it. I'm at a high table by the bar. Guests flock to my side. Dimly, I note their congratulations. I nod, making all the appropriate responses, sounding out the right words without registering them.

Noah and Ryker stop by, along with a subdued Jake. Maybe he told them what went down with Krista because after Noah pounds me on the back, he says, "you win some, you lose some."

I'm not sure whether I should punch him in the face or feel sorry for him. I know I feel sorry for me, the biggest loser who's gotten everything he's always wanted.

Across the room, my father is present, making the flying visit as required. He arrived this afternoon, for the one time of

the year he and my grandfather deign to be in the same room.

Dad catches my eye, and a broad smile forms on his lips as he ambles over. “Zach!” It’s been a year since I last saw him. Hell, it’s been a year since we spoke. Our few emails were all related to company business. New creases line his face, but I suspect he owes them a life well-lived. Envy fills me.

“Dad. How are you?” It’s my usual greeting, but I really want to know this time. It’s not just a cursory inquiry.

“Fine, things have been good, actually. The foundation’s thriving.” Dad’s passionate about his work. All of F&S could have been his, but he had the balls to say no. And here I’ve spent my life apologizing and making up for his choices—but was there ever any need?

“That sounds great. Congratulations,” I say.

His eyes are shrewd, seeing more than I want. “The same to you. You’ve put a lot of work into F&S. It’s everything you’ve ever wanted.”

Is it?

“Isn’t it?” he asks. I jerk at how easily he’s able to read my mind.

Before I can respond, my grandfather joins us. I frown irritably. What’s he afraid will happen? That I’ll be contaminated by my father’s contentment?

“Congratulations, my boy,” Grandad says, barely sparing his son a quick nod, more for the interested public rather than a sign of any affection. All of a sudden, I’m ashamed. Of my grandfather. Of myself for being blind all this while.

My father’s glance is long and thoughtful. “Good luck, son.”

I angle my head, unable to get anything more past the lump in my throat. He walks away.

“Typical,” my grandfather says, disdain in his eyes as he stares at his son’s back. “I was grooming him to take over. But he never had the heart for it. Started spouting notions of profit sharing with the employees!”

“I thought you kicked him out because he refused to play Santa,” I say.

Grandfather snorts. “Oh, he was willing enough. But it’s one thing to pretend to be generous for a few days, another thing to actually start distributing the wealth for real.” He shakes his head in disgust. “I kicked him out because he had no respect for the Forrester legacy. Too bad I couldn’t cut him off entirely. There would have been too much talk. So, we set up the philanthropic arm of F&S for the tax write-offs and to keep him busy.” He turns to me now. “At least we know you’ll do whatever it takes.”

I flinch at his words. They’re an echo of what he said in my office. As if that shit’s something to be proud of. I think of all the times Dad reached out to me and I rebuffed him. His offers for schooling in Europe, so I could be near him. Invitations to check out how the foundation was doing. Calls I ignored because the money-making side of the company was taking too much of my time. History reconfigures in my head as I stare at my grandfather. All those years of challenges. Pitting me against other leaders in the company. Pitting me against my dad. I’m the product of years of manipulation. And I know this won’t be the end of it.

Talk about lessons learned. And for what? Do I really need to be an asshole to get ahead?

A wall inside me crumbles. My future has always been Forrester & Sons and protecting the family legacy. Ensuring a next generation of carbon copies to hold on to the money and power; having sons carry on the name.

Now I imagine a little girl with blonde hair and pink pouts who’ll wave tiny fingers at me when I fuck up. And I will fuck up. But that’ll be okay. As long as Krista’s beside me, forgiving me and helping me forgive myself. She makes me better. Because that’s what she does. There’s perfection in that picture.

I take a step back.

“Is your speech ready? All set to take your place?”

“Actually, no.”

Grandfather blinks.

“I don’t think I’ll be doing this.” I take a step back.

“The speech?” He looks confused.

I lift my chin. “The legacy. I’m done.”

He raises an eyebrow. “It’s everything you’ve ever worked for, and you’re walking away?” His voice is incredulous.

“I am.” I meet his eyes, stare for stare. The best type of negotiator is the one that doesn’t negotiate.

F&S, Forrester & Sons, is more than the damned “legacy” he’s been harping on about all these years. It’s the hundred thousand jobs, hundred thousand people that make it what it is. And after last month, fewer are faceless, nameless. In addition to Alice and Steven and Tommy and Alfie, there is Susie at the cashier’s counter, Tami, always ready with a warm smile and a hot drink. Kareem, with a built-in radar able to pinpoint the location of any item in the store in milliseconds. There are even a couple of multi-generation employees, including George Estrella Sr. and Jr. Junior proudly shared that GeeThree—George Estrella III—was starting an internship with the accounting department.

Good people in place. Even if I leave, the company will thrive.

I have everything to lose and very little to gain by staying. It’s never been about the money. I’m a billionaire in my own right, thanks to a combination of shrewd investments, shares in F&S that I inherited when I turned eighteen and twenty-five; and a healthy trust fund, care of my mother—that’s another thing Forresters do—marry rich.

“Think about what you’re giving up, boy. Once you leave, there’s no returning,” my grandfather says again.

I turn and don’t look back. I walk faster, almost running now, as I dig for my phone and press it to my ear, huffing, “Tommy, can you let me into the store?”

Do whatever it takes?

You bet your ass I will.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

KRISTA

I'M RINGING in the New Year in a classic ugly Christmas sweater with the pattern of Santa's gloves over my boobs and the caption "Feel the Joy" embroidered right under it. On the back, block letters in red yarn interspersed with sequins spell "Santa's Twerkshop" with an arrow pointing down to my butt, encased in comfy sweatpants. Yep, I'm totally bringing sexy back.

My suitcases are mostly packed and ready to go. Just a few more things to wrap up before I bid New York City goodbye. My eyes travel to the windowsill, where rain beats furiously against the glass. The mini tree lives on, still lopsided. Who needs perfection, anyway?

After all, I'm going to Paris.

Well, the Paris Hotel.

That's right. It's off to viva Las Vegas.

In a Christmas miracle, Bill didn't fire me, even though all the emails he sent during the holidays were vaguely threatening. Instead, my next assignment is to evaluate the personnel at the Vegas Vavoom Room and their familiarity with the new product line.

At least Bill knows how to keep his promises. Is it nuts that I'm strangely grateful that he's not a liar?

In one corner is the box that he messengered to me. Lined in velvet, with crevices made for each of the items. The last name in luxury—luxury sex toys, that is. Research, Bill called it.

The mission? Make the world a happier place, one anal bead at a time.

I take a generous swig out of my bottle of cheap prosecco, then settle down on the floor with my back against the couch to read the company dossier. It was founded by two women in their forties, a former bartender and a mechanical engineer who put herself through school dancing in a club where they became fast friends. Yay, girl power.

I eye the offerings again. Most come pre-charged, efficient and ready for immediate pleasure. I pull out a ridged vibrator and run my hand along its length. It's a purple model with balls that promises eighteen modes and unrivaled stamina.

It's cold. Not like Zach's girthy...nope. That's all in the past, and there's no need to go there. New year. New resolutions.

One: Stop thinking about his cock. The only dicks allowed are the silicone ones in my hand.

Two: Make a TikTok.

Three: Get at least one stamp on my passport—even if it's from Canada. They stamp passports in Canada, right?

Four: Get my eyes checked, so I can watch out for assholes.

I haul myself up and turn on the TV. Maybe I should Netflix and chill with my Battery Operated Boyfriend to usher in the New Year. Wonder if I can make myself come in the ten-second countdown? If so, I'll give the company advance points for efficiency.

Ugh. Because I'm me, I've already signed out of all my digital streaming accounts. Network television it is. And wonder of all wonders, ABC comes on, right in the middle of *Love Actually*.

I click on the vibrator. Half a second later, I jerk. The thing's a tractor, louder than I expected. Minus point. I hurriedly turn up the TV's volume to Billy Mack's, "Christmas is All Around Us."

One more sip of prosecco. I may need to find another bottle at some point. Or pay for airplane champagne. The chorus comes on, and like any loyal fan, I start singing my heart out, holding the vibrator to my mouth. Who needs hairbrush mics when you've got a good dildo in hand?

Maybe I'll cue up "All by Myself" next. Totally apt for the merchandise in my hand. Forget being my BOB, this thing's going to be my BFF.

I'm in the middle of the third refrain when the doorbell rings, followed by furious knocking. The interruption makes me drop my mic—erm, vibrator—to the ground. One of the nuts pops right off.

Shoddy workmanship. Another minus point.

More pounding interrupts the eulogy of the most incredible friendship there could have been.

I pick up the toy, stick it in the back waist of my stretchy pants, and stomp to the front door.

Hold your reindeer. You're ruining my vibe-rator. I giggle-snort.

I open the door. My mouth drops.

It's Zach.

My voice, a full soprano just moments ago, deserts me, taking my mind with it.

I blink. He's in a Christmas sweater that only emphasizes his broad shoulders. The front of it proclaims, "It's after Christmas but I'm still looking for my balls."

His features are set. But only the hesitant vulnerability in his blue, blue eyes keeps me from slamming the door into his Prada-covered toes.

More details seep in. A puddle's forming under said leather shoes. My gaze traverses up soaking laces to dripping tuxedo pants.

"What happened?" I ask.

“Ran here. After taking the subway.” His nose wrinkles. “The valet at the Plaza was backed up. No cabs or Ubers because everyone was rushing to get somewhere.”

I can't believe he's here. Sneaking a glance at the prosecco bottle, I see it's still half-full. I return my gaze to Zach.

There's a rueful twist to his mouth. His hair, wet and windswept. The ruddy color in his cheeks is reminiscent of the bright pink makeup he wore as Santa. It all rushes back to me. My mouth turns down in a fury I'm not sure I want to fight.

My spine stiffens. “How'd you know I'd be here?”

He shrugs. “Your boss has loose lips when given the right incentive.”

“And if you'd missed me?” I raise a brow.

“Jet's all fueled with a flight plan set for Vegas.”

A loud party horn blares from the window. “Wait...aren't you supposed to become CEO, like tonight?”

“I have it on good authority that I didn't pass the Santa test.”

“What are you talking about? Of course, you passed. After all, everyone deserves a second chance,” I say sarcastically, repeating his last few words to me as Santa that morning. I can't believe I actually passed the jerk.

“Do they?” Zach asks huskily.

I turn away.

“Look at me. Please,” he says. It's the catch in the “please” that does it.

My shoulders sag but I meet his gaze anyway. Desperation and determination fire them.

“Lying to you was the stupidest thing I've ever done. But I don't regret it. Somehow, even with my head up my ass, I found you. Did I take advantage? Yes. Because it was the only way I could keep you close.” His bright eyes dare me to refute his words. “So I'm sorry—but not that sorry.”

Well, I'm not done being mad, either. Anger and hurt and a pesky sense of hope pummel me one after the other. Can I believe this? I cross my arms and raise my brows. A replica of his customary pose. Still... "I suppose even a little repentance is good for the soul."

A ghost of a smirk appears on his face before his lips flatten again. He takes a deep breath, his stance intent. "I'm absolutely sorry for lying to you. And it took me a little longer to come to some realizations."

"Realizations?" I parrot.

"Realizations. And resolutions." His chin lifts, but there's a soft vulnerability in his eyes. "Realization? I love you. Resolution? Get you to love me back."

His words are so matter-of-fact, they're hard to dispute.

All of a sudden I can't breathe. "Wh...what? You're saying you fell in love with me—in a month?" My breath hitches, but I keep my voice skeptical.

"Hey, if Santa can visit every household in the world in one night, a month's plenty."

I harrumph. He's turning my logic back on me.

"You seriously think I'd come here, dressed like this otherwise?" Dark challenge storms his gaze.

He's not wrong. Nothing screams repentance quite as loud as the ugly sweater he's wearing over his tuxedo pants. Tom Ford must be crying into his porridge and hanging his head in shame. Those clothes don't deserve to exist in a world with each other.

Kind of the way Zach and I were never supposed to occupy the same plane. Yet here we are. And his look? It wants to own me, it's telling me all the rest of it is noise. It doesn't matter. Because the man, *this* man... he loves me.

I tip my head to the side and stare at him, committing the sight to memory. He must think I'm hesitating because he squares his shoulders, planting himself more firmly in place.

Sheer stubbornness lights his eyes. “Krista, I had to play Santa. It was a condition.”

“You really weren’t kidding about that?” My earlier agitation returns.

“No.”

“I...I have no idea what to say to that.”

“Say you’ll forgive. Say you’ll be mine. Say—”

Pain and regret color his tone, I can’t no longer bear to be the reason for it, because it hurts us both. I cup Zach’s face with my hands, cutting him off. Slowly, I draw him down and press my lips against his. There’s nothing impulsive about my actions this time, no hesitation. This plan is solid and perfect, and permanent.

A shuddery breath leaves him and his arms lock around me, crushing me close. His mouth opens over mine. I arch further into him, my nipples tight against the solidness of his chest. He tilts his head, his tongue slides over my lips, then thrusts deep.

My mind goes hazy, my body is on fire. I moan and loop my arms around Zach’s neck, my fingers tangling in his hair, tugging him to me.

He makes a deep noise in his throat, and it goes straight between my legs. His big hands slide down my back.

He stiffens. Something hard presses into the base of my spine.

“Wha—”

Crapsicle. The vibrator’s still wedged into the waistband of my pants. “Nothing.” I put my hands on his shoulders and try to take a step back.

But Zach keeps me anchored to him with one arm while his other hand fishes out the toy. A smirk appears on his lips.

“Happy New Year?” I say weakly.

His eyes gleam bright with laughter and wicked intent. “I could make it even happier.”

A LONG, long while later, we're sprawled out on my couch. The bed was too far away, and we were in a rush. I'm half-draped over him, a panting mess of arms and legs. The TV is still on mute in the background with the subtitles going. It's the scene where Jamie has just professed his love and proposed to Aurelia in Portuguese.

Our clothes litter the ground. I catch sight of the back of Zach's sweater, now flung over the lamp. It reads, "Naughty list, but attempts are being made."

I find myself grinning again. Outside, cheers, whistles, and horns sound along with off-key renderings of "Auld Lang Syne."

I snuggle closer, my calf winding tight around his hair-roughened leg. I run my fingertips along his bicep and hide a smile against his broad chest. I breathe in his warm masculinity once more and then lift my head up. "Happy New Year, Santa."

Zach huffs out a laugh. His breath tickles my skin. He leans down and presses a long, languorous kiss to my lips. When he pulls back, his eyes are happy and sated and so full of love that my heart skips a beat.

"Happy New Year, baby."

EPILOGUE

ZACH

ONE YEAR LATER

AS IT TURNS OUT, I did end up becoming CEO of F&S International. The board of directors unanimously voted my grandfather out when he stated his intention to remain the head of the company until his dying breath. They were as fed up with him as I was. When they approached and literally begged me to come back, I acquiesced but with my own conditions.

Over the last year, I've steadily made changes to F&S from the inside-out. It's become a more equitable workplace, a legacy I'll actually be proud to leave behind. I've also been slowly rebuilding a relationship with my dad, and Krista and I are flying to Greece to spend New Year's with him.

I've made changes for myself, too. I'm not quite as much of a workaholic as I was. Plus, the nice thing about having "International" as part of the company name is that we have offices worldwide, and Krista and I have been spending a few months in each, stopping home in New York between destinations. The perks of private planes.

It's late afternoon, and Krista's hunched over a book at a café by our hotel in Paris sounding words out from her new French dictionary. "Je name pass less poise. Voolez lays sup-primer."

Her pronunciation is awful, but I now like the language all the more for it.

"I think it's said, '*Je n'aime pas les pois. Veuillez les supprimer,*'" I say, quirking a brow as I take the seat beside

her. “And why would you learn to ask to remove peas? You love them.”

She frowns at the smile I can’t stop from spreading on my lips. Another thing this last year has taught me? Krista has absolutely no facility for language.

“Gah. I’ll never be able to learn French,” she grumbles, snapping the book shut.

“Good thing you have me, *non?*” I drop a kiss on her cheek and run a finger across her jaw, unable to resist touching her.

At my signal, the waiter hovering nearby rushes over. I order smoothly in French, and the man practically melts in relief. Krista and I lean back and take in the Eiffel Tower, postcard-perfect against the pink sky.

Moments later, champagne is delivered, and I tip my glass to her. “Merry Christmas.”

She grins and lifts hers. “Joyeux Noël,” she enunciates the phrase perfectly, her expression lofty. I laugh. We’ve only been hearing it a million times a day since we’ve been here. I watch as she drinks deeply, fluttering her eyes closed in enjoyment.

“I love you, you know,” I tell Krista.

Her eyes drift open. “Do you?” She tips her head to the side.

“Yes.”

“So, is now when you’re going to show me that rock you’ve been carrying around?”

I give her an annoyed look. “You knew?”

She winks. “I see you when you’re sleeping, I know when you’re awake.”

“How do you know it’s not a lump of coal?” I challenge.

“I think I’ve been especially nice this year,” she says with an impish grin. There’s no resisting that smile.

Even though she knows it's coming, my heart speeds up, pounding in my throat as I pull the small red Cartier box out of my pocket and flip it open. I'm about to get down on one knee, even though this is not the perfect proposal I'd planned.

"Krista—"

"Yes!" She throws her arms around me and presses her lips to mine, cutting me off like she likes to. We kiss for long, slow minutes. Drinking each other in. Fizzing in my blood, a thousand times more potent than the champagne still on the table.

We come apart for only a moment, so I can slide the ring, a classic solitaire set in platinum, on her finger. I kiss her once again before resting my forehead against hers. We look down at the gleaming diamond together.

"Who'd have thought we'd end up here back when you were shoving zombie babies into my arms," I muse.

She snorts at the memory. "You kind of sucked at it."

I shrug. "Well, then I can only get better with practice."

She goes wide eyed. "You're doing it again?"

"Private performances only."

Her attention returns to her ring, a small smile on her face before turning back to me. "And you'll put on the costume while you practice?"

"Already had it dry cleaned. Figured someday you'd want kids who'd say they saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus." I brush my lips along Krista's.

"Well done, Santa."

"I learned from the best, Shopper."

THE END

Dear Reader,

*Thank you so much for reading Santa vs. the Secret Shopper.
Can't get enough of Zach and Krista? [Sign up for my
newsletter to get their bonus epilogue.](#)*

Happy Reading!

Ivy

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling Author Ivy Hunt writes contemporary romantic comedies about strong, sexy men and smart, funny women.

She is a passionate New Yorker who left her Happy For Now job in tech to pursue her Happily Ever After as a writer. When she's not writing or reading, she's gallivanting the world.

If you'd like to receive a notification when Ivy releases a new book, please sign up for her [mailing list](#).