

Single
AND
READY
TO
Jingle



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIPER RAYNE



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PIPER RAYNE
Heartwarming humor with a side of sizzle

About Single and Ready to Jingle

The girl who loves Christmas falls for the Grinch—it's a Christmas miracle.

What started as a dumpster fire of a blind date turns into a deal.

In truth, it probably didn't help that I showed up dressed like an elf but that's a story for another time. Our start was rocky at best which is why it's so frustrating that I can't stop thinking about his sexy British accent. Or the way his chest and arms fill out his suit. Or his perfect hair with that single streak of grey at the front.

Santa likes lists and so do I, so here's all the reasons why Andrew and I aren't right for each other:

He's my brother's best friend

He's the biggest grump I've ever met.

He hates Christmas.

That last one is big for a girl like me who thinks that the entire month of December should be a national holiday. So, when he calls for my help in planning his firm's holiday party, I can't pass up the opportunity to grow my small business. Bonus, we make a deal, and he agrees to attend three holiday events with me so I can make him fall in love with Christmas. As if I'd pass up an opportunity to make a Grinch's heart grow three times its size.

It isn't long until I discover Andrew has a very real reason to hate Christmas and I start to see him in a different light. That's when the Christmas miracle begins.

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Chapter One

KENZIE

Not much draws the gaze of a New Yorker. Except maybe a twenty-eight-year-old woman running down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan while wearing red-and-white-striped tights, elf ears, and curved green shoes with hanging bells.

I rush past the gawking men and women clutching their shopping bags that contain items that cost more than my monthly rent.

“Damn it,” I mumble, stopping at a red light, sounding like a Christmas carol as I jog in place. I’m going to be late and there’s nothing I hate more than disrespecting another person’s time. It’s just plain rude.

As soon as the cars clear the intersection, before the little walking man pedestrian signal lights up, I step off the curb. If you ever want to tell the difference between a tourist and a born and bred New Yorker, wait to see when they cross the street. A real Manhattanite believes that pedestrian signals are merely suggestions, not rule of law.

I run down the sidewalk, my blonde braids bouncing with every step, the bells hanging from my toes and skirt ringing the entire way.

I love Christmas.

Like, love *love* Christmas.

Most Americans wait until after Thanksgiving to put up their Christmas decorations, but not me. Mine go up the day after Halloween.

At the next light, I pull my phone from my purse to see how close I am to the restaurant my date chose for tonight. I'm only a few blocks away.

IOBJECT and I met on the Blind Dating app. The idea behind the app is that you converse with people and get to know them without seeing a picture of them. Everyone is vetted thoroughly before they can join the app, and because it isn't free, it keeps out a lot of the creeps. In fact, I pay a premium to have no idea who I'm going out with, which sounds kind of crazy because I'm not exactly swimming in money, but if you had my same history when it comes to dating you would too.

Safety is paramount though. When you confirm to meet in person, you have to load all the details into the app—when, where, with what user, etc. I guess that way if my body shows up in the Hudson, the police will know who to question first.

No, I haven't found a love match yet, but I've been on some decent dates with some okay guys. All the other apps seem to be full of guys looking only for hookups, misogynists, or men with foot fetishes. If I never have to see an unsolicited dick pic again in my life, that premium is worth it.

Dating in New York City is its own version of Dante's Nine Circles of Hell, so I decided the new app was worth giving a try. What's the worst that can happen? I'll go on more bad dates? Been there, done that, have the therapist bill to prove it.

All I know about IOBJECT is that he's thirty-four, enjoys watching football, and he's a lawyer. I'm trying not to hold the lawyer thing against him since my older brother is also a lawyer. We've chatted a few times on the app, and even though I don't think we've really connected in a big way, he asked me out and I figured why not give it a try. At the very least, I might score a free meal with some interesting conversation.

I didn't plan on showing up dressed as an elf though, but hey, it's a great icebreaker. If he's the guy for me, he'll see the humor in the fact that I forgot my change of clothes at home this morning, and because work ran late, I didn't have time to take the subway all the way downtown to grab presentable attire before our date.

I turn off Fifth Avenue onto Fifty-Second, spotting the restaurant sign. I slow to a fast walk, hoping some of the sweat that's causing my costume to stick to my skin will dissipate.

A man and woman are leaving the restaurant as I arrive, and he holds the door open for me while the woman openly cranes her neck to watch me. My gaze roams the expensive restaurant and I realize I may have made a mistake in choosing not to be late over going home and changing.

The couple waiting to be seated turns to look at me.

"Have a candy cane." I dig a few out of my pockets and hand them to them. "Remember, Santa's always watching."

Rather than cowering, I raise my chin to project confidence, as if it's not weird to be dressed as one of Santa's helpers in a five-star restaurant.

The hostess gives me a tight-lipped smile. "We don't allow singing telegrams here," she leans forward and whispers, her

platinum-blond hair slipping from behind her ears.

“Oh no. I’m meeting someone. The reservation is under the name Marshall.”

Marshall was a pet hamster I had growing up and the name I told IOBJECT to put the reservation under.

She doesn’t say a word as she looks from me to the tablet in her hands. “Your party has already arrived. Follow me.”

“Thank you.”

She turns and walks farther into the restaurant, weaving through tables. The bells hanging off me sound obnoxious in the subdued space. Out on the streets of Manhattan, they didn’t seem so loud, but there’s nothing I can do about them now. I’m here, and we’ll make the best of it. If anything, it’s a cute story if things turn out good with IOBJECT.

She leads me to a table for two. It’s hard to mistake the horror in my date’s eyes as I approach the table.

He’s handsome, dressed in an expensive navy suit with a red tie. His square jaw is covered with a short beard that matches his light-brown hair, which has a copper sheen to it. The most interesting thing about his hair is the inch-wide streak of gray at the front on his left side. It’s unique and different.

“Here you are,” the hostess says and gestures.

IOBJECT slides out of his chair to stand. Well, good start. At least he’s a gentleman.

“Hi, I’m RAINBOWRIDER.” I wave a little shyly as his bluish-gray eyes take me in from head to toe.

It’s not in the sexual way one would hope on a first date. More in a questioning way, as if asking, “Are you really

wearing an elf costume?”

I'll just have to win him over with my charming personality.

Chapter Two

ANDREW

It's already been a shit day.

First, my sole competitor for partnership at the law firm won his case and is being lauded as the next Johnnie Cochran, regardless of the fact that the case was a slam dunk from the beginning. The defense's staggering ineptitude practically handed him the victory.

Second, my daft assistant entered the wrong time in my calendar, so when my biggest client showed up, I was unprepared.

And third, my blind date just arrived... dressed like an elf. I'm not clear on if she actually thinks of herself as an elf or maybe there's a weird Christmas role-playing underbelly within the city that I'm unaware of.

Doesn't matter. This is definitely *not* a match.

The only question is, how soon can I get this date to end?

"Hi, I'm RAINBOWRIDER." She smiles as though nothing is amiss.

I suppose there's not much to be done now, except suffer through dinner and get out of here as soon as humanly possible.

"Good to meet you." I nod and take my seat.

She pulls out her chair and sits, sounding like a goddamn chorus of bells. The diners nearby all glance over, and my hand clenches the armrest of the chair. Lord, please, if you're taking requests, please do not let anyone I know see me with an absolute barmy woman.

“Oh, you're Scottish,” she says with a big smile.

“English, actually.”

She chuckles. “Sorry. Where in England are you from?”

A tight smile forms on my lips as I decide whether I should take the time to educate her that English and Scottish people sound nothing alike. I figure that will only prolong our time together. “I'm from London.”

“Oh, very posh,” she says in a terrible version of my accent.

I draw a breath. Luckily, the server arrives to take our drink order. I, however, decide to order my meal at the same time to shorten this complete waste of my evening. There are a million more beneficial things I could be doing with my time than dining with an elf.

“I'll have two fingers of your best scotch please, and the salmon dish for my entrée.”

“Absolutely, sir. And for you?” The waitress turns to my date, and it's clear she's doing her best to keep her gaze focused on my date's face and not let it drift down to her ridiculous outfit.

“Oh, I didn't realize we were ordering right away. Okay...” She peruses the menu quickly and looks back at the waitress with a bright smile. “I'll have a glass of your house white with the filet mignon.”

“And how would you like it cooked?”

“Medium well, please.”

The waitress nods and takes our menus. “I’ll be back in a minute with your drinks.”

I nod and turn my attention back across the table. “Why did you order white wine?”

She appears perplexed, so I help her out.

“Red wine pairs with red meat, not white.”

Her bright smile finally falters. “Oh well, I don’t really like red, so white it is.”

“But wouldn’t you prefer a drink that enhances the flavor of your meal, not tarnishes it?”

She looks at me as though she doesn’t know how to answer, so I shake my head.

“Never mind. Care to explain the outfit?”

I have to know whether I am in fact dealing with a crazy person or not.

Her cheeks pinken and she bites her plump bottom lip. “I’m an event planner and I had a gig today for holiday photos and I thought it would be fun to dress as an elf. The kids loved it! But I forgot my change of clothes at home, so I didn’t have time to get all the way back there, change, and then be on time for our date.”

“So, you thought it best to show up wearing that?” I motion with my hand across the table.

“Hey, I’m single and ready to jingle.” She wiggles in her seat, making the bells ring. Once again, the majority of the diners look in our direction.

Lord, what have I done to deserve such torture?

When I don't laugh with her, her face falls and a foreign feeling of guilt worms its way through my veins.

"I didn't want to be late or make you wait." The sincerity in her voice surprises me.

Still, I cannot sit here and suffer through a date with a woman who shows up, presumably to attract a grown man, dressed as a fictional character. If anyone I know sees me, I'll never live it down. God knows I've been embarrassed enough for one lifetime.

I open my mouth to politely tell her that while it's been nice meeting her, I don't think we're a match and I'm going to leave, but she speaks first.

"We haven't even properly introduced ourselves yet. I'm Kenzie Montgomery." She holds her hand out across the table.

I roll the familiar name over in my head a few times, trying to sort out where I've heard it before but come up empty. I take her small hand in mine and shake it. "Andrew Wainwright."

Her hand stills in mine. "Wait. Andrew? Wainwright? Did you by chance go to Columbia Law School?"

I drop her hand, and my forehead wrinkles.

The waitress returns and sets our drinks on the table. "Your meal shouldn't be too long."

I thank her before returning my attention to Kenzie, who is staring at me with wide eyes.

"I attended Columbia Law School, yes."

I'm almost positive we can't share any acquaintances or friends. I'm sure I'd remember hooking up with her. There's no elf makeup blocking her face. After Moira, there were certainly some drunken nights, but none in which I partook in losing myself in another woman. Besides, this woman would have had to be in London at the time and she doesn't exactly strike me as a worldly person. By the time I came to New York, I had my sights set on excelling in my career, so I know for certain I haven't been with her in the decade plus since.

"You know my brother, Finn Montgomery."

My stomach sinks. I don't only know her brother. He's my best mate.

"You're Finn's little sister?" My mouth is agape as I try to make sense of this. "I thought his sister's name was—"

She grins. "He's the only one who calls me Mac. Everyone else calls me Kenzie, but my given name is MacKenzie."

Kenzie looks as if it's a delightful situation we've found ourselves in.

I, however, realize two things.

First, ditching dinner is no longer an option and I'll be forced to endure the shame of dining with a full-grown elf woman. Second, the fact she's Finn's sister gives me the perfect out without having to make an excuse for why we're not a match.

Because if anything ever happened between Kenzie and me, Finn would murder me.

Chapter Three

KENZIE

I can't believe Andrew Wainwright is sitting across from me.

"Well, it truly is a small world then, isn't it?" His smile strains and I can't tell if it's because he's uncomfortable knowing I'm Finn's sister or not.

I mean, he hasn't exactly appeared to be super into the date so far. In fact, he's been kind of a jerk. I get the elf costume, but a nice person would have tried to make me feel as if it wasn't that big of a deal, whereas he's making me feel like a loser.

Regardless of his coolness, this is my brother's best friend. So while it's obvious there's no romantic match, we can still salvage a nice dinner.

I've always been curious about Andrew. They met in law school after my brother had already long moved out of our house in Indiana. I only moved to the city after college, and I guess our paths never crossed.

From what my brother has told me, Andrew is obsessive about his law career and puts in a lot of time in at the law firm he works at. I see that now as he keeps glancing at his watch.

"I can't believe you're Andrew Wainwright. It's crazy that we'd end up on a date together."

“Yes, well. Clearly, there will be no romantic entanglement between us now.”

“Of course.” The relief I hear in his voice stings, but I brush it off because he’s right. “We can still enjoy our dinner though.”

He nods in a stilted way that makes me think he’d rather just end dinner now.

“So, are you a divorce attorney like my brother?”

He sips his drink. “I’m a litigation lawyer at Simons, Berns & Scofield. We mostly deal with large corporations and enforcing the contracts they have in place.”

“Okay... so what is it you actually do?”

His nostrils flare and he sort of huffs as if my question is annoying. “Think of it this way. If someone breaks part of a contract, or if there’s a dispute over the terms of a contract, our clients come to us to get us to try to enforce the contract. It could be that someone is in breach of a business deal, someone is suing a company for something, maybe a CEO was terminated and contesting the directive of the contract they signed in such an event. It never ceases to amaze me the number of reasons people can get in conflict with one another.”

I nod. “Sounds interesting,” I say, not because I actually think it does but because I’m a polite person. Sitting behind a desk and staring at legalese all day sounds miserable to me.

“It can be. I prefer the days I’m in court over the days I’m poring over contracts to find one loophole I can use for my client’s benefit.”

“Is that because you’re argumentative?” The words leave my mouth before I think better of them.

He tilts his head. “Argumentative?”

“Not in a bad way. The impression I get is you’d do well arguing your point in front of other people. Maybe argumentative is the wrong word.”

He frowns. “Perhaps. I’ve never given it much thought.”

We sit in silence for a beat, because I insulted him, but he hasn’t been all warm and fuzzy to me so far. “I’m going to use the restroom.”

I push my chair back and cringe when all the bells on my costume ring. It’s worse when I walk to the restroom. Although I stand by my decision to not be late, I’m slightly embarrassed now, which I think is more due to Andrew’s reaction than my own. Tessa’s going to get a kick outta this one.

After I return to the table, purposely ignoring the way all the other diners glare at me, I retake my seat. My meal is waiting for me while Andrew has started eating his. And he’s getting on me for an elf costume? It’s common etiquette to wait for your date to return before you eat.

Rather than say anything, I smile as I take my seat. “How’s the salmon?”

He finishes chewing. “Excellent. Perfectly done.”

I nod and set my napkin over my red-and-green skirt, then pick up my cutlery and cut into my steak. Red liquid oozes from the meat, and I hold up the piece to inspect it.

“Didn’t you ask for your steak to be cooked medium well?” Andrew asks, surprisingly observant.

I sigh. “Yeah. That’s okay though.”

A line forms between his eyebrows, which I've noticed is a sign of his displeasure. I would know—it's been directed at me several times tonight. "Why would you eat it like that? Just call the server back here and tell them to cook it longer."

"No, it's fine. I don't want to bother her." I put the piece of meat in my mouth and chew, stifling my reaction to spit it out.

Andrew looks as though he's barely suppressing an eye roll but goes back to his own meal. The two of us sit there, paying rapt attention to our meals, eating in silence. Awkwardness crawls over my skin like poison ivy.

I hate awkward moments. I mean, I'm sure everyone does, but I think I hate them more than most. One of those childhood wounds people harbor for years or go to therapy for.

I work up the courage to talk. I'd rather deal with his attitude than this uncomfortableness. "So, how long have you been in the US?"

His body stiffens from what I thought was an innocent question.

"I came as soon as I graduated uni in London to attend law school." He reaches for his drink and takes another sip. I notice it's getting low and I wonder if he'll stick around for a second.

"Did you plan on staying after graduation or was your original plan to return to England?" I sip my wine and sit back, not too interested in my meal.

"You're full of questions, huh?" His lips press in a thin line. "I wasn't positive, but I had an idea that I might stay." He wipes his mouth with his napkin and leans back in his chair. "Event planning isn't an easy business to get into?"

“No, it’s not. And my company isn’t huge—yet.” I smile at him, but his face doesn’t change from his blank expression. “Mostly I do smaller events—birthday parties, anniversary parties, that kind of thing. And I put together my own events... like the one I did today. My dream is to move into doing larger scale events, but I’m still waiting on my big break.”

He finishes his drink, the ice clinking to the empty glass. “And what exactly would a big break entail in the event planning world?” He picks up his fork and buries his head in his dish.

I frown for a second because he sounds condescending, but I decide to look past it. “Planning an event for a celebrity or someone well-known in the socialite circle and pulling it off. Most of the event planning business is word of mouth. It just takes someone giving me a chance to show I’m capable.”

He nods while he chews but says nothing.

I cut into my steak and fork a piece, bringing it to my mouth. That film of floundering silence coats me again. Andrew looks at his salmon as though it’s personally offended him.

I swallow and decide to take one last stab at a decent conversation. “Will you be traveling home to see your family over the holidays?”

His knife screeches across the plate and he quickly looks around at the other diners before peering across at me. “No, I won’t. I don’t generally do much for the holidays.”

“You don’t do much for holidays?” My tone sounds as if he just told me he kicks puppies for fun. “Oh, I love Christmas. I’m a total Christmas nut.” I smile, hoping some of my cheer will rub off on him.

He looks at my chest and back up to my face. “Wouldn’t have figured.” His sarcastic comment doesn’t do much to salvage this evening. “Let me guess—you already have your Christmas tree up.”

“Trees, plural.” I wink.

“How silly of me to assume you’d only have one.”

“You said you don’t do much for the holidays, but you can’t mean Christmas is included?” I feel as if it’s an innocent enough question, but something passes over his face. It’s quick, almost like a searing flash of pain, but it disappears.

“Not particularly.”

I frown. “How can you not like Christmas? There’s so much to love.” I fork my potato around since it’s the only thing I’m probably going to eat.

“Like what? The influx of tourists into the city so it takes twice as long to get anywhere? The pressure to find someone the perfect gift because if you don’t, then that must mean you don’t care enough about them? The commercialism of the entire holiday?” He gives me a hard glare. “Families pretending that they’re perfect when in fact nothing could be further from the truth?”

I stare at him for a beat because... jeez, this man is like a real-life, living and breathing Scrooge.

“You’re pretty cynical.” My forehead wrinkles and I place my fork down, my appetite gone.

“I’m a realist. Christmas is an entirely commercial affair that puts money in the pockets of large corporations and stockholders, and nothing more.”

“That’s a crappy way of looking at something so magical that brings people together.”

He wipes his mouth again and I don’t miss the way he white-knuckles the fabric. “Well, Kenzie, some of us aren’t as daft as others when it comes to the holidays.”

My head notches back as if he’s physically shoved me. “Are you calling me crazy?”

“You came to a dinner date dressed as a bloody elf!” The napkin drops to his lap and he leans across the table, his face growing redder. “What grown woman shows up to a date with a man she presumably wants to begin some type of relationship with dressed as a children’s Christmas character?”

My eyes burn with unshed tears because the disgust and condescension in his voice is something I’ve known all too well in my life. I stand with a flourish, the tiny bells ringing. At this point, no one else is really paying attention to the bells or that I’m dressed like an elf.

“I can see now that arriving here dressed like this”—I shake my hips for a little extra emphasis and, quite frankly, to annoy him—“was a mistake. But my intention wasn’t to embarrass you. It was so I wouldn’t leave you sitting in a restaurant, waiting for your date to show up. Making you think your blind date was a no-show felt rude and demeaning to me. So, I showed up here like this. But you had two choices. You could’ve laughed it off and appreciated that I did what I could to be on time, show it mattered that I thought of you and your feelings. Or you could make me feel like an idiot. And you chose the latter.”

He opens his mouth, but I raise my hand.

“As much fun as this evening has been, I’m leaving. And don’t worry, I’ll do you the courtesy of not telling my brother what a dick you were to his little sister.” I toss my napkin on the table and storm off in a chorus of tinkling bells.

If I ever see Andrew Wainwright again, it will be too soon.

Chapter Four

KENZIE

It's not until I'm out in the chilly early November air that I stop and think about what I just did. My cheeks heat with embarrassment and I pull my phone from my bag and call Tessa.

"I'm really hoping you're calling me from the bathroom to tell me you're going home with your date and to give me all his details so I can send out a search party if you don't surface? It's only been forty-five minutes."

"Most people answer the phone with hello." Just hearing her voice pulls that security blanket feeling over me. I walk toward downtown. At some point I'll have to hop on the subway, but I need to burn off some of my irritation before battling hundreds of people.

I hate this feeling of unworthiness. It's both familiar and unwelcome.

"Since I hear honking taxicabs, I'm assuming it's a SOS call?"

I stop when the light changes. "It's an 'I made a scene and stormed out of the restaurant and now I feel bad about it' call."

"What? You stormed out of the restaurant? I didn't even know you were capable of such emotion."

“Har.” The light changes and I walk again, dodging the gawkers.

It’s a running joke about how much I let roll off my back. I always look at the positive side of a situation and don’t focus on the negative, and my attitude has always served me well. Tessa has the temper of a city stray old dog, so she’s never been able to understand how even-keeled I can be, even when someone has upset me.

“Wait, is this a joke or something?”

“No! I’m serious.” While I walk, I fill her in on everything that went down—the costume, his apparent embarrassment, his irritation, and finally what he said about the whole disaster of a date.

“You did the right thing. He sounds like a jerk. If it were me, I probably would’ve dumped my wine over his head.”

I glance up at the street sign and realize I’ve walked ten blocks by now. I head toward the subway. “I haven’t told you the best part yet. Guess *who* my date was?”

“You know the guy? I thought the app—”

“He’s my brother’s best friend—Andrew Wainwright.”

“No way!” I pull the phone away from my ear from her screech.

“Yep. Can you believe that?” I hike my bag farther up on my shoulder and smile as I pass an older lady checking out my elf costume.

“Are you going to tell Finn?”

I shake my head even though she can’t see me. “No. What’s the point? This is the first time I’ve even met him after

all these years. There's not a big chance I'll ever run into him again."

Tessa clucks her tongue. "You're a better woman than me, Kenz. I'd want to make him pay."

I don't tell her, but the first thing that runs through my head is that I'd like to do the opposite. As angry as I am with him, I feel bad for him. I wish I could change his mind and show him the magic of the holiday season. You'd think someone had sprinkled me with elf dust. Maybe it was the flashes of pain I saw on his face that he tried to mask. Maybe it's because I too am familiar with pain, but Christmas and my memories of it have been a soothing balm. A part of me wishes he knew what that was like too.

"Anyway, I'm going to hop on the subway now. Want to do drinks later this week?"

"Just text me when and where."

"Okay, I'll check my schedule and let you know. Bye, babe."

"Bye."

I hang up and slide my phone back into my purse before taking the stairs down to the subway and using my pass to enter through the turnstile.

While I wait on the platform for my train to arrive, I go back over dinner with Andrew. I don't know why but that look on his face when I asked if he was going home for the holidays and whether he liked Christmas is stuck on repeat in my head, but I cannot forget it.

After I reach my stop and emerge from the bowels of the city, my phone chimes in my purse. When I pull it out, I see a missed call from my brother. I stop walking and let out a

groan, my head falling back so I'm staring straight up at the dark sky clustered with skyscrapers.

With a sigh, I right my head and look at the screen, wondering what I'm going to hear when I call him back. Why is my brother calling? Did Andrew call him after I stormed out? For what purpose? I told him I wouldn't tell my brother.

God, something about Andrew Wainwright feels like a stubborn splinter under my skin.

My brother and I aren't particularly close. We live in the same city, me moving here years after him, but we've rarely hung out. Maybe it's the six-year age gap or maybe it's that he had a completely different childhood than I did. We talk probably once a month and see each other a handful of times a year. I love my brother and don't have any ill will toward him. We're just not that close.

I don't want to wonder for days why he called and whether it's about what I said to his friend, so I hit his number to call him right back. If it's about Andrew, I'd rather deal with it now so that tomorrow, I can put the Scrooge behind me and enjoy my favorite season of the year.

"Hey, Finn. I missed your call?" I ask with a nervous hitch when he answers.

"Yeah, I was just calling to invite you to my place for Thanksgiving dinner."

I open my mouth then shut it. It takes me a moment to recover from my surprise because in all the years we've lived in the same city as adults, he's never once invited me to Thanksgiving dinner, let alone hosted. I didn't even know he could cook.

“You’re cooking?” I clear my throat, hoping to hide the surprise in my voice.

The sound of his laugh reverberates in my ear. “Hell no. I’m having it catered.”

“Ah, that makes more sense.” I walk down the street toward my apartment.

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet, and I figured Thanksgiving was as good a time as any.”

My stomach drops for a moment. “Oh my god, Finn are you dating someone special?”

Over the years, I’ve only ever met one woman my brother has dated and that was a chance meeting at a bar on St. Patrick’s Day. He has never, ever wanted me to meet someone before.

“You’re not going to make a big deal about this, are you?” His tone is eerily similar to Andrew’s at dinner and I’m getting a better idea of how the two of them might connect as friends. They both have that agitated lawyerness.

“How long have you been seeing her?” I stop at the corner when I spot Mrs. Hoffmeister smoking on the front stoop of our building. No doubt she’ll ask me to do something for her if I pass her. I might as well wait, see if she goes inside.

“Zahra and I have been together for about nine months.”

“Oh, love her name. So pretty. But seriously, Finn, how is this the first I’m hearing about it?”

He sighs and I picture him pushing his hand through his sandy-colored hair. “I didn’t want to jinx anything.”

Oh, she must be *really* special.

“You don’t say...”

“Cut the shit, Mac. Are you coming or not?”

I chuckle. “Of course I’m coming. Let me know what you want me to bring.”

“Will do. Oh, and you should know that Mom and Dad will be joining us too.”

The excitement I felt moments ago plummets to the ground like a dead bird splattering on the concrete sidewalk.

My brother quickly fills the silence. “C’mon, Mac. It’s not that big a deal. It’ll be fine.”

My parents and I have a complicated relationship, to put it mildly. I love them, they’re my parents, but growing up wasn’t easy.

“Are you sure you want to do that? What if they start fighting at dinner and Zahra is there?”

“I’ve already explained their dynamic to her. She’s prepared.”

I frown. “What are they doing in Manhattan anyway?”

“They’re at some conference down in Florida the week of and their flight home has a layover in Newark, so they figured why not just spend the night and come into Manhattan for Thanksgiving. They’re leaving the next day.”

Nice of them to mention to me that they were coming to town.

“Sure, I’ll be there. Listen, if Tessa stays in town, can I bring her along?” Normally I hang with Tessa on Thanksgiving, or if she headed home to Milwaukee, I’d join her.

“Sure, the more the merrier.”

“All right. Anything else?” I head toward the building now that Mrs. Hoffmeister has gone inside, waiting to see if Andrew has called my brother.

“Nope, that’s it.” I hear the smile in his voice. It’s nice to hear him happy. It’s obvious to me that he doesn’t know anything about who I had dinner with tonight.

“Okay, see you then. Looking forward to meeting Zahra.” I say her name in a singsong voice like a child.

“Don’t act like that when you meet her, okay?” He hangs up.

I smile as I slide my phone back into my bag. It’s about time my brother found someone he cares about. I hope one day I join him.

Chapter Five

ANDREW

My fingers press on the bridge of my nose and I close my eyes. Darla, who shouldn't be my legal assistant, must be taking the piss because no one can truly be this obtuse.

She's already giving me that "please don't yell at me" look, her hands growing shaky.

"What do you mean you told him to come back?" I barely manage to keep my voice even.

Her eyes widen and she shifts her weight from side to side. We're about five seconds away from a meltdown. "You said you didn't want to be interrupted." Her voice is soft and shallow.

I let my hand drop from my face, inhaling deeply through my nose, trying not to be the monster she obviously portrays me as in her head. "You understand that it is your job to assist me, correct?"

She bites her bottom lip and nods. *T* minus three seconds now.

"In case it wasn't clear, that means that when a messenger comes to drop off papers, you are to, at the very least, accept them. If you deem it necessary and important enough, interrupt

me. If they aren't time sensitive, you can wait until I no longer wish to be uninterrupted."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know." The tears well in her eyes.

This is the exact reason she should not be my assistant. And she wouldn't be if she wasn't my boss Rick Simons's fiancée's cousin. Unfortunately for me though, Rick divorced his first wife to marry Bethaney, a woman twenty-five years his junior. Now Bethaney leads him around by his ballsac. Somehow, I got screwed in the deal and got stuck with Bethaney's idiotic cousin Darla as my assistant.

"The messenger you turned away has papers that need to be filed with the court by day's end. I suggest you track him down."

"Yes, sir." She rushes out of my office without a backward glance. At least she understood the urgency.

I should just chalk up today as a loss. It's common knowledge that Mr. Berns, one of the three partners in the firm, is retiring next year. After Tom Harding's big win yesterday, he's definitely in the running to take Berns's spot. Add in my complete disaster of a date with Finn's sister last night and the past twenty-four hours have been complete shit.

Too bad it can't be like that movie *Groundhog Day* and I can wake up and change the course of events.

If Darla's not able to get those papers back for me, it'll be my arse on the line, not hers. Out of the entire time she's worked for me, this is by far her most egregious error.

Who sends a messenger away?

I can't let this one ride. I have no option but to talk to Mr. Simons and explain how incapable she is. Maybe there's a position somewhere else in the company for her. I don't really

care where she ends up as long as it's not working as my right hand.

The thought of my right hand reminds me what I was doing this morning during my shower. Jacking off to the thought of Finn's little sister, Kenzie, is bloody asinine after the events that took place last night. And makes me feel like a complete creeper, being that she's my best mate's little sister.

It's confusing as hell, given that I couldn't wait to get away from her last night. I mean, her long blonde hair has always been my preference on a woman, and her bright-blue eyes sparkle, and no male could miss her plump lips. Regardless, the woman is an overgrown toddler excited for Santa to arrive. What exactly did my subconscious find alluring about that?

I push all thoughts of Kenzie from my head and stand from my desk, taking a moment to adjust myself now that I have a half-chub from thinking of her. Bloody hell.

Once I'm situated, I head out of my office and down the hall toward Mr. Simons's office. I can't let Darla's ineptitude slide any longer. But I'm going to have to approach this subject delicately because pussy-whipped is too soft a term for what Mr. Simons is for his new, younger woman.

I approach his office, which is situated at the corner of the high-rise and looks out over Manhattan. The adjoining office is where the other partner, Mr. Berns, now works. If he retires next year, it will probably be mine or Tom Harding's.

When the time comes, I'm pretty sure Mr. Berns will give me his vote and I suspect Tom Harding will be getting Scofield's. Which makes Mr. Simons the tiebreaker.

Mr. Simons's assistant isn't at her desk, but his office door is half-ajar, so I knock. My stomach feels a bit sour at the idea of having this conversation, but I've done harder things and dealt with the aftermath of my decisions before, so I push aside the fear that he'll take offense.

The door opens slightly when I knock to reveal that Mr. Simons is sitting behind his desk and, lucky me, his fiancée is adhered to his lap.

Of course she is. Could anything in my life come easy?

He drags his attention away from the woman who I'd consider too young for me, and I'm thirty-four while Mr. Simons has a couple decades over me. He removes his hand from her hip and waves me in. "Andrew, come on in."

"I can come back if you're busy." I nod at Bethaney. "Hi, Bethaney."

"Andrew."

A few months ago, after Mr. Simons proposed, he brought Bethaney around and introduced her to everyone. He said it was because we'd be seeing her around the law firm from time to time and wanted us all to be comfortable, but I suspect he was showing off his new prize, as though his new piece of arm candy negated the fact he'd divorced the mother of his children for her.

It wasn't like he ever said that, but timing being what it was made it obvious.

"Nonsense, come on in. I was just trying to make Bethaney feel better."

Bethaney's pout looks perfectly practiced.

I take a few more steps into the office. “Everything okay?” I ask, feigning interest. What could this girl be upset about?

“The planner for our Christmas party quit. She said I was too demanding or something.” Her face twists into an expression to suggest the woman is crazy. “Now I have no one and the party is less than two months away. It’s going to be a disaster!” Her shoulders drop.

Mr. Simons wraps his arms around her waist, pulling her close to him. They’re one of those couples where, due to their age difference, you can’t help but think of them in bed and it’s not the best image to imagine.

“It’s okay, we’ll figure something out.” Mr. Simons kisses her temple.

“Ricky... you don’t get it.” She throws her arms around his neck, pressing herself to him.

Ricky? I barely stifle an eye roll.

“Everyone who’s any good won’t be able to take the job with this short of notice. This was supposed to be my coming-out party to your office. I wanted to throw the best party the company has ever had. I want everyone to like me.”

I’m surprised at the note of vulnerability in her voice. But truth be told, Mr. Simons’s first wife was an exceptional party planner. She had connections though, ones I’m sure Bethaney doesn’t. His first wife was big on charities, so the party favors were usually for a specific cause. During Labor Day, she gave everyone a specific animal that she’d adopted for them from the rain forest. And you get monthly updates on said animal. I believe her long-term goal was for us to continue to give money to the charity and it worked for me. A specific amount

of money is taken out every month to care for my orangutan, Bongo.

“Everyone does like you. Right, Andrew?” He looks at me with an expression that clearly says I’d better agree.

“Of course. Everyone here thinks highly of you, Bethaney.”

Her pout makes a reappearance. “You guys are just saying that. I want to prove that I belong. Plus, Christmas is my all-time favorite holiday. I can’t screw this up.”

Christ, what’s with the Christmas cheerleaders I find myself surrounded by lately? What is it about the holiday that these people love? Then a thought occurs to me, but I don’t want to mention Kenzie’s name to Bethaney because that’s inviting Kenzie into my world.

“You know what, sweetie, Tom Harding probably knows someone. He always seems to have a guy or a woman who can help out.”

Tom Harding? I’ve never wanted to throat punch a guy more.

“Really?” Bethaney stands. “Maybe I should go ask him?”

“You do that, sweetie.” He pats her on the ass. “Hell of a case he won for the firm yesterday, right, Andrew?”

If I could forcefully throw up, I would right now.

“I know someone!” I actually raise my hand as the words rush out of me so fast, I’m surprised Bethaney understood me and stops. I’m not an impulsive person. I always think before I speak. It’s the nature of being a lawyer.

“You do? Who is it?” Bethaney turns to Mr. Simons.

“My friend’s sister is an event planner.”

“What’s her name?”

“MacKenzie Montgomery.” I don’t actually know if she goes by her full name in business or if she has a business name. We never got that far last night.

Bethaney tilts her head and purses her lips. “I’ve never heard of her.” She steps closer to the door and panic arises inside me.

“She’s very up and coming.” Bethaney’s expression doesn’t change, so I add, “And she loves Christmas. Just last night, she was dressed like an elf when we had dinner. Christmas cheer is the best, am I right?” I don’t know why I added that last part.

“You love Christmas?” Her expression says she pegged me for a Scrooge.

“What’s not to love? Favorite holiday.” I plaster what I hope is a convincing smile and point to myself. Even Mr. Simons quirks an eyebrow my way.

Bethaney’s eyes widen and she shifts to stand by me. “An elf? Love that.” She heads back over to Mr. Simons and grabs his lapels. “Oh, Ricky, this could be it. If she’s up and coming, I could be known for discovering the next ‘it’ event planner in the city. Wouldn’t that be amazing?” Her smile is at full wattage.

“You’re amazing,” Mr. Simons says, looking at her lovingly. Jesus, this guy is a goner.

Bethaney turns back to me. “Can you give me her number?”

“Sure, but why don’t you let me call her first and sweet-talk her into making time in her schedule?”

“Perfect.” She claps like a baby seal then rushes over to embrace me.

I let my hands hang stiff at my sides and glance at Mr. Simons, but he doesn’t look concerned that his fiancée is pressed against me. In fact, he’s grinning almost as much as she is. Maybe the way to win his vote for partner isn’t through hard work and billable hours. Maybe it’s through making the woman he loves happy.

The idea is irksome, but if that’s the reality I’m dealing with, then I’m just happy I realized it now and that I have an event planner to refer to Bethaney.

Bethaney finally unwraps me from her hold and the scent of her cloying perfume eases as she steps back. “I’m so surprised that you love Christmas too.” She swats my chest. “You don’t strike me as the type.”

Shit. Me and my big mouth. I could have just referred Kenzie but not lied about my love for Christmas.

“What’s not to love?” I smile in a way I hope comes across as genuine.

“This is going to be so fun!” She looks about five seconds from breaking into song and dance.

I need to escape before she starts singing Christmas carols or something.

“Okay, I’ll give her a call and get back to you ASAP.” I turn and start to head out the door, but Mr. Simons calls my name.

“Thanks for this. I won’t forget it.” He winks.

I return the gesture with a nod and a smile before heading back to my office.

Now I just have to figure out how I'm going to pull this off. I'm pretty sure Kenzie won't be happy to hear from me. She strikes me as the person who won't care about the job prospect because of the way I treated her.

I need to smooth things over with her and get her to agree to do the event. And then make sure she does a stellar job. And also pretend to love Christmas. Fan-fucking-tastic.

I may not have gotten rid of my assistant, but if all this solidifies me as the choice for partner, then it will be worth it.

Chapter Six

KENZIE

My studio apartment has two things going for it. First, it's in Manhattan. Second, it's small enough that I really only need to move about two steps in each direction whether I'm hungry or I have to go the bathroom. New York has much worse to offer and, like I said, it's in Manhattan.

I fall back on the pull-out sofa that's also my bed and lean my head back, closing my eyes.

It wasn't the best day for me as an event planner.

I met with a potential client for her daughter's fifth birthday and even though kids' parties aren't my ultimate goal, I was really excited about it. The client lived in a condo that overlooks Central Park, so working with her would definitely be a stepping-stone into the most elite circles in Manhattan.

Everything was going well. She loved my vision about turning her large family room into a Candy Land with pastel drapes falling from the ceiling and a cotton candy rainbow over the entryway. Then she threw me the bomb. Her daughter was obsessed with unicorns and she wanted to switch the theme to unicorns.

I was cool to switch it up—a million other ideas floated in my head—but she mentioned that she wanted a real unicorn at the party.

Silence filled the large room with a twenty-foot ceiling, and I sat for a moment before I figured out that she wasn't joking. Unfortunately, I had to voice with a cringe that there's no such thing as a unicorn.

She replied, "Obviously. But I want it to look like a real unicorn. A white horse with a unicorn horn on its head. She'd absolutely love it."

I put my pen to paper to keep my thoughts to myself. "Like, in your apartment?" I pointed at the floor to make sure I'd heard clearly.

Her eyes narrowed and I assume she saw the horror on my face as I pictured the horse relieving itself on her fifty-thousand-dollar wool rug that she'd bragged she'd spent almost a year searching for before she found it and there wasn't a replica anywhere in the world.

"Of course in the apartment. It's plenty big enough." Her arms widened as if I didn't feel minuscule in the condo.

Normally I thrive on pulling off the impossible when a client has a grand idea for their party, and if we were in the suburbs, I'd be heading to the horse ranches, but this is Manhattan. I can't snap my fingers and have a horse delivered, stuffed in an elevator to go up fifty-five flights, and then let it loose in a fully furnished apartment.

When I told her I was unsure if animal control would fine us if we were even able to get an animal that weighs on average fifteen hundred pounds into the elevator, her nose scrunched, and I knew I had broken the cardinal rule of event planning. I had come off as being more intelligent than the client. But in this case, I was clearly the saner of us. I gave her a bunch of other ideas for the party—ones I suspected she was

now going to pass on to whichever designer she did hire, and they'd pass them off as their own.

I blow out a breath and right my head, grabbing the remote beside me and flicking on the television. After a few minutes of scrolling and not finding anything interesting, I pick up my phone and pull up the Blind Dating App to check if I have any new matches.

After last night's disaster, I'm not in a huge hurry to go on another blind date, but like Tessa is always telling me, Mr. Right won't come crashing through my door and declare his undying love. I must put some effort into meeting him. Which is funny, since she's still single herself.

I click on my direct messages and find one from Andrew. I drop the phone on the sofa cushion next to me. A big part of me wants to leave it unread because he's the type who would be driven crazy by that, but I'm too curious for my own good. After debating for more than a minute, I pick my phone up and click on the message.

IOBJECT – Can we talk?

That's all it says. No apology, no mention of even wanting to say I'm sorry, just that he wants to talk. That could mean so many things. Maybe he wants me to split the bill with him for last night. Or he talked to my brother and has some unnecessary guilt over treating me the way he did.

I debate not answering at all. Him knowing I've read the message and purposely didn't respond might drive him straight to insanity. But I decide to give him the benefit of the

doubt since he is my brother's friend, because if my brother wants me to meet someone, it means it's serious. If he proposes to her and they get married someday, I'll have to be around Finn and I'm not one for uncomfortable situations, so I type out my response.

RAINBOWRIDER – What do we have to talk about?

No more than two minutes pass before he responds.

IOBJECT – Can we meet up? Where are you? I can come to your place.

Huh. He sounds desperate to talk to me.

RAINBOWRIDER – Again... what is this about?

I swear I can envision him pushing his hand through his reddish-brown hair in frustration. The thought of it puts a smile on my face.

IOBJECT – Can we just meet please?

Ugh. As rude as ever.

I glance around my studio apartment. Although I'm not embarrassed about where I live, I can picture him living in some super posh place with a doorman. No way do I want him coming here and seeing that crinkled nose of his on display.

After a quick Google search, I message him an address.

RAINBOW RIDER – 281 3rd Avenue – See you there in an hour.

His response is immediate.

IOBJECT – I'll be there.

I set down my phone and grin. Oh, he's gonna hate me when he realizes where we're meeting. I almost can't wait the hour.

Chapter Seven

ANDREW

I glance at my phone to double-check the address then look back up at the sign overhead. Sure enough, this is it.

Rolf's German Restaurant

Christ. It looks like Christmas threw up all over this place. Through the window, I see thousands of Christmas bulbs hanging from the ceiling with garland. Those fake silver icicles hang from the garland, and odd, creepy-looking dolls are stuck in here and there. It's like a holiday version of hell. My own hell.

"Isn't it fantastic?"

I turn toward the voice behind me. *Fuck me.*

Kenzie smiles up at me with her long blonde hair hanging in waves down to her breasts. She wears a cream wool coat that nips in at her waist. Definitely an upgrade from the elf costume. The elf costume didn't hide her attractiveness, but tonight she looks like a woman that I know beyond a doubt I'll picture when I'm jacking off again.

I clear my throat. "I assume you picked this place to spite me?"

She grins. "Of course I did. Shall we?" She motions toward the door then skips over there.

She's obviously still miffed with me and I have no idea how she manages to put a smile on her face and be so jovial.

I follow her into the restaurant and have to blink a few times from being assaulted by the holiday decor. Literally every surface of the ceiling is covered. I almost feel as though I have to duck so I don't walk into one of those creepy dolls.

Kenzie talks to the host for a moment, and he points at the bar area. She looks over her shoulder at me and motions me forward. "You good if we just sit at the bar? They don't have any tables available."

"That'll do."

She nods and heads into the bar section, taking the only free two stools at the end of the bar. The bartender walks over to us and gives Kenzie a big smile, leaning in to ask her what she'd like to drink. He's younger and his Christmas sweater says he's a fan of the holiday, just like she is.

His blatant appraisal of her irritates me, but I refuse to give any thought as to why.

She studies the drink menu display for a moment before passing it to me. "I'll have the eggnog cocktail."

The bartender winks. "One eggnog cocktail coming up. And for you?" He barely spares me a glance before looking back at Kenzie.

"Do you have any beer on tap?"

"He'll have the Grinch cocktail," Kenzie butts in, thumbing in my direction.

"Done. Be back in a few." The bartender takes the drink menu and places it under the bar then walks away.

I'm left staring after him, my jaw ticking. "Was there a reason I couldn't order for myself?"

Kenzie shrugs. "Just seemed fitting, don't you think? Or would you prefer my eggnog?" Her voice is syrupy sweet. It's clear she feels as if she has the upper hand and she's trying to get under my skin.

Mission accomplished, but not for the reason she thinks. It's because she's now taking off her coat and walking over to hang it on the nearby coat hook and I get my first glimpse of what she's wearing. Jeans and one of those ugly holiday sweaters, which seems like an oxymoron to me these days given that they're now in fashion. Her jeans hug her hips, and with her back to me as she tries to reach the highest hook, I get an unobstructed view of her perfect arse. Round, plump, and firm. Practically begging for a man's hands to squeeze it.

Jesus, what am I thinking? This is Finn's little sister!

I stand and remove my own jacket, coming up behind her to help her and hang mine on the hook.

Just then, a server squeezes past. "Sorry, excuse me."

I'm forced to move into Kenzie's space and press my front to her behind. A quick rush of air leaves her lips, and she stills.

"Apologies," I mumble and step back as soon as I'm able, taking her jacket and hanging it up with mine. With the discipline of a saint, I avoid the urge to shift myself in my pants.

We take our seats back at the bar as the bartender slides our drinks in front of us. Mine is bright green with a cherry floating between the ice cubes, while Kenzie's looks like eggnog with cinnamon sprinkled on top and what looks like caramel sauce around the rim.

She picks up both of our drinks with a smile and licks her plump bottom lip then looks at me. “So, do you want to switch drinks?”

“I’d rather you be wearing that elf costume from last night than suffer through one sip of that eggnog.”

She shrugs her shoulder. “Suit yourself.”

Lifting my glass to my lips, I sip and taste a fruity blend mixed with what I think is vodka. It’s not half-bad actually, though I’d never admit it to the woman beside me currently licking the caramel sauce from her lips after setting down her drink.

“You missed a spot.” I point at the right of her mouth.

She sticks out her tongue and tries to reach it, and I roll my eyes, taking a napkin off the pile on the bar.

“Here.” I offer it to her.

She accepts it but completely misses the spot when she dabs at her face.

“Here.” I snatch the napkin from her and gently wipe at the stubborn spot of sticky substance.

It’s not until I’m finished that it dawns on me how close we are to one another. She’s turned to face me, so her legs rest between my spread ones. I let my hand drop and crumple up the napkin, tossing it on the bar while I clear my throat and maneuver my legs around hers so I can once again face the bar.

“What does your sweater say? I didn’t notice,” I ask to break the spell she has me under. Raising my drink to my lips, I take a swig, then set it down and turn my head to look at her.

Her hands are on her hips while she juts her chest out as though she's proud as punch. "It says, 'I'm so good Santa came twice.'"

The sip of my drink gets trapped in my throat and I cough, trying to catch my breath.

"Are you okay?" I hear her say through my hacking, but I can't see her because my eyes are now watering.

Bloody hell, this woman is a menace to my good sense.

It takes me a minute, but I recover, dabbing my eyes with another one of the napkins from the bar. "Sorry, went down the wrong pipe."

"I thought maybe it was my sweater." She grins as though she's enjoying my reaction.

"I'll be honest, I wasn't expecting that. I was figuring on something sweet like, 'Jesus is the reason for the season' or something."

"Oh, I love a punny Christmas sweater. Especially if they're a little dirty."

"Then that's a good one." I nod toward her sweater, purposely averting my eyes away from the way her breasts strain the fabric.

Something about this woman's smile is infectious. It almost pulls a smile of my own out, but I stifle the urge and school my features. I need to remember why I'm here and it isn't to socialize.

"Listen, I asked you here because I wanted to apologize for my behavior last night. I'd had a shit day at work, and I can be a little testy when things at the office aren't running how I'd like. I was rude and I shouldn't have been."

It's all true, although I'm not a man who's used to apologizing.

"You can relax, Andrew, I kept my word—I didn't tell my brother."

I like the way my name sounds on her lips more than I should. With the mention of her brother's name, a guilt from the way my body is reacting to hers consumes me. "I appreciate that, but it doesn't change the fact that I might have overreacted a bit."

She squeezes her lips together as though she's debating saying something for a moment before she speaks. "In retrospect, wearing the elf costume was probably a bad idea. I can understand why you weren't thrilled, but you could have dealt with it a lot different."

I nod in agreement because what am I going to do? Tell her I loved the fact that she'd been dressed as an elf? We both know I'd be lying.

"That's not the only reason I wanted to meet with you tonight though."

She tilts her head. "Oh?"

Putting all my pride on the line, I tell her, "I have an event planning job for you, and I really need you to take it."

Chapter Eight

KENZIE

A job is the last thing I thought Andrew was going to say. “I realize I’m probably not your first choice of people to work with, but you wouldn’t be working for me *per se*, but more for the law firm itself.” His fingers tap on the bar top as if he’s nervous to ask me.

Interesting. I haven’t done a lot of corporate events, but I wouldn’t mind getting into them. Generally, they don’t take up your entire weekend in the same way a wedding does. They usually have decent budgets, and unlike brides, the social committees at a corporation aren’t usually high maintenance or picky. This isn’t the event of their lives.

“My interest is piqued. Tell me more.” I take a sip from my drink and hum in approval. “You’re really missing out here.” I lift my drink before setting it back down.

Andrew gives me a weird look like maybe I’m inappropriate for voicing how yummy my drink is? He’s hard to read. The moment any type of emotion—beyond irritation—flits across his face he shuts it down. “There is no drink that screams Christmas like eggnog.” He raises his eyebrows and I wonder how anyone could hate Christmas so much.

“The party planner that was handling the firm’s holiday party is... no longer available, and the firm needs someone to

take over.”

I blink a couple of times. He can't mean... “You mean this year's holiday party?”

He presses his lips together and nods.

“But Christmas is in seven weeks.”

“I'm aware.” He picks up his drink and takes a hefty gulp.

“That's not really a lot of time to pull something together. Have any decisions been made? Event space, number of attendees, please say you have a caterer?”

With every word out of my mouth, his eyes slowly get wider and wider. It's just now, being this close to him, that I get a better look at how deep blue his eyes are. Like a stormy sea, which knowing the little that I do about him, fits.

“I don't know what decisions have or have not been made,” he says stiffly.

“Wait. Why are you involved in your firm's Christmas party? You hate Christmas.”

He rolls his eyes and puts up both hands. “I don't *hate* Christmas.”

“Would loathe be a better word?” I raise an eyebrow.

The corner of his mouth twitches. “I'm involved because I'm the connection to you since I suggested you for the party.”

While I do believe his apology from earlier, I don't believe for a second that he suggested me as some benevolent act. “And...”

He pushes his hands through his wavy hair and his shoulders sag a bit. “Okay, I'm being considered for partner and the man who can make that happen is engaged to a right

twit who's in charge of the Christmas party this year. If I'm able to solve her problem, it would bode well for me in the future."

"Ah, I see." I nod slowly.

I mull over the real reason we're sitting here together. Would I love to plan a Christmas party for a law firm? Without question. If the holidays lasted all year long, I'd make it my specialty and never do anything outside Christmas. Do I have the room in my schedule to do the party? Sadly, yes. I have a few smaller jobs I'm committed to in the next couple of months, but nothing the size and scope of what it sounds like the law firm will be doing. But just because I have the time doesn't mean I can pull it off. I'll have to rely on other businesses to do their part, and with such short notice, I don't know if that's possible.

"Well?" Andrew looks at me with barely veiled hope and it's clear to me how much he needs me to help him reach his goal. Not the Christmas party per se, that's just a means to his ultimate goal of becoming partner at the firm.

Though I owe him nothing, I can't deny that the look on his face makes me want to help.

"I can't commit until I know exactly what's involved. Why don't you set up a meeting with...?"

"Bethaney. She's the fiancée who's in charge of the party."

I nod. "Why don't you set up a meeting with Bethaney and I can get the information I need from her before I decide whether I can make this happen."

Andrew nods eagerly and something akin to a small smile tilts the corners of his mouth up slightly. "Wonderful. Why don't you give me your contact number, so we don't have to

message through that dreadful app anymore, and I'll be in touch."

"You're not going to continue trying to meet someone, OBJECT?" I hold my hand out toward him. "Here, give me your phone."

He pulls his phone from his front pocket, unlocks it, and hands it over. "I think I'm taking a break."

I quickly add myself as a contact and text myself so his number will be in my phone. When I hand it back to him, he glances at the screen.

"Mrs. Claus?" he says in a wry voice.

I laugh. "Well, that's why you want to hire me, isn't it? I love Christmas and you're hoping for a miracle?"

He chuckles and shakes his head. A weird whooshing feeling attacks my stomach at the sight of his smile and the twinkle in his blue eyes.

I ignore that feeling and take a sip of my drink. Me being attracted to Andrew would be akin to Mrs. Claus having an affair with the Grinch.

* * *

"Thank you for the drink," I say to Andrew as we walk over to the coat rack.

He grabs my jacket for me and holds it out while I slip my arms through the sleeves. I jog my memory to remember the last time any of my dates ever did that for me and not a one. There's something old school and chivalrous about the act that I love.

“Thanks,” I murmur when his knuckles brush against my neck as he brings up the collar.

I face him, but he’s not looking at me, instead buttoning his jacket. I almost get the feeling he’s intentionally keeping his eyes focused on the task.

He follows me out of the restaurant, and between the bar and outside, it feels like a mile because I’m suddenly very aware that he’s watching my every move. Rather than sauntering, I feel my walk is stiff and awkward.

The chilly November air hits me when I step outside and turn to face him. “So... I guess I’ll just wait to hear from you. Let me know about the meeting with Bethaney.”

Why does this moment feel like the awkward part at the end of a date when neither person knows what to do?

He signals with his arm in front of him. “I’ll escort you home. Are you walking or did you take the tube?”

“The tube?”

He shakes his head as though he’s forgotten himself. “The subway, I mean.”

“Oh, no, I walked. It’s not that far. You don’t need to walk me home.” I rub my hands together. “I made it all the way here on my own.”

His mouth pulls to the side. “I understand this isn’t a date, but Finn would pummel me if he knew I’d let you walk home on your own. C’mon, no arguing. I’m not accepting a no.”

“Well, all right then.” I walk in the direction I came and Andrew falls into step beside me, positioning himself so that he’s on the street side.

We walk the first block in silence before just the sound of horns honking and cars whizzing by weighs on me.

“You never said what your dislike of Christmas is about? Notice how I didn’t say hate.”

He side-eyes me but doesn’t directly turn to look at me. “I have my reasons.” His voice is tight and strained.

“Which are...”

He doesn’t bother to respond, and I frown. I just want him to love Christmas, to see how magical this time of the year is, and it drives me crazy that I cannot get him to feel the way I do.

More silence until we reach my block. I point at my small building, lit up with a solitary light over the entry door. I inwardly cringe when I spot Mrs. Hoffmeister sitting on the stoop, smoking. “This is me.”

He nods, pushing his hands farther into his pockets. He doesn’t have gloves or a hat, and though it’s not exactly freezing yet, it is chilly. I’ve always found that something about the damp November air settles into your bones.

“Hi, Mrs. Hoffmeister,” I say with a slight wave.

She takes her last drag off her cigarette and tosses it toward the curb. “Kenzie, dear. Who is this fine gentleman?” She smiles and her yellowed teeth glow under the one light.

“This is Andrew. He’s a friend.” The words feel foreign coming out of my mouth because we are definitely not friends, but what am I supposed to say? He’s my brother’s friend and he hates Christmas but he wants to make partner, so now we’re playing nice to both get something that benefits us? And yes, he’s an attractive man, but there’s nothing between us romantically.

I don't miss how Andrew's frame jerks in my peripheral vision. He steps forward with his hand out, walking up the few steps. Mrs. Hoffmeister accepts it, not bothering to stand from the step.

"Pleasure," he says.

Mrs. Hoffmeister turns her attention back to me. "I was hoping to catch up with you. My knees have really been bugging me this week and I was hoping I could count on you to maybe dust the apartment for me. It's really bothering my allergies. And you know I'd do it but ever since my surgery..."

She trails off because she doesn't need to finish her sentence. I've heard it all a million times. Ever since she had surgery on her knees two years ago, the cold, the rain, the snow—almost any weather event, it seems—makes it hard for her to do certain things.

"It's getting late tonight, but I can pop by tomorrow morning before I start my day. How does that sound?"

"Oh, you're an angel." Her smile causes relief to surge through my veins.

"How'd you get down here to smoke?" Andrew asks with barely concealed skepticism, eyeballing the stairs she's sitting on.

I get that uncomfortable pinch in my chest I always do whenever confrontation might be brewing, and I shoot Andrew a look with what I hope has daggers in it. At the very least, flaming arrows.

"Andrew." I nod at him. "Let me know about that meeting."

I don't wait for him to respond. Instead, I move forward and offer Mrs. Hoffmeister my arm and help her up the steps and into the building. "I'll be at your apartment in the morning."

Once we're in the building, she asks, "That your boyfriend?"

"Never in a million years."

I ignore the way the words taste like a lie.

Chapter Nine

KENZIE

Two days have passed since the evening Andrew and I met. I'm due to meet him and Bethaney at his office today at eleven to discuss the possibility of me being hired as the event planner for the law firm's holiday party.

I have the usual nerves that are present before I meet any client, but there's an extra layer of unease knowing Andrew will be in attendance. Which is stupid. The man is infuriating with his stoicism and disdain for the best time of the year. Not to mention, we couldn't be more different. So why does the thought of seeing him make me feel giddy as if I have a schoolgirl crush?

With a deep breath, I step out of the elevator on the floor that Simons, Berns & Scofield occupies. As I expected, the atmosphere is posh with lots of walnut, glass, and brushed brass. I walk over to the receptionist and tell her I'm here to meet with Andrew Wainwright. The short, dark-haired girl directs me to the left and instructs me to follow the hall to the end, then take a right and keep going. I'll find his assistant outside the office with his name on the door. Seriously, is he too important to come and get me? He probably told the receptionist he was too busy to be interrupted.

I'm wearing the Balmain sweater dress I purchased on a used clothes website last year. It's been my lucky dress for

first meetings with clients ever since I ate ramen noodles for an entire month due to the purchase price, but it was worth it. I fully subscribe to the “fake it until you make it” mantra. Dress for success, they say, but that’s only possible if you’re already successful, so a girl does what she needs to do to make it. I paired the monogram-jacquard knitted dress with my knee-high black suede boots. Finishing the look with a center part in my hair, straightened and pulled back into a low pony.

The look is mostly professional, part sexy, and says this is a woman who has her finger on the pulse of the city. A lot of my clients are always trying to one-up their frenemies with their own event, so it pays to have people think you’re ahead of the curve as to what’s hot and hip.

After wandering for a minute, I come upon a closed door with Andrew’s full name on a bronze plaque. A young brunette sits at the desk outside the office looking at her phone, frantically typing away with her thumbs.

I wait for her to notice me, but she doesn’t look up. She’s frowning and sighing at her phone as she reads the text on her screen. Since I don’t want to be late for this meeting, I clear my throat. She startles and her phone fumbles out of her grip.

“Sorry,” I say, offering a smile. “I’m here to see Mr. Wainwright.”

She pushes her phone out of the way and straightens her back. “Is he expecting you? Andr—Mr. Wainwright doesn’t like to be disturbed.”

“Yes, I have an eleven a.m. meeting with him.” I shift the strap of my bag on my shoulder, wishing I could set it down. Sometimes in my meet-and-greets, clients want to hire me to start working right away since they’re busy, so I always carry

my portfolio with me, along with some linen samples and various pamphlets for different caterers and decor companies.

The young woman looks nervous and fiddles with her hands.

“Is there a problem?” I ask.

“I don’t know.” She bites her lip. “Mr. Wainwright is very specific for me to never interrupt him before noon unless it’s *really* important. Or if a messenger is here with delivery papers. Right. I must remember that.” She says the last part almost to herself.

“He set the meeting with me for eleven, so I’m going to say that he thinks it’s important, so if you wouldn’t mind bothering him...”

She bites her lower lip again and a pained look crosses her face.

The door behind her whips open and Andrew stands there without his suit jacket. His pressed shirt tapers at his waist. His tie is tight around his neck. But it’s his wavy hair, as if he’s already run his hands through it a million times today, that’s the only thing not completely in place and I hate that he’s making me slightly breathless.

“Darla, did I hear—” Andrew’s eyes shift to me and he stops talking.

“Hi.” I give him a little wave that makes me feel juvenile.

Darla spins around in her seat. “I didn’t know if I should tell you she was here or not.”

Andrew’s forehead wrinkles, disdain clear in his features. “I told you I was expecting someone.”

“Well, I don’t know. I can’t keep all these rules straight.” She throws her hands in the air out of frustration and looks as if she’s a minute from breaking down in tears.

“It’s fine. It’s no problem, really.” I look from Darla to Andrew with wide eyes.

With a shake of his head, Andrew steps back in his office and comes out with his jacket in his hands. “The meeting is in the conference room. C’mon.”

I give Darla a small smile before catching up to Andrew, who is already straightening the collar of his jacket.

“Here, I’ll carry your bag.”

“Oh, you don’t have—” But before I finish my sentence, he has the strap in his hand and over his shoulder. “Thanks.”

“Thank me later when I’m seeing a physical therapist with a back injury. Seriously, how are you holding this up?”

“I guess I’m small but mighty.” I flex my bicep, but he never looks over, so I slowly lower my arm, hoping he didn’t notice.

He opens a door down the hall and reveals a room with a long wood table surrounded by chairs. No one else is inside, and he sets my bag down in the chair at the head of the table. “Bethaney should be along soon. She came by my office earlier to let me know how excited she is to get things going with you.”

“You didn’t tell her I was definitely taking the job, did you?”

He shakes his head, a deep groove forming between his eyebrows. “No, I told her you were coming here to discuss the

possibility, but just like Darla, she doesn't hear everything that comes out of my mouth."

"Okay." Some of my tension eases.

Andrew goes to stand by the large windows overlooking Manhattan with his hands in his suit pants pockets, while I walk to the chair to the right of the head of the table. After unbuttoning my jacket, I slide it over the back of the chair then look up to ask Andrew a question.

But the words die in my throat when I see the way his gaze roams over me. His avid interest makes me feel as if my dress is made out of Lycra, not wool. I mean, it's a fitted dress, but it's not revealing or inappropriate.

"I clean up pretty well, don't I?" I smile at him, and he clears his throat.

"Hmm." He looks toward the doorway. "Bethaney, hello. I'd like to introduce you to MacKenzie Montgomery."

I turn to find a woman much younger than what I'd conjured in my mind. When Andrew had said she was engaged to one of the partners, I pictured a more mature woman, but Bethaney can't be any older than me. Younger even, if I had to guess.

"Kenzie, please. Great to meet you, Bethaney. Thanks for having me today. I'm excited to hear what you have in mind for the firm's holiday party." I step over to her with my hand extended.

She looks at it briefly and waves me off. "Let's not do any of that boring lawyer stuff. I'm a hugger. Are you a hugger?" She steps forward and wraps her arms around me, leaning side to side, before I can prepare.

"Um... sure." I look at Andrew with a "save me" face.

“Well.” Andrew claps his hands in front of him. “I’ll leave you ladies to it.”

Bethaney pulls away from me. “Oh, no way! You have to stay. After all, you’re the one who knows Kenzie and I’d love to hear your ideas too, since you love Christmas as much as we do.”

I study Bethaney’s face for a beat before I realize she’s serious. No note of sarcasm is present in her tone, so I look slowly at Andrew with a raised eyebrow.

“Right. Be that as it may, I do have to prepare for a call this afternoon with a client—”

“I insist.” Bethaney’s voice is a little harder now.

He must notice the change too because with a resigned sigh, he pulls a chair out from the table across from where my coat hangs.

I pull my notepad and pen from my bag and heave the bag onto the floor near my chair before taking a seat. Bethaney sits at the head of the long table, as though she’s looking out at her subjects even though it’s just Andrew and myself in the room. If I had to guess, the boardroom is a foreign place for her.

“Well, the best place to start is probably with you telling me the date of the party.” I look up at her with my pen poised over the paper.

“December 17th.” She smiles as if that’s not a little less than six weeks away while I try to keep my expression from showing the panic flaring inside me.

“All right. And Andrew mentioned that the last planner was no longer able to do the party. Did they have a conflict in their schedule or did something personal come up...”

“Oh no, she quit.” Bethaney rolls her eyes and leans back in her seat. “Said I had unrealistic expectations, but really, she just didn’t get my vision.” Her hands go out in front of her and spread open.

I glance at Andrew’s clenched hands and tight jaw. This isn’t new information to him. He knew the last event planner quit and failed to tell me. Suddenly, this feels more like a setup than an opportunity.

“Right... okay then. Do you already have a venue to hold the party?” I ask.

She nods with a big smile, as though she’s very pleased with herself. “It’s being held at the St. Regis in their roof ballroom.”

I nod, impressed. Of course, I’ve never done an event there, but I know the space and it’s gorgeous, with a real European flair. “Can I assume they’re handling the table setup and the catering?”

She shifts in her seat and glances at Andrew. “They’ll put the tables in place with basic tablecloths, but I didn’t like their options for food, so I told them we’d be bringing in outside catering.”

I stifle my wince. I can only imagine how the hotel felt about that. “If we could arrange something you were satisfied with with the hotel, would you be open to letting them handle the food? It would be more cost-effective and much easier to arrange on such short notice.”

Bethaney raises her chin and shrugs. “I suppose, but the guy there seems really intent on sticking with their standard fare and I want this party to be anything but standard.”

We go on to discuss the budget—bigger than I expected, and the number of guests—also bigger than I expected, then we get to the part where Bethaney explains her vision for the party to me. I get a really good idea why the last event planner quit. For a moment, I wonder if she’s related to my unicorn mom.

I keep my face neutral, nodding at all the appropriate times. I somehow stop myself from laughing when she tries to pull Andrew into the conversation by getting his take on what’s the better option, a Christmas carol sing-off or a dance-off.

“Yes, Andrew, I’m dying to get your opinion?” I lean forward with my arms crossed on the table. He’s put me in an impossible situation with this opportunity, so anytime I can make him squirm, I intend on taking full advantage.

“Both sound like great ideas, Bethaney.” He smiles at her, and even though I’ve never seen Andrew’s full smile, I’d bet my small studio apartment this isn’t it.

“I know, right? Both are amazing.” She shakes her head and looks around the room as though she can’t believe how intelligent she is.

When we conclude the meeting, I stand from the table and reach out to shake Bethaney’s hand again. “Thanks again for seeing me today. I’ll go over my notes and figure out what it’s going to take to put this all together and whether or not I have room in my schedule.”

She accepts my hand instead of insisting on a hug, but she clasps my hand between both of hers. “Oh please, you’re my only hope. This is the first party I’m in charge of and I need to do a better job than”—she leans in closer—“the ex,” she whispers.

For the first time, I see insecurity in her eyes. “I won’t take more than a day or two to get back to you.”

I give her a reassuring smile, but there’s still worry in her eyes and it tugs on my sympathies. Her desperation feels all too similar to my own when it comes to my career.

“I’ll walk you out.” Andrew comes beside me and motions for me to leave the boardroom first.

I do so, and we walk side by side back to the reception area without saying a word. He presses the elevator button and I’m surprised when he steps inside with me.

“Oh, you’re joining?” I step aside so there’s more distance.

In this small space, I catch the scent of his cologne, and for some reason, it surprises me. He’s obviously looking to date again since he was on the app, but his life seems too busy to want a woman entangled with it. Oh, unless he only wants one thing from the women. I shake my head to stop my line of thinking because we’re not ever venturing into that territory again.

“I said I’d see you out.” He presses the button and stuffs his hands in his pockets.

Once the doors shut, I immediately turn to face him. “You didn’t tell me the last planner quit. And I can see why. Her expectations are completely off base.”

He massages the bridge of his nose with his fingers. “I know, believe me. But maybe there’s a way to figure it out?”

I stare at him blankly for a moment. “She wants it to be snowing the entire time the party is going on. Even if you used fake snow, she’s given no thought to how much that will accumulate on the floor throughout the night. And her idea to force the guests into a sing- or a dance-off? I mean, I don’t

want to stereotype all lawyers, but I've never gotten the impression that you're all a bunch of exhibitionists. And don't even get me started on wanting actual reindeer present."

What is it with all these rich people and their need to have live animals at their parties?

"You said you were trying to grow your business, right?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Andrew, the only thing worse than not having a job as an event planner is doing an event that you don't have enough time or resources to pull together. Regardless of the crazy she wants to pull in, this is that event."

His hands slide out of his pants and he takes mine, squeezing them. "There's got to be something you can do. I'm desperate, Kenzie. I need you."

I ignore the way my skin tingles from his words.

The elevator dings at a lower floor. Andrew drops my hands, and a middle-aged man steps on with a tight smile and a nod at each of us. Andrew and I step to the back of the elevator to give the man room and the usual awkward silence of an elevator ride begins.

When we reach the main floor, the stranger steps out and Andrew motions for me to go first. He follows me out and we step off to the side of the foyer to continue our conversation.

"I'm a one-woman operation. I don't have enough business to have a staff. I really don't think I can pull this off in time for the party. I'm sorry."

The way Andrew's shoulders fall might as well be a knife to my chest. I try to remind myself this is how I ended up watching those three Great Danes one weekend. I hate disappointing people.

“I’ll do anything,” he says.

“Dress up like an elf?” I raise an eyebrow and his smile almost undoes me. The man has a set of pearly whites I could get lost in. “I’m kidding. You could help me...”

His eyes widen and his smile vanishes. “Me? I don’t know the first thing about party planning.”

I shrug. “You seem somewhat intelligent, what with being a lawyer and all. I’m sure you can take instructions well enough.”

His eyes narrow at my sarcasm, and he brings his hand to the back of his neck, rubbing there. “I’m not like the two of you... I’m not a well full of ideas to make people enjoy themselves.”

I lean in close. “I wouldn’t want you for your mind, Andrew, just your muscle.” I touch his upper arm and, sure enough, he’s hiding a great body under that suit.

“My schedule is packed. With the holidays...”

Which reminds me. “Speaking of the holiday in question, why does Bethaney think you love Christmas? We both know that’s a lie.”

He cringes. “I may have alluded to loving it in order to get into her good graces. She leads my boss around by his dick and I need him to vote me in as partner.”

I nod. That makes more sense.

It’s then I realize I have some leverage. Not like it’s kept me up late at night, but Andrew’s dislike of Christmas has been bothering me. How can he hate a holiday that’s the majority of people in this country’s favorite? I can’t help but believe he’s missing out. And an idea pops into my head.

“I tell you what... I’ll do it under two conditions.” I hold up two fingers.

His hands drop to his sides. “Name them.”

“First, you agree to help me when necessary. I’m not going to put you in charge of ideas or execution, but I might need you to make follow-up calls or pick something up from a vendor. Who knows?”

He nods, a short, concise movement. “Done.”

“Second...” I pause, letting him know he’s not going to like this one. “You have to agree to let me take you to three holiday activities around the city and you have to attend them with an open mind. I’m determined to show you how great Christmas can be.”

“Why do you care so much whether I like Christmas or not?” His eyes search mine.

“I don’t really know,” I answer.

His deep-blue eyes meet my own, and neither of us looks away for a beat.

“It’s the only way I’ll agree to take on this party, which may or may not still end up being a disaster.” I put my hand out between us.

He heaves out a sigh and stares at my hand. He looks at me one more time. “Deal.” His hand slides into mine.

I take his hand and a small hum of electricity rushes up my arm. Ignoring my body’s physical reaction, I say, “I’ll let Bethaney know and I’ll be in touch.”

I turn and walk away, knowing I have my work cut out for me with both the party and in trying to turn around Andrew’s attitude about the good ol’ jolly of a man’s holiday.

Chapter Ten

ANDREW

I look away from my computer screen and massage the bridge of my nose. I've been over and over this case about three times today and still can't find anything that will help my client enforce the terms with their supplier. Another firm drafted the contract back when they signed it, and now it's up to me to find a way to hold our client's supplier's feet to the fire, but when you had them sign a shitty contract with a thousand loopholes, that's nearly impossible.

I glance at my watch and realize I was supposed to meet Finn for drinks down the street five minutes ago.

Shit.

Swiping my phone off my desk, I tap out a quick message to him.

Me: *Sorry, running late. Be there in ten.*

The message is marked read almost immediately, but he doesn't bother texting back.

I gather my things, put on my coat, and race out of the building. Since we're meeting right down the street, the halfway point between the buildings we work in, it doesn't take me long to get there.

Finn sits at the back of the cocktail bar fashioned with an old-school law office vibe. He's in one of two navy-blue

velvet chairs situated across from each other, a black marble table between them. He gives me a small wave, and I walk over, hanging my coat on a hook mounted on the wall before I sit. Now that I've met Kenzie, the resemblance between them is clear. They have the same big lips and blue eyes, but whereas Kenzie is fair with blonde hair, Finn's hair is light brown and his skin has a bit more of an olive tone.

"Sorry I'm late." I ditch the suit jacket and hang it over my coat before loosening my tie and rolling up my shirtsleeves.

"Nothing I'm not used to." He smirks.

And he's not offended. He knows just as well as me how easy it is to get sucked into work and lose track of time when your mind is going down a train of thought on a case.

"Ordered you an old-fashioned." He nods at the drink sitting in front of me. He holds his usual scotch.

"Thanks." I lift it toward him. "Cheers, mate."

"Cheers."

Our glasses clink, then we each take a sip.

"Where's Zahra tonight?" I ask. It's rare to find him without her these days.

"She headed into Brooklyn to visit her sister and her kids for the night."

I nod and lean back in my chair. "Things still going well for you two?"

If his smile is any indication, then he doesn't need to tell me they're going exceptionally well. "Things are great between us. Better than ever."

Ignoring the uncomfortable pinch in my chest, I smile. “Good to hear. So, what cases have you been working on lately? Anything interesting?”

We chat for a while about what we each have going on at work. I’m not a family law specialist, nor is he a contract specialist, but sometimes it helps to hear someone else’s ideas from outside of our specialty. Oftentimes, I find when you’re deep in it, you can overcomplicate matters, whereas someone on the outside sees things in simpler terms that are sometimes helpful.

After that, we chat about football, or soccer as he calls it. Back in law school, I managed to get him interested in the sport and we’d always take time away from studying to go to a pub on either Saturday or Sunday morning to watch a game.

We order another round of drinks, and after the waiter drops them off at our table, Finn lifts his toward me. He has a strange expression on his face that I can’t quite read. “I’d like to do another toast.”

“What for?”

“I plan to propose to her on Thanksgiving.” His grin would be infectious if he wasn’t talking about proposing.

“That’s... that’s great, man.” I sip my drink to push down the lump forming in my throat.

We clink glasses again and sip our drinks.

“There’s one other thing...” The way he trails off makes me think I might not like whatever he plans to say next. “I plan to propose to her at Thanksgiving and I know that you Brits don’t do the Thanksgiving thing, but I wanted to see if you’d come over and celebrate with us. I want everyone I care about there to mark the occasion.”

My stomach sours further, but I force a smile. “Yeah, sure. Of course, I’ll be there.”

“Awesome. You were my last ask. This is going to be perfect.”

“Who else will be joining us?”

“My parents will be in town, and my sister is going to be there too.”

When he mentions Kenzie, I realize this is my opening to tell him that I’ve not only met his sister, but gone on a date with her, will be pseudoworking with her, and have found myself agreeing to spend even more time with her so she can attempt the impossible task of making me like Christmas. Has really that much happened between Kenzie and me in this short of time?

I open my mouth to say something, but for whatever reason, the words die on my lips. I think it’s the guilt of whacking off to his sister’s image in my head more than a few times. I’m afraid he’ll see through me and see that even though his sister is my complete opposite in every way, something draws me to her.

So rather than confessing my sins, I say, “Sounds good.”

“You can’t say anything to anyone though. I want it to be a complete surprise to Zahra.”

I nod and take another sip of my drink to hide how uncomfortable I am.

“Who would you tell though, right? It’s not like you’ll be chatting with my parents or Mac before then.” He chuckles, and I join in with a fake one of my own.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I lean back and pull it from my pocket to see Kenzie's name on my screen with a notification that she's texted me, which only makes me feel like a bigger ass than I already do for hiding something from my best friend.

"Everything okay?" Finn asks.

I shove the phone back in my pocket. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"You just look kinda pale?"

I shake my head. "Just work stress. Nothing I can't handle."

We move on to other topics, but Kenzie continues to invade my mind. Sooner or later, I'll have to come clean to Finn.

Chapter Eleven

KENZIE

On Friday night, I texted Andrew to see if he wanted to meet up to go over some things for the party that I need his help with. Since my meeting with him and Bethaney, I've spent some time figuring out everything that needs to be addressed and assigning each task in order of priority.

We arranged to meet at a café because it's the midpoint between our homes. I figured a café on a Sunday afternoon was safe. It definitely didn't give off date or romance vibes.

At least for me.

I'm sure Andrew hasn't given me a second thought since I saw him earlier in the week, but I've found myself unable to stop thinking about him. He's like a pesky open tab in my brain that my hard drive refuses to shut down.

I arrived ten minutes early to ensure I wouldn't be late, and I raise my hand and wave to get his attention when I see him walk in the door. He wears a pair of dark jeans and a collared shirt with what I guess is a cashmere dark grey V-neck sweater over it, sans jacket. It's unseasonably warm today, so I opted for a sweater instead of a coat too.

Andrew makes his way over, and it doesn't escape my notice how a few nearby women turn their heads to watch. One blatantly stares at his ass. When I catch her eye, I raise an

eyebrow. She looks chagrined and instantly turns around. Mission accomplished, though I don't know why I found the need to be overprotective.

"Have you been waiting long?" he asks as he slides into his seat.

I always forget about his accent when we're apart, so upon first hearing it again today, it feels like warm honey being poured over my body.

"No, I was a little early." I push back my chair and stand. "What do you want to drink?"

"I'll get it." He starts to slide his own chair back to get up, but I raise my hand.

"I'm capable of getting us a couple of drinks. It's not like this is a date. What do you want?" I'm pretty sure I said the date thing more as a reminder to myself than for his benefit.

"Americano, please."

"Huh."

A line forms between his eyebrows. "You don't know what an Americano is?"

"I do. It just doesn't seem very British of you. Figured you'd order a tea."

"Well, I won't tell the monarchy if you don't," he deadpans, but there's a flicker of light in those stormy eyes that says he's well aware of how funny he's being.

I bring my hand to my chest in mock surprise. "Did you just make a joke? I didn't think you were capable."

He rolls his eyes, and without another word, I turn and walk over to the counter to order his Americano and my

caramel macchiato.

A few minutes later, I return with our drinks and slide his across the table.

“Thank you.” He nods.

“Don’t mention it.” I give him a small smile then lean to the side to grab my notebook from my bag. “Thanks for meeting me today.”

“I’ve been waiting for my marching orders.”

“Are you excited to find out what help I need from you?” I rub my hands together like some evil villain hatching a master plan.

“Not in the slightest.”

I chuckle and raise my cup to my lips, taking a small sip so I don’t burn my mouth. Even with the sip, I realize they gave me the wrong drink. When I look up, Andrew is staring at me. “What?”

“Why’d you make that face?”

My forehead wrinkles. “What face?”

“The one that looks like you just sipped water from the East River.”

“It’s nothing. They just gave me a café latte instead of a caramel macchiato.” I shrug.

“What’s the difference between the two?” he asks.

“Pretty much just the caramel.”

“Why don’t you go up there and ask her to fix it?”

I wave him off. “It’s not a big deal. She’s busy. I’ll just drink it. I probably don’t need the extra sugar anyway.” I smile

wide to show him it's okay, even though I miss the sweetness and flavor of the caramel.

“Kenzie, you should say something.”

I like the sound of my name when he says it with his accent. Probably a little too much.

“Like I said, it's not a big deal.” I take another sip to prove it then set down the cup. “Let's get started. We have a lot to go over.”

He presses his lips together but doesn't say anything, so I flip my notebook open to the page where I listed the phone calls I need him to make to track down supplies and see whether any caterers have availability the evening of the Christmas party.

I'm in the middle of explaining it to him when, without a word, he picks up my cup, then stands and bypasses the line, heading to the far end of the counter where the baristas are preparing other customers' drinks. Andrew says something to the girl behind the counter, and a couple of minutes later, he returns with a steaming cup and sets it gently in front of me.

“Continue,” he says, taking his seat across from me.

“Andrew. You didn't have to.”

“You ordered a caramel macchiato.”

“Why'd you do that?” I lift the new cup to my lips and take a sip, humming at the sweetness of the caramel flavor when it touches my tongue.

He stares at me with those storm-cloud eyes for a beat. “I got tired of watching you pretend to like the other one.”

“I told you it wasn't a big deal.” I set the drink on the table.

“Neither is going up there and asking them to make the order the way you originally intended—and paid for.”

I shrug and roll my eyes. “Thank you.”

He tilts his head, and it makes the light catch the grey streak at the front of his hair. God, he has such nice, full, wavy hair. Why is it always guys who get the features most women would die for? I clear my throat to begin talking about the caterers again when he interrupts. “Why do you have a problem standing up for yourself?”

“I don’t.” I feel my face screw up in confusion.

“I beg to differ. The same thing happened at the other restaurant with your steak, then here, and your neighbor clearly has you wrapped around her finger.”

“Mrs. Hoffmeister?”

“Yes, the woman pretends to be incapable of dusting, but she can drag herself out of her apartment to smoke?”

I wave away his concern. “She doesn’t mean anything by it. She’s just old and I think she’s a little lonely. Her husband passed away about a decade ago. It’s probably for the company.”

“Doesn’t mean she should be manipulating you into doing her house chores. If she’s lonely, she can have you over for coffee.” He leans back and crosses his arms.

“She’s not manipulating me.” For a moment, I forgot how annoying this man could be.

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“Okay then.”

“I mean it.” My voice sounds as if I’m ready to pound my foot down on the floor in true toddler fashion.

He raises his hands. “Forget I said anything.”

I give him a sharp nod and let the topic go, but the entire walk home, all I can think of is whether he’s right. I hate that I feel a nagging suspicion that there might be something to Andrew’s theory.

Chapter Twelve

ANDREW

“Are you going to tell me where we’re heading?” I ask as Kenzie leads me farther from our meeting spot at the southwest corner of Central Park.

This is one of her “not dates” for me to find the love of Christmas.

“Haven’t you ever heard that patience is a virtue?” She glances over her shoulder and my eyes fixate on her long blonde hair once again. Today it’s in waves.

“Not one I’m blessed with.”

It’s Friday night and the air is chillier than earlier in the week, so I’ve watched her nose and her cheeks turn pinker the longer we walk.

We take a right when we hit 6th Avenue, and soon after, Radio City Music Hall comes into view. I stop immediately.

It takes her a moment to notice, and when she does, she swivels around and frowns. “What’s wrong? Why did you stop?”

I nod toward the Radio City Music Hall sign. “Please tell me you’re not taking me to see the Rockettes.”

She crosses her arms and juts out her hips. I’m not sure why it’s sexy as hell when she’s annoyed with me. “Part of our

deal is that you go into this with an open mind.”

“It’s hard to have an open mind when I know I’m going to have to watch a bunch of women in sparkly costumes kick their legs in unison to the beat of Christmas music for the next two hours.” I’d rather spend the two hours in a prison cell.

Her hand digs into her purse and she pulls out her phone. “Should I text Bethaney and tell her that I can no longer do the party?” She arches an eyebrow.

I blow out a breath and groan. “Couldn’t you have eased me into all this holiday crap? Like maybe we just look at that big tree everyone is so enamored with?”

Her mouth drops open and she walks over to me. “I *am* starting off easy. I’m not even asking you to participate. You literally just have to sit there and observe. And just so you know, the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree doesn’t get lit until after Thanksgiving.”

This sounds like a special sort of torture, but I did make a deal with her and I’m not someone who goes back on his word. Hence why I haven’t told her of her brother’s plans to pop the question to Zahra on Thanksgiving. I haven’t even told her I’ll be there because I know it will only make her question why when I’ve never been to their holidays before, and I don’t get the impression that Kenzie is someone who gives up easily when there’s something she wants to get to the bottom of. No, I gather she’s more like a bloodhound following the scent of a trail.

“I’m texting her now.” She poises her phone with her thumbs on the screen.

I reach over and lower it. Both our hands are half-frozen, but there’s no denying the warmth that travels up my arm from

our point of contact. Except I do deny it, because this is Finn's baby sister, and he doesn't even know that we know each other.

"You win. I'll smack on a smile, but no promises of really enjoying myself." I point at her and she smiles.

"I'll take it."

I nod, and we continue walking and join the end of the line waiting to get into the iconic theater. In all the years I've lived in Manhattan, I've never attended anything here.

A giant Christmas tree on top of the marquee is lit up as though it's a lighthouse that alien spacecraft can probably see from space.

When we finally make our way inside, I have to admit, I'm impressed by the art deco architecture and decor.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Kenzie's gaze is skyward, and the wonder and awe on her face remind me of what a child's might hold on Christmas when they first see the presents under the tree and believe Santa brought them.

"Definitely impressive."

I look around our surroundings some more. A giant tree hangs from the ceiling and dangles down in the large lobby, draped in lights in such a way that it looks half like a chandelier and half like a Christmas tree. Lit wreaths line the walls, and the sporadically placed bars along the walls serve guests looking for a beverage.

"Do you want something to drink?" I ask Kenzie, who's still soaking in the atmosphere.

She drags her gaze away from the ceiling and looks at me. "Sure."

“Another eggnog monstrosity?”

She chuckles, and the sound reminds me of the wind chimes my gran used to have near her kitchen window. “Wine is fine. White please.” The challenging look on her face is a silent retort for the night we met, when I questioned her choice of wine.

“White it is. I’ll be right back.”

I push through the crowd. After waiting entirely too long to be served, I make my way back to Kenzie, who’s standing near the wall where I left her.

“Here you go.” I pass her the glass and she smiles, thanking me. “What made you decide on the Rockettes as your first attempt to win me over on the holidays?” I bring my wine to my lips and sip.

“It’s a good way to get into the Christmas mood this early in the season, and I go every year. Usually I drag my best friend, Tessa, along with me, so by taking you this year, she thanks you for sparing her.”

I chuckle. “Are you surrounded by people who hate the holidays?”

She gives me a sassy look. “Tessa likes Christmas just fine. She just doesn’t like seeing the same concert year after year.”

“Fair enough. So, what can I expect from tonight’s performance?”

Someone passes by and pushes me, forcing me to step into Kenzie’s space. She has nowhere to go because she’s against the wall, and for a moment, our eyes lock and we just breathe each other in. The air grows heavy in my lungs and my cock

stirs in my trousers. Stepping back from her takes effort, but I force myself to.

“Sorry,” I mumble and her gaze darts away from mine.

“It’s crowded in here. Should we go take our seats?” She looks vaguely uncomfortable.

I wonder if my desire for her is that transparent. The last thing I want is to make her feel uneasy in my presence. “Great idea. I’m going to end up with this wine all over me if we don’t.”

I trail behind her, and it takes us a few minutes to reach the doors of the theater. Kenzie shows the attendant the tickets on her phone, and she directs Kenzie toward our seats.

The first thing that surprises me is the size of the theater. It’s much bigger than I had imagined, and the dome-shaped ceiling is quite impressive. We make our way to about the midpoint in the theater and head into a row in the center section about a third of the way down. When we reach our seats, we take turns letting the other take off their jacket and get situated before we sit.

“I always try to get seats at least halfway back. I made the mistake of getting tickets right near the front my first year here, thinking those would be the best seats. I realized that you can’t take in the entire stage when you’re that close. So now I make sure I’m farther back.”

“Rookie mistake.”

She shrugs. “Pretty much.”

A few minutes later, Kenzie’s giving me an update on where she’s at with the firm’s holiday party when a very tall man sits in the seat directly in front of her. She doesn’t say anything, but I noticed her eyeing the man the entire way

down the aisle, and when he sat down in front of her, her lips tugged down a bit in the corners.

I lean in and say in a low voice, “Do you want to switch seats with me so you can see better?”

She turns to face me, not realizing how close I am to her. Our lips are only inches apart, and the flowery scent of her perfume amplifies the magnetic pull I feel toward her.

“Would you mind?” Her gaze is on my lips and not my eyes.

I clear my throat and pull back. “Not at all. I should be able to see over or at the least around him.”

We both stand and commence the awkward maneuver of getting around one another. I have a split second to decide whether we should face each other or whether I should turn around as we squeeze past each other. Kenzie makes the decision for me, turning away from me so that her ass grazes my front as she passes. I barely manage to stifle a groan.

Clearing my throat, I sit back down, and shortly after, the show starts. I only allow myself to glance at her once during every number because if I don't put a limit on it, I'm afraid I would spend the entire evening staring at her and not the stage.

Turns out Rockettes aren't that bad when I watch them through Kenzie's eyes.

Chapter Thirteen

KENZIE

“C’mon. Admit it. You kind of enjoyed yourself.” I elbow Andrew’s side once we’ve emerged from the crowd spilling out of the theater.

“It was somewhat entertaining.”

I laugh and roll my eyes. “Don’t worry, Andrew, I won’t tell anyone. I wouldn’t dare ruin the stiff upper lip lawyery persona you have going on.”

“I’m quite certain lawyery isn’t a word.”

“It’s my word.” I give him my cheesiest smile, and the corner of his lips tip up. He shakes his head and looks away.

I don’t know why it gives me so much joy to make this man smile.

We stop when we reach the next block and I turn to him. “I’m headed downtown so... I guess this is where we say our goodbyes.” I gesture in the general direction I’m heading in.

His forehead wrinkles. “I’ll see you home, Kenzie.”

“You didn’t see me here.” I raise an eyebrow.

“That’s only because I came straight from the office. Otherwise, I would have,” he says it with finality as though there’s no argument to be had.

And it's not that I won't enjoy his company or don't appreciate him making sure I arrive home okay, but being trapped beside him in the dark where our knees occasionally grazed each other's for two hours has made me feel like a strung bow, ready to snap.

"This isn't a date, Andrew. You don't need to be so chivalrous." Maybe reaffirming that this isn't a date will help ease some of the tension that's been building inside me all evening.

His lips press into a thin line. "I don't need the reminder. But like I said before, your brother would have my head if he knew I was with you and sent you on your way alone in the dark."

"My brother doesn't even know we know one another."

He looks mildly uncomfortable. "I'm walking you home. No arguments. Now, should we head to the tube?"

I study him for a beat and see no sign of him backing down, so I turn and head toward the nearest subway station. "To the tube, I guess."

Once again, he positions himself so that he's walking on the side of the sidewalk closest to the road.

I look at him. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Always walk on that side?"

We separate for a moment when a man having an argument with someone on the phone makes it clear he's not going to go around us, but through. Ah, New York.

When Andrew doesn't answer for a second, I look back at him, and he shrugs. "It's just proper etiquette. If a car veers off

the road or something, I'll take the brunt of the impact, thereby sparing you."

"You know, for a real grump, you're quite chivalrous."

He rolls his eyes, but I swear the color in his cheeks deepens to a further pink.

We reach the subway station and make it to the platform just as my train is pulling up, so we rush on and take the first two seats we find seated side by side. Oh great, more knee brushing.

Mentioning my brother has me curious about something, so I figure I'll ask Andrew. "I was talking to my brother last week and he mentioned that he's been seeing someone for a while. Have you met her?"

"Zahra?"

I nod.

"Yes, a few times." There must be some kind of reaction on my face because he says, "You haven't met her?" His brows furrow.

I shake my head. "I didn't even know Finn was dating someone special until he called to invite me to Thanksgiving dinner."

He studies me for a moment as though he's waiting for me to say something more. When I don't, an anxious expression flits across his face, but it's gone in an instant.

"What's she like?"

He contemplates his answer for a moment. "She's lovely. Smart, pretty. She seems to make your brother happy, from everything I've witnessed."

I nod, happy to know my brother has found someone. We sit in silence for a few minutes—or as silent as a New York City subway train can be on a Friday night—before he shifts to face me better.

“Is there a reason you didn’t know about Zahra until recently? I thought you and Finn were close?” His voice is filled with compassion as though he worries the words might be painful for me to hear.

Which in a way is true, but probably not for the reasons Andrew thinks.

“Finn and I... well, it’s complicated. We’re not that close. Not for any reason in particular. It’s probably a lot of things. The differences in our ages, our interests... in how we grew up.”

Andrew tilts his head as though encouraging me to go on, but I want to move on from this subject. It will burst the bubble of holiday joy the Rockettes cocooned me in.

When I don’t go on any further, he takes the hint and says, “Well, he always talks fondly of you. He’s very proud of you for making your own way here.”

I give him a sad sort of smile. The announcement for my stop comes on and we stand and walk over to the doors.

Once we’re on the street level again, I shift to the inside of the sidewalk, knowing he’s going to force me there anyway.

“Ah, you’re learning.” There’s a hint of amusement in his voice.

“I’m a quick study.”

“The practice came about because way back, people would throw their waste from the chamber pot straight out the

window. This way, men were much more likely to be covered in shit than the woman.”

I stop walking and stare at him for a moment. He stops and turns to face me.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Swear to God.” He chuckles.

“You should really refrain from telling any dates or girlfriends that in the future. It really feels much less romantic when feces are involved.”

He grins wryly. “Noted.”

We approach my building and I’m thankful that Mrs. Hoffmeister is nowhere to be seen. Early this week, she sent me to the corner store to grab her cigarettes and hemorrhoid cream. I thought of telling her I couldn’t go, but the truth is that it’s much easier for me to do it than it is for her. Even if she technically could do it herself.

When we reach my building, I turn to Andrew. “Thanks for seeing me home. Sorry it’s so out of the way.”

“I told you it’s no bother.”

We look at one another until I tear my gaze away when the invisible string between us feels as though it’s being pulled too taut. “I have a meeting with Bethaney next week. Maybe I’ll see you there?”

“Not if I can bloody well help it.”

I laugh and look back at him. “Well, thanks again.” I turn and take one step up the stairs.

“Kenzie.”

I turn back around. “Yeah?”

Being on the steps puts us much closer to eye level, and it's a little jarring at first to have our lips so closely lined up.

“I may not be a Christmas cheerleader at this point, but I enjoyed myself tonight. Thank you.”

The moment feels weighted in a way that a single thank you shouldn't. “You're welcome.” My voice is filled with something I can't make sense of.

He shoves his hands in his pockets, nods, and steps back, watching me walk up to the door. Once I've used my key to get inside the building, I turn and give him a small wave. Only then does he turn back toward the subway station.

I enjoyed myself this evening too. Even if I couldn't prove to Andrew how amazing the holidays can be, I still feel as though I accomplished something. I'm just not sure what.

Chapter Fourteen

ANDREW

A knock on my office door causes me to look up from the contract I'm reviewing. Darla stands there with her usual "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be doing" expression.

"Yes?" I lean back in my chair and stretch my back.

"Bethaney just called and says she'd like to see you in the conference room about the holiday party."

My shoulders sag. While the idea of seeing Kenzie again is appealing, poring over the details of the company holiday party I don't even want to attend does not.

"Tell her I'll be there in a minute."

Darla nods and retreats to her desk.

I haven't really spoken to Kenzie much since last Friday night when we were at the Rockettes. We've texted a few times regarding her task of calling what felt like every caterer in the city to see if they had availability for December 17th, but that's it. No mention of last Friday night, no mention of setting up our next get-together in her effort to make me like Christmas. I shouldn't be so eager to find out what she'll have us do next.

Maybe she needed a little distance in the same way I did. I know it wasn't a date, but tell that to my libido. I've had

Kenzie on the brain ever since.

The way her eyes sparkled as she watched the show, the youthful energy pouring out of her when she talked about coming to see them every year... the way her hair drapes over her breasts when she leaves it down and the way her tongue pokes out of her mouth a tiny bit when we're in close proximity like she either wants to lick them or draw in another breath.

I've never had a problem concentrating at work before, but all week my mind has floated to thoughts of her like a raft stuck in a current, unable to control the direction.

It's irritating as fuck.

Especially because of who it is. I mean, Kenzie and I could not be more different or ill-suited for one another, not to mention the issue of her being the baby sister of my best mate.

I stand from my desk and grab my suit jacket off the hook near the door, then make my way to the boardroom. When I arrive, Bethaney and Kenzie are seated in the same places as before and both turn in my direction.

"Hi, Andrew. Thanks for joining us." Bethaney smiles at me like a dog waiting for a treat from its master.

"No problem." I manage to keep the irritation from my voice. Once I've taken a seat across from her, I glance at Kenzie and nod in way of greeting.

I am wholly unprepared for the sight of her. She's seated, but I can see that she's wearing red, and it matches the exact shade of her lipstick. The arresting color makes her hair seem even more blonde than normal and makes her already blue eyes look the exact color of the sky on a clear day.

She smiles and gets started with the meeting, tackling her list of priorities and doing her best to put Bethaney in her place with her outrageous ideas, but in a way that seems to do good rather than harm.

Bethaney asks for my input a few times, but I manage to defer back to them without her picking up that I really could not care less. All I can think about is how I'll be working later than normal tonight because of my time spent in this meeting.

“Now, the food. Andrew was kind enough to call around to a list of caterers I've used before and can vouch for them being able to do the job and no one has any availability this close to the date, so I'd like to make a proposition.” Kenzie looks at Bethaney with a hopeful expression, but her face falls like a toddler's whose mum just told her she can't have any cake.

“That's the worst.”

“Well, I think I might have a solution. I know you weren't thrilled with the regular offerings at the event space, but I spoke to the St. Regis and since we're at a crossroads with Bethaney's menu to what St. Regis offers, they're willing to let you have some outside vendors come in and set up to serve during the party. So rather than having a sit-down formal dinner, the theme would be ‘Take a stroll down Main Street.’” Kenzie pulls out some rough sketches she's done of the event space with her idea integrated in, and I watch as she pitches the idea to Bethaney, who seems to relax the more Kenzie talks.

It's quite something to watch. Kenzie clearly has a passion for her work. It's not like I thought she couldn't put two brain cells together, but seeing her in her element showcases what

an intelligent and capable woman she is. Sadly, it's a fucking turn-on.

As if I needed another reason to want this woman.

"If you're on board with the idea," Kenzie continues, "this means we'd have to push the party start time by an hour and a half to make it clear this is a cocktail party and not a formal sit-down dinner, but with the money we'd save, we can get some holiday-themed ice sculptures done as the centerpiece for each table."

"You're a genius, Kenzie! I love it!" Bethaney's outburst takes the two of us by surprise and Kenzie actually startles in her chair. Bethaney claps like that monkey with the cymbals.

The smile her comment puts on Kenzie's face brings a warm feeling to my chest.

"Do you think everyone will like it, Andrew?" Bethaney looks at me, waiting for a response.

"Absolutely, I think it will be the best holiday party the firm has had."

Bethaney grins, and I resist the urge to wipe my lips from having them on her ass.

"Perfect," Kenzie says. "I'll get to work on securing all the vendors and making the arrangements with the hotel. Next week, we'll need to meet to finalize the rest of the decor."

"Can't wait. Now we're getting to all the pretty details." Bethaney swings her gaze in my direction. "I'd love your input on that, Andrew. I know you've been to all the other firm's parties and I want this to be the best one yet."

I have been to all the firm's holiday parties since I've been here, but if there was a gun to my temple, I couldn't tell you

what the decor looked like at any of them.

This is not what I say though. “Happy to help.”

As much as Bethaney’s overenthusiasm for everything grates on me, I can admit that I like the way her appreciation for everything Kenzie is doing seems to make her almost glow.

“I figured. I know how much you love Christmas like us.” Bethaney beams at me.

“Ho ho ho.” I hope my smile comes off as somewhat genuine. I glance across the table at Kenzie, who looks as though she’s hiding a laugh. “Well, if that’s all, ladies, I best get back to my office. I have some things I need to take care of before day’s end.” I push my chair back and stand. “Kenzie, I’ll walk you out.”

Kenzie packs up her things and we say our goodbyes before I lead her down the hall toward the bank of elevators.

“Good save in there with the Main Street idea.”

She looks over and smiles. It’s weird the way it makes her eyes sparkle. What’s even weirder is the fact that I notice. “Thanks. I’m actually really excited to bring the idea to life. I think it can turn out to be pretty amazing, and I’ve never seen anyone else do anything like it.”

“You’re ahead of your time.” We reach the elevators and I press the button.

She chuckles. “I don’t know about that.”

The elevator dings and arrives in no time, which almost never happens. For whatever reason, I feel reluctant to say goodbye to her. Maybe because we have no set day or time that I know I’m going to see her?

Am I imagining things, or does it seem like she's hesitant to leave too? She shifts her weight for a beat and stares up at me before stepping into the elevator.

"See you later," she says as the doors close.

"Yeah, see you."

The doors close completely, shutting off my view of her.

Whatever the reason that she's on my mind, I need to cut her out. I remember with vivid detail how much it hurts when you assume you know what the other person is thinking, only for it to turn out you were dead wrong.

Chapter Fifteen

KENZIE

The afternoon of Thanksgiving Day, I walk into my brother's shiny glass-and-chrome condo building, preparing to steel myself for what's to come—an entire afternoon and evening with my parents.

I love my parents, but it's been a long time since I've seen them and that was by design. Every time I leave them, I can't help but feel... less than. Not to mention the mental chore of having to listen to them go at each other when one pisses the other off, which always happens at some point.

So after my brother buzzes me in, I give myself a mental pep talk on the elevator ride up.

Despite my anxiety, I'm excited to meet my brother's girlfriend that he's been hiding. I just hope she's ready for the family dynamic.

I knock on the door of my brother's condo and hear some commotion behind the door before it swings open. My head rears back, and I blink a few times to make sense of what I'm seeing. Andrew is standing in the doorway.

Andrew. Not my brother.

What is *he* doing here?

“Um...” I stand there like an idiot, and before I say any actual intelligible words, my brother pops up beside him.

I haven't seen Andrew since our meeting at the firm earlier this week to pick out the decor for the party. He seemed distracted and colder than normal. More like the Andrew I met on the blind date. I chalked it up to work stress, but now I wonder if it's because he knew he'd see me here today. If so, why didn't he mention it?

"Hey, Mac. Come on in." Finn waves me in and gives me a hug once I'm inside. "I'm so glad you're here." He pulls away and takes in my face and must register my surprise. "Oh right, you haven't met Andrew yet. You must've wondered if you were at the right condo."

He laughs and I do my best to join in, though it sounds stilted and fake to my ears.

"Andrew, this is my baby sister, Mac. Mac, this is Andrew." He gestures to Andrew standing beside him, looking equal parts guilty and anxious.

Obviously, Andrew hasn't let on to my brother that we've met, let alone spent time together, and I can't help but wonder why since he's here and presumably knew I was coming.

I make the split-second decision to play along and stick out my hand toward him. "Call me Kenzie."

Relief washes over his features and he slips his hand in mine. "Good to meet you." He nods and squeezes my hand in what I take as thanks for playing along.

Then I turn to my brother. "And you can drop the baby part of the introduction when you introduce me to your girlfriend." I draw out the word girlfriend the way a kid might if they were teasing.

Finn rolls his eyes. When we hear the clicking of heels on the wood floor, we all turn in that direction.

Emerging from the kitchen is a beautiful black goddess. That's the only word I can think of to describe her. Her hair is short and pinned at the sides to make a sort of faux-hawk, and her deep-umber skin sets off her amber eyes and red lips that match the red silk jumpsuit she's wearing. She's gorgeous and I suddenly feel like a complete frump in the long-sleeve cotton tee and jeans I'm wearing.

“Speaking of...” Finn holds his arm out to welcome her to his side, and she moves into the space, locking herself there as though they're magnets. “Zahra, this is my sister, Mac.”

“It's wonderful to meet you. I've heard a lot about you.” She smiles wide and there's nothing fake about it. It's welcoming and honest and sets me at ease that the two of us can find a connection despite her glamorous appearance.

I glance at my brother with a look I know he'll interpret correctly—I wish I could say the same, but I only found out about her a few weeks ago—then smile at Zahra. “It's really great to finally meet you. Finn has been keeping you all to himself except for the fact that you're gorgeous, which you are.”

My brother relaxes. That's right, big bro, I can throw some brownie points your way.

Zahra sets her hand on his chest. “Well, that's always nice to hear.”

“Let me take your coat for you.”

I remove my jacket and my brother takes it while I hand the bottle of white wine to Zahra.

“I'll go put this in the spare bedroom,” Finn says with my coat in his hand.

“And I’ll go pour you a glass of this.” Zahra raises the wine bottle then heads into the kitchen, leaving Andrew and me alone.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper with a little more agitation in my voice than I intend.

“Your brother invited me.” He’s still acting cool toward me, for whatever reason.

“A little heads-up would have been nice.”

My brother returns from down the hall, preventing Andrew from answering. “Oh good, you two are getting to know each other. Let’s go sit.”

Finn leads us into his living room, that is exactly what you’d expect from a single Manhattan lawyer in his midthirties—black leather, chrome, giant flat-screen TV. I take a seat on one of the chairs facing the couch, and Andrew sits on the couch on the end farthest from me, while my brother sits on the end closest to me. Zahra returns with my wine in hand and passes it to me.

“Thank you.” I realize they must have been already sitting in these spots when Zahra sits between them and leans forward for her own glass of wine on the glass coffee table in front of her.

“When are you expecting Mom and Dad?” I ask Finn.

“Not until closer to dinner. They had some friends in the city they were stopping to see first.”

I nod and sip my wine, knowing I’m going to need to be tipsy at the very least to get through tonight. There are so many dynamics at play here that it’s hard to keep track.

“How’s work?” Finn asks.

My gaze flicks to Andrew, but when I find his eyes intently on me, I look back at my brother. “It’s good. Busy of course, because of the holidays coming up.”

“Finn said you do event planning?” Zahra says.

I nod. “It’s my own company, and I have a grand total of one employee.” I smile and thumb my chest. “But I love it. I contract out most of the work for an event, so I don’t really need anyone else at this point, but if I continue to grow, I can see bringing on an assistant or something. Someone to make follow-up calls, do the paperwork and billing.”

Zahra smiles. “You’ll have to give me a card before you leave. With the nature of my business, I have all kinds of people coming to the restaurants we work with for events. I can pass your name on, and maybe you can refer some of your clients to check out our spaces for their events, if you think it could work.”

I beam. “That would be great.”

My brother gives Zahra a chaste kiss.

Oh boy, he’s a goner. I can tell just from the way he’s looking at her all doe eyed.

When he pulls away, Finn looks at Andrew. “You guys have that big Christmas party at the firm every year, right? Maybe next year you can refer Mac for the job?”

Andrew had just taken a drink of his beer, and he sputters and coughs, leaning forward to set the beer on the coffee table. He thumps himself on his chest. “Wrong hatch,” he says with a strangled voice.

Finn looks at him quizzically, then shrugs, returning his attention to Zahra. “Want some help getting those apps

together? No sense waiting for my parents. They'll show when they show."

"I thought dinner was being catered?" I ask.

"It is, but Zahra insisted on doing something, so she made some appetizers. She likes to cook."

"Guess that comes in handy with my brother, since he's completely inept in the kitchen," I say.

She smiles and gets up from the couch. "It certainly helps."

Finn follows her into the kitchen, leaving Andrew and me in silence except for the football game on the television. We both pretend we're avid football fans, but I swear I feel his gaze on me.

"Everything okay?" Andrew says in a low voice, I'm assuming to keep my brother and Zahra from hearing.

"Mmmhmm." I don't look at him.

"Kenzie, I would have told you but..."

When he doesn't continue, I turn my attention toward him. "But what?"

He sighs and it makes his whole chest heave. Of course I can't help but notice the way his navy cashmere sweater stretches across his pecs. "I can't say. But you'll figure it out."

My eyes narrow. "What is that even supposed to mean?"

"Trust me." He holds my gaze, those storm clouds in his eyes swirling with emotion.

Despite myself, I nod. "Fine."

"Now, why else are you so grumpy today? That's usually my role in our relationship."

My brain stutters over the words “our relationship” even though I know he doesn’t mean them the way it’s implied.

“I’m not grumpy,” I argue. But the truth is I am, which is rare for me.

He gives me a pointed look.

“All right, I’m on edge about seeing my parents, and I feel like a sack of potatoes next to Zahra. I should’ve dressed up.” I frown and look down at my shirt with a cartoon turkey on it that says, “You only like me for my breasts.”

Andrew chuckles.

“I’m serious. She’s so glamorous and put together.” I gesture aimlessly toward the kitchen.

“MacKenzie, you couldn’t look bad if you tried. You always look stunning, poultry shirt or not.”

I don’t know if it’s his use of my full name or the entirety of his compliment, but my cheeks heat and a low throbbing sensation stirs between my legs.

Our eyes lock, then he opens his mouth to say something, but I don’t want him to take his words back, so I blurt, “Thank you.”

He nods.

“Here we are.” Zahra arrives from the kitchen with a tray of appetizers, and Finn follows with a second tray.

They smell delicious and my stomach growls, but luckily no one seems to notice.

“Looks wonderful, Zahra,” Andrew says.

“Dig in.” She gestures to the food as she and my brother retake their seats.

The four of us chat for a while before Finn invites Andrew to check out the new pinball game he put in his spare bedroom because my brother is basically a man-child.

I chat with Zahra in the living room and find out that she works in restaurant consultation—everything from concept and brand development to business plans and kitchen designs. It sounds pretty interesting, and I can tell that she loves her profession.

Twenty minutes into my getting to know my brother's girlfriend, there's a knock on the door and I hear my parents' muffled voices out in the hall. Most likely, already arguing.

Let the fun begin.

Chapter Sixteen

ANDREW

Finn and Kenzie's parents are not what I expected.

I've known Finn for a pretty long time, so of course he's talked about them, but I didn't expect them to command the amount of attention they have since joining us. It's like as soon as they entered, they sucked all the air out of the room, leaving little oxygen for the rest of us.

We're all seated at the dinner table, enjoying the catered meal, and I notice the way they inquire and show interest in Finn's life and job but ask very few questions of Kenzie. And when Kenzie's around them, she's different. Her light dimmed as though she was the sun and someone hung blackout drapes over her.

"Anyway, all that to say do not stay outside of town if you ever visit Zurich. It's just not worth it." Finn's mum, Katherine, finishes a story I was only half paying attention to.

"Noted," Finn says with a smile for them both.

"So, Finn, any interesting cases lately?" his dad, Gregory, asks.

Kenzie sits quietly, eating her meal, while Finn tells us about a divorce case where the wife is accusing her soon-to-be ex-husband of forging her signature on the prenuptial agreement.

When Finn is done, Gregory finally turns his attention to his daughter. “MacKenzie, what have you been up to?”

She stiffens and plasters on a fake-as-fuck smile. “The usual. Working a lot.” She shrugs as though she’d be happy to leave it at that.

“Getting any traction? Did you add a price list to your website like your mother and I suggested last time we spoke?”

She sets down her cutlery and rests her forearms on either side of her plate. “I told you, there is no price list. Each client and situation are unique. I meet with them first, hear their wish list and budget, then price the job.”

Gregory frowns. “Are you looking at the analytics and seeing how many people leave your site within a minute of being there? A lot of that traffic you’re losing is probably because you don’t have pricing. The more steps you make a potential customer go through to get the information they need, the greater the chance they’ll abandon you altogether.”

“Dad, it’s fine.” She picks her cutlery back up and stabs at her turkey.

“Your father is just trying to help, MacKenzie. No need to be so sensitive.”

Kenzie huffs. “I’m not being sensitive.” Another piece of turkey gets stabbed.

“You sure about that?” Katherine presses her lips into a thin line. “You don’t see your brother getting all upset when we ask him about his career.”

“No offense, Mom, but I’m not one of your consulting clients.” A green bean stabbed.

Her mum humphs. “Well, maybe you should be.”

Finn claps his hands. “Okay, anyone ready for a refill of wine? I’m going to grab another bottle from the kitchen.”

In unison, Kenzie, Zahra, and I raise our glasses.

Finn chuckles and walks into the kitchen. It’s silent around the table, other than the sound of forks and knives scraping against plates. When Finn returns, he’s holding a bottle of champagne and two champagne flutes.

The meal I just ate threatens to rush back up.

Finn sets the bottle and glasses on the table between his and Zahra’s seats.

“What’s this for?” she asks, eyebrows drawn in.

Rather than take his seat, Finn pushes his chair back a few feet and drops to his knee, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a glittering engagement ring. Zahra’s hand flies to her chest and she inhales deeply.

Despite wanting to look away, I force myself to watch as a good friend should.

“Zahra, I’ve never been happier than I have been since we met, and I don’t want to waste any time before I let you know that I want us to spend the rest of our lives together. Nothing could make me happier. Will you be my wife?”

I steal a glance at Kenzie and gone is the anxiety from earlier, replaced with a huge smile and a twinkle in her eye.

“Of course I will. Oh, Finn.” She wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him in.

The rest of us clap, and as soon as Finn has slipped the ring onto Zahra’s finger, Kenzie is the first to get out of her chair.

“Congratulations, you guys.” Kenzie pulls her brother in for a hug, then does the same to Zahra. When they separate, she takes Zahra’s hand to check out the ring, then looks over her shoulder at Finn. “Good job, brother.”

I have to swallow a couple of times before I’m able to stand and offer them my congratulations. My jaw is tight as I hug Finn and give him a few pats on the back. “Congratulations, mate.”

He pulls back with a smile wider than the English Channel.

I’m happy for my friend, but it’s hard not to remember when I was the one who thought he had the world at his feet.

I give Zahra my best wishes.

“I have to call my parents!” Zahra’s hand is pressed to her heart as though it’s beating too fast.

“Let’s video call them together from my computer,” Finn says.

“Perfect.” She kisses him square on the lips, then pulls away with her hand on his cheek.

My stomach revolts again, feeling as if it’s a towel being twisted and wrung dry.

“Would you mind if we join you?” Katherine asks. “We’ve not yet met your parents, and well, they are about to become family.”

Zahra looks pleased that Finn’s mum seems so eager to envelop her family into their own. The four of them head out of the living room and down the hall toward the office, leaving Kenzie and me by ourselves.

“I take it this is why my brother asked you to be here tonight?”

I turn around to face her. “Maybe it’s my charming personality?”

She rolls her eyes. “Please. A cobra has more charm than you.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Did you know about the proposal?”

I hear the hurt in her voice, as if she feels betrayed I didn’t tell her Finn’s plan for tonight.

I nod. “I did. But he swore me to secrecy.”

“And that’s why you didn’t give me a heads-up that you’d be here so we could get our stories straight before being in front of my brother?” She crosses her arms and juts her hip out to one side.

I know it’s an indication that she’s mad at me, but my cock doesn’t get the message because it stirs. “I knew if I told you I’d be here, you’d want to know why. Then I’d have to outright lie to you, or you’d get it out of me. Neither option seemed ideal.”

“You don’t think withholding information is the same as lying?”

I step closer to her. “I think what I did was the lesser of two evils.”

Her gaze roams my face for a beat. “For the record, I’m not upset that you didn’t tell me about the proposal. That I understand. But knowing that you’d be here would’ve been good so we could figure out how to deal with my brother.”

I push my hand through my hair. “Just figured it would be easier to pretend we didn’t already know each other. It’s less complicated that way.”

She steps toward me so only a few inches separate us. “Why? It’s not like there’s anything inappropriate going on between us, right?”

The way she looks at me... her words almost feel like a challenge.

I clear my throat. “Of course not.”

“Purely platonic.” Her voice is lower and breathier than normal.

“Right.” My voice holds a strangled tone.

Neither of us says anything for a few moments, our gazes locked.

“Want to tell me why you looked so uncomfortable when my brother was proposing to Zahra?”

I step back. “What are you talking about?” I try to sound casual and unaffected, but I’m not sure I succeed.

She takes another step toward me, undoing the distance I put between us. “It was obvious, Andrew. You looked like you were going to throw up the entire dinner all over your plate.”

Jesus, it’s annoying how well this woman can read me.

“I assure you you’re imagining things.” My voice growing sterner.

She shakes her head slowly. “I don’t think so. You looked more uncomfortable than you did when Bethaney asked you whether you thought her fiancé would prefer her to wear Mrs. Claus or reindeer lingerie on Christmas Eve.”

“I’m fine, Kenzie.” My clipped tone suggests she stop it.

She shrugs. “If you say so.”

Living through my most regrettable decision once was enough. The last thing I want to do is to recount it to Kenzie so that she can see firsthand what an idiot I was.

Chapter Seventeen

KENZIE

Once the video chat with Zahra's parents is complete, we all retreat to the living room for some after-dinner drinks.

I'm counting the minutes until I can leave. So far, I've managed to avoid any confrontation with my parents, and they've managed not to get into it with each other. But through my teenage years, I developed a keen sense of when things were about to go off the rails and I sense that the time is nearing.

My parents are outspoken, even on their best behavior, but alcohol loosens their tongues and diminishes what little filter they have. It's not that they have a drinking problem—lord knows they get into it all the time when they're sober too. But when alcohol is involved, it almost always devolves into a huge screaming match.

"Any idea where you think you'll get married?" my mom asks the happy couple.

Finn looks at Zahra. "I'm not picky. I'll marry Zahra wherever she wants."

I smile at the way Zahra looks at my brother. It's obvious to anyone within a few feet of them how much they love each other. I couldn't be happier. We may not be the closest siblings

in the world, but Finn has always been good to me and been there when I needed him. I want him to be happy.

“I don’t really know. I guess I’ll have to start researching places in the city.” She takes Finn’s hand. “Kenzie, would you be willing to be the event planner for our big day?”

I’m the furthest thing from the Grinch, but I swear my heart swells two sizes too big for my chest and I blink back the tingling in my eyes. “I would be honored.” I walk over to give them both a hug.

My mom’s gaze darts between them and me with a wary expression on her face.

I absolutely shouldn’t engage, but I ask the question anyway. “Is something wrong, Mom?”

“No... I was just wondering if it might be best if someone else acted as the event planner, that’s all. Someone more suited to handling such a big affair. Someone who doesn’t have a personal connection to the bride and groom.” Her fake serene smile chafes.

“They haven’t even made any decisions as to what kind of wedding they want. Why do you seem so sure I can’t handle it?” I somehow manage to keep my voice even.

“Every couple wants their wedding to be the biggest and best anyone has ever seen.” She looks at Finn and Zahra. “Isn’t that right?”

Zahra’s eyes are wide and it’s clear she doesn’t know what to say, but Finn is unfazed, used to this aspect of my relationship with my parents. “Mac can handle it, Mom.” He winks at me, and I know from experience that he’s thinking I should shrug off Mom’s comment. It’s just Mom being Mom.

“I don’t doubt your abilities, sweetie.” Her voice is placating, and it’s all I can do to keep my mouth shut. “I just want to make sure the day is perfect, and I don’t want you in over your head.”

I cross my arms and lean back in the chair, feeling like a petulant child. Even more so when I glance at Andrew, watching him bear witness to our little disagreement.

When I don’t say anything, she waves me off with a little shake of her head as though I’m the one being difficult and overdramatic. “Finn, have you considered having the wedding back home? We could do it at the country club. They just put an extension on and there’s a beautiful event room now.”

“Why would they want to do that, Katherine?” my dad questions.

She whips her head to look at him and narrows her eyes. “Why wouldn’t they consider it? It’s where he grew up. He has lots of memories there and the country club is beautiful. Not to mention it will cost a fraction of what a wedding in New York City will.”

My dad rolls his eyes, taking a sip of his drink. “They’ve built a life here for themselves. This is where they should get married.”

“Well, excuse me for wanting to explore all the options, Gregory. I guess that makes me a terrible mother.” She slams her wineglass down on the glass coffee table. Some of the wine sloshes over the rim, but by some miracle, the glass doesn’t break.

“Jesus Christ, Kath, you always do this.” My dad tosses back what’s left of his drink and sets his glass on the table as well.

“Do what?”

Their voices grow louder, and soon they’ll be outright screaming at each other. This is always how it starts—with some small slight that turns into something more.

“Try to bulldoze everyone into what you want. Just let the kids figure out what they want on their own.” He gestures to Finn and Zahra.

Zahra shifts uncomfortably and keeps glancing at Finn as though she’s not sure what to do.

“I do not do that! Even if I did, better that than to not give a shit. Do you think everything just comes together on its own, Greg?”

My chest feels as though it’s collapsing and putting pressure on my lungs. It’s a sensation I’m familiar with, and if I closed my eyes, I’d probably feel as though I was back in my bedroom in the house I grew up in. I hate that their arguing puts me right back there in the past. I feel like I’m a helpless teenager again, walking on eggshells whenever both my parents are home.

But I’m not helpless to do anything anymore. I’m a grown adult, and I don’t have to stay here to listen to this shit.

“I need some air.” I rush down the hall, find my coat on the bed in the guest room, and shove my arms through it, continuing up the hall as fast as possible and out the door without a backward glance.

The sound of my parents’ raised voices can be heard all the way down the hall. I stab the elevator button so hard I hurt the tip of my finger and wait there tapping my foot until it arrives. The silence on the way down is welcome, and I draw in deep

breaths to try to temper the adrenaline surging through my system.

When I reach the ground floor, I walk out of the lobby and brace myself against the cold wind, quickly zipping up my jacket. I didn't think to take my purse or my phone with me when I bolted, so there's nothing I can do but walk to burn off some of the irritation coating me like a thick layer of paint.

I decide to head right for no reason, and when I reach the corner and I'm about to cross the street, I hear my name called from behind. I turn to find Andrew running toward me.

“Kenzie, wait up!”

At the sight of him, my shoulders slump. I can't believe he witnessed what went down. Not only were my parents embarrassing, but so was my reaction.

He reaches me and scans my face. “Are you all right?”

The concern in his eyes makes me want to break down now that someone safe is here, but is Andrew safe?

“Me? What about you? You looked like you wanted to disappear when Finn was proposing to Zahra, yet you're insisting nothing is going on.”

His lips form a thin line. “I told you, I'm fine. I'm not the one who just ran away.”

“I'm fine.” I swipe at my eyes against the tears building.

“You're not fine. Now tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can help.” He touches my shoulder and gives it a squeeze.

“It's not a big deal.” I sniff and shove my hands in my pockets to make sure I don't reach for him. I'm dying to wrap my arms around him and have him pull me into his chest.

He tilts his head and waits.

After a few moments, I feel uncomfortable and spill my guts. “It’s hard for me to sit there and listen to my parents fighting... it brings me back to how I felt as a teenager, which as you may have guessed was not great.” I chuckle a hollow laugh. “Finn was always able to shrug off their fighting. Mind you, they didn’t go at it with the same intensity as they did after he left for college. My high school years were spent between feeling like a referee or an afterthought. Do you know they didn’t want me?”

I huff. “Nope. Even told me I was an accident once when I was younger because my mom was mad that I was sick and she couldn’t go out to some party they were supposed to attend.” I scoff and shake my head. “Do you know that I can’t count the number of times my parents altogether forgot to pick me up at a friend’s house, or after an extracurricular? It was mortifying to have to accept a ride from another parent while I made excuses for why my parents had forgotten me.”

Andrew’s hand, ungloved and cold from the weather, cups my cheek. “Sounds like a lot for a child to deal with.”

I shrug. “Other people had it worse.”

He steps closer, and the scent of his expensive cologne reaches me. “That doesn’t negate the fact that it was bad for you.”

“Maybe,” I mumble.

“I noticed the way they afford Finn more respect than they do you. You’re right to be upset. Especially after what your mum said about you planning your brother’s wedding.” The hand that was cupping my face is gone when he uses it to push back his hair and kind of just holds it there as if he’s frustrated.

“I’m used to it.” A frown tugs my lips.

“Well, you shouldn’t have to be.”

“I hate that their fighting still gets to me like that. And it just sucks feeling like you’re not good enough, you know?”

“Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.” Without warning, he pulls me into his body and wraps his arms around me, running his hand down my back.

I don’t pull away, even though I should because he does feel safe and with that comes fear. Plus, if my brother came out here right now, he’d demand to know what the hell is going on. Those things should matter, but in this moment, they don’t.

“What did you tell everyone when you left Finn’s?” I mumble into his chest.

“That I’d track you down and bring you back.” The deep rumble of his voice against my ear and cheek causes me to hug him tighter without giving it a second thought.

He must not mind though, because he returns the gesture, pressing me harder against him.

I refuse to think about how safe I feel in his arms. The last thing I need is to fall for my brother’s best friend, my sort-of client, and a man who despises everything I love.

Chapter Eighteen

ANDREW

The day after Thanksgiving, Kenzie texts me to meet her at the corner of W. 42nd Street and 5th Avenue at one o'clock for our second "make Andrew love Christmas" outing.

When we returned to Finn's condo after I tracked Kenzie down, things were awkward, but we all feigned ignorance and carried on with some of the most inane small talk I've ever made in my life.

Kenzie made her exit an hour later, and I used her leaving as my own segue to get the hell out of there shortly after.

Since it's cold today, I'm wearing a cream cable-knit sweater under my charcoal trench, dark denim paired with Blundstone boots I've worked in over the past few years and now fit me perfectly, and a scarf and leather gloves.

I opted against a woolly hat to preserve my hair in case the two of us grab a bite to eat after we're done with whatever Kenzie has planned. There's no way to not look like an eight-year-old boy with haphazard hair when you take off your hat after wearing it all day. I ignore why I would even care what Kenzie might think about my hair. Best not to examine that too hard.

And so, even though my ears are already cold as I wait for Kenzie to show, I suck it up.

A few minutes after I arrive, I spot Kenzie strolling up the sidewalk, smiling at everyone she passes. That might seem like nothing, but I assure you it's very un-New Yorker of her. Generally, people pass one another with zero recognition that the other person even exists.

When she's a few meters away, she spots me, and her smile grows even wider.

Heat blooms in my chest because there's no way a woman like Kenzie can give you the full power of her smile and it not affect you.

"Hey you." She gives me a small wave I can only refer to as cute.

"Hey." I examine her face for a moment and gone are any traces of the frustration and disappointment she displayed on Thanksgiving Day. It makes me happy to think that maybe I had a small part in that, since I tracked her down and spoke to her.

"Are you ready for our little adventure today? Are you feeling open to accepting the Christmas spirit into your heart?" Her hands, stretched out at her sides, come together over her heart.

I chuckle. "First let me see what kind of punny shirt you're wearing today?"

Her mouth drops open and she tilts her head. "What makes you think I'm wearing something like that?"

I lean forward a bit before I speak, hands still in my pocket. "Because I know you, Kenzie Montgomery. You can't help yourself."

She unbuttons her red coat and spreads it open wide. "You do know me apparently."

I look down at her evergreen knit sweater with a cream-colored gingerbread man on it and the words “Let’s Get Baked” written over the top.

My head tilts back and a full-bodied laugh leaves my lips. “I like it.” When I straighten, she’s looking at me kind of strange. “What?”

“Nothing. I’ve just never seen you laugh like that. You should do it more often.”

I’m unsure how to respond, but I don’t need to worry because she speaks again.

“Let’s go.” She walks, and I position myself on the street side, hustling to keep up with her.

“Where exactly are we going?”

She glances over and smiles. “Well, I figured if you’re like most men, you leave your holiday shopping until the last minute. Either that or you give a list to your assistant to take care of. I know how you feel about your assistant though, so not sure that’s a feasible option for you.”

“True enough.”

“I thought we could go ice skating, then take a walk through the holiday market.”

I groan. I haven’t been ice skating since I was a kid, and even then, I wasn’t any good at it.

“Nope. None of that.” She wraps her arms around my forearm and pulls me to a stop. With her finger pointed at me, I feel as if I’m being reprimanded. “You promised. It’s part of the deal. You have to go into it with an open mind.”

With the way she looks up at me with those big blue eyes, it’s a wonder anyone can ever say no to her.

My discomfort eases and I decide to play along even if I'm dreading the outing. "You're right. Sorry." I nod, and she smiles and releases my arm.

From there, we make our way to the ice rink that's been set up in the middle of the park. A giant Christmas tree is at the end closest to the main branch of the library, and an après ski lounge is on one side.

Though Kenzie got us tickets, we still end up having to wait in line.

"How's your week been? Before Thanksgiving, I mean," I ask her after we've been standing there for a while.

"Busy. Your firm's party is top of my mind, but I'm working on a smaller event for some clients I've worked with in the past. It's just a private Santa meet-and-greet for their kids and friends, but I want everything to be perfect. One of the wives was the first person to give me my break into high society party planning, and I don't want to disappoint her."

I knock her with my shoulder. "You won't."

"How can you be so sure?" She looks up at me as though she really needs to hear the answer, as though what I say matters.

I wonder if she's still rattled from what her mother said a couple of days ago.

So in an effort to get across how much I mean it, and not because my fingers are itching to touch her, I take her shoulders in my hands. "You forget that I've seen you in action. I know how focused, and capable, and committed you are to your clients. Whatever you put together will be perfect."

I'm not sure if it's the cold or my words, but her cheeks turn pink. "Thanks, Andrew. That means a lot... really it

does.”

I give her an awkward kind of smile and let my hands drop to my sides.

One of the attendants who has been working her way up the line holding a metal bucket in front of her reaches us. I lean forward to see what’s inside.

“Candy cane?” She smiles at us.

I raise my hands. “None for me, thanks.”

“Ooh, I’d love one.” Kenzie grabs one and gives the woman her thanks, then unwraps the candy and sticks it between her lips.

If my body’s reaction to seeing her red lips wrapped around a piece of candy is any indication, I’m in deep trouble. I shift my weight to hopefully hide that I’m trying to adjust my shaft that is now a half-chub in my jeans.

“You’re missing out.” She smiles around the mint stick.

All I can do is grunt before I turn around and face the direction the line is moving so that I don’t have to watch her suck on that thing anymore.

“Don’t be a grump. You promised.”

I don’t turn around when I answer her. “I know. I assure you, I’m not.”

Truth is, I’m enjoying myself *too* much.

Chapter Nineteen

KENZIE

I can barely catch my breath.

Watching what is normally a confident, capable, hot-as-hell man struggle to stay upright on the ice has to be God's way of evening the playing field for the rest of us.

True to his word, Andrew hasn't complained. But from the moment he put on the rented skates and we stepped out onto the ice, it's been obvious that he would rather be anywhere but here.

"Do you want me to get you one of those things the kids push around to help them learn how to skate?" I grin at him while a kid of about ten speeds by a little too close, causing Andrew's arms to flail before he regains his balance again.

Once he's no longer in danger of falling, he glares at me. "If you do, this deal is off, and I will absolutely start complaining."

I put up my hands and skate over to him. "Do you want to try actually skating again, rather than just standing in one spot? You'll get better if you give yourself a chance to find your balance."

He huffs out a sigh that frosts the air in front of him. "If you insist."

“I do. Just think of it like taking little steps, but don’t lift your feet. Just glide them forward.”

He nods and moves forward. Slowly at first. So slowly. I skate in front of him, facing him while I skate backward.

“You’re doing great.” I smack my mittened hands together to cheer him on and he looks at me from under his brows. “I’m serious.”

“I think I just saw one of the *Golden Girls* pass me.”

I laugh and check over my shoulder to make sure I’m not going to run into anyone. “Just keep going.”

With a look of frustration, he does. Slowly picking up speed and seeming to become a little more comfortable.

That is, until the same little boy who buzzed by him does so again, this time even closer than before. Andrew’s arms wheel around like a windmill before my own instincts kick in and I reach for him. But I’m not quick enough to save him. His feet slip out from under him, and I go sailing back with him.

We land with a thud on the ice, Andrew below and me on top.

“Are you okay?” he says as my face is mashed into his coat.

I raise my head and look down at him. When our eyes catch, we both laugh uncontrollably. Neither of us moves until it becomes obvious that I’m lying on top of him, my body pressed to his.

“I guess I should get up.” My voice is ragged.

“Sure, right.”

It's awkward as hell trying to get off of him with skates on. The last thing I want is to slice an important part. Once I'm standing, I offer a hand to Andrew, but he ignores it and manages to get himself upright.

"Had enough?" I ask.

"Good guess. I'm not sure my ass can take much more." He rubs one ass cheek with his gloved hand.

"Well, we don't want your ass taking any abuse. Let's get out of here."

We make our way off the ice and return the rental skates, then we venture off to the holiday market set up around the paths through the park. It's a European-inspired open-air market where all the vendors are in small glass huts and selling mostly handmade items.

"Do you mind if we grab some hot chocolate first? I'm chilly," I say.

"What's a Christmas market without hot chocolate, right?"

I nudge him with my shoulder. "Now you're getting it."

We approach the first food vendor who sells hot chocolate and wait in line for our turn to order. Once we've received ours, we stand off to the side, out of the way of traffic, to blow on them until they cool down enough to drink.

"Are you looking for anything particular while we're here?" Andrew asks.

"Not especially. I have a lot of my shopping already done." I take the lid off my drink and blow gently on the foam on top.

"Why does that not surprise me in the least?" He mockingly shakes his head and I roll my eyes in return.

“But if I see something I think a person would love, I’ll grab it.”

“I’ll bet you’re an excellent gift giver, aren’t you?”

I grin. “I may have been told that a time or two. How about you? Do you enjoy giving gifts or are you a Scrooge in that aspect too?” I wink so he knows I don’t really think he’s heartless and I’m just joking at this point.

He tries to take a sip of his hot chocolate but pulls back with a curse. “Damn it. That thing is bloody hot.”

“I told you it needed to cool off before we drank it.”

He ignores my retort and answers my previous question. “I’m indifferent to gift giving. You already know I think Christmas is overcommercialized. But I agree with the sentiment that if you find something you know someone else will love, it’s a good feeling to give it to them. I just don’t think you should be under any obligation to find something for someone. Why buy something for someone just so you can check it off a list, not because it was truly heartfelt?” He goes for another sip of his drink.

Has this man learned nothing?

“What are you going to get Darla for Christmas?”

He sighs. “I’d like to get her a lobotomy.”

“Andrew!” I laugh and smack him across the upper arm.

“Honestly, if you could see what I deal with day to day with her, you’d agree.”

I blow on my hot chocolate again then lean in to take a small sip. It’s better than it was, so I go for a full sip and put the lid back on top. The liquid is still piping hot, but doable. “Mmm, that’s so good.”

“You have a little...” Andrew points at his upper lip.

I use my tongue to try to get the chocolate off, but Andrew shakes his head, his eyes laser-focused on my mouth.

“Here.” He leans forward and uses his thumb to wipe the corner of my mouth.

The urge to open my mouth and wrap it around the tip of his thumb is overwhelming. I mean, what the hell?

“Thanks,” I say in a soft voice and look away. Eventually, once I compose myself, I give him a small smile. “Ready to go explore some shops?”

“Definitely.” He looks as eager as I am to forget what just happened.

We stroll aimlessly down the path between the small glass huts, popping into shops here and there until we come upon one that sells vintage Christmas decorations.

“Oh, we have to go in here.” Hot chocolates long since discarded, I pull Andrew into the glass hut to look around.

He chuckles, having grown used to my enthusiasm, I think.

After greeting the attendant, I look around, admiring the wares until I turn and see a green ceramic Christmas tree with lights on one of the tables.

My hand flies to my mouth. “Oh my god.”

“What’s wrong?” Andrew comes to my side.

Tears sting my eyes as a flood of memories wash over me.

“Kenzie, are you okay?” His voice is soft as though he’s afraid he might startle me.

I nod. “I’m okay. It’s just that this Christmas tree reminds me of my grandparents and the Christmas holidays I used to

spend with them.”

I finger one of the lights, remembering how my grandma would always let me stick them in every year when I arrived at their house.

“Your family spent Christmas with your grandparents?”

“No. Just me. My parents always wanted to travel and so did Finn, so after enough begging, they let me spend every holiday with my grandparents in Colorado from the time I was seven.”

The nostalgia is overwhelming and suddenly the space feels too small, too hot and confining.

“Let’s go.” I bolt out of the shop into the crush of people walking down the center of all the huts.

“Kenzie.” Andrew takes my upper arm and steers me off to the side so we’re out of the way, forcing me to stop. His gaze darts all over my face as though he’ll find some clue as to what my problem is. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, I’m fine.”

His lips form a thin line. “If you don’t want to talk about it, just say that. But don’t stand here and pretend you’re fine when you’re clearly not.”

This attitude of his is the first glimpse I’ve had in a long time of the Andrew I met that first night.

“That tree is really like one that my grandma used to have, only hers was white. She used to do her house up to the nines with holiday decor, and that tree was my absolute favorite of all of it. Seeing it just took me back, that’s all.”

Andrew looks at me to continue, so I do.

“They both passed away in a six-month span of each other a few years ago. Seeing such a stark reminder of my grandma just brought up some of the grief again, you know?”

He frowns and nods. “Do you have the tree now?”

I shake my head. “No, my parents went to Colorado to have all my grandparents’ stuff sorted after my grandma passed, and even though that’s the one thing I asked them to set aside for me, they forgot. It got donated or thrown away, they weren’t sure.”

His jaw hardens. “That’s bullshit.”

“Pretty much. It’s not like it would bring her back, but putting it out each Christmas would have been a nice reminder of her, you know?”

He nods.

“You already know how I felt growing up. The time I spent at my grandparents’ house was some of the happiest of my life. I always felt safe and accepted and loved there.”

“That’s why you love Christmas so much.” He says it more to himself than to me, but I nod anyway. He frowns, and the crease at the bridge of his nose deepens.

I study his face for a moment. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because now I feel like an even bigger asshole than I usually do.” He wraps one hand around the back of his neck and cringes.

“I’m not following.”

“I shit all over Christmas, tried to make you feel stupid about how much you loved it. Christ, you must’ve thought I was a right wanker.”

I smile softly. “You didn’t know. Besides, we’re past that, right?”

“I guess. I’m sorry.” He brings me in for a hug.

It takes me a second, but I wrap my arms around him and press my cheek to his chest. Even with his coat on, I can feel how hard his chest is underneath.

Even stranger than him hugging me is the fact that it doesn’t feel weird or awkward at all. In some strange way, it feels almost right.

Chapter Twenty

KENZIE

ME: *I'm here. Tell me what you want and I'll order it.*

The minute I sit down, I text Andrew since he should be right behind me.

I set the empty caramel macchiato mug on the table with a sigh, then tap the screen of my phone where it lies on the table in front of me, 7:26 p.m.

Andrew was supposed to meet me at seven o'clock to go over some things I need his help with for the firm's party. Nothing huge or anything, and truth be told, I probably could have fired it off in an email and that would have been fine, but after our time together at Bryant Park a few days ago... I don't know. Something felt as if it had shifted between us, changed somehow.

I mean, yes, he's still hot as hell. But he no longer felt like my brother's best friend the way he had when we'd first been spending time together. Now it feels as though we have our own thing, completely independent of his relationship with my brother.

The only problem is, I don't know what our thing is exactly.

Friends?

Quasi business associates?

Or something more...

It's hard to consider that last one. Because if I accept that I have feelings for Andrew, that means he'll be a big factor in my happiness, which scares me.

When I decided to use the dating app, I wanted to discover my soul mate, my other half. In my mind I'd go from indifferent to I love this man. Never would I have guessed I'd fall for a man over six feet, gorgeous but grumpy as all hell.

I decide to scroll through social media for a bit while I wait, but I grow bored. I look at the time again. Irritation pricks at my skin because I hate late people. Hello, I came dressed as an elf not to be late.

Seven forty-five p.m.

Okay, that's it. I'm texting him again.

Me: *Hey I'm here at the café. You still coming? Hope everything is all right.*

The message is delivered and stays that way for a few minutes. And yes, I know this because I keep checking.

No read status, no three blue dots, nothing. It's as though he's completely forgotten about me and the plans we made.

Anger twists in my belly. When the time flips over to eight o'clock and he's officially an hour late, I take my empty cup to the end of the counter to be washed. I return to the table, pack my things, and leave.

I grow more and more angry on the walk back to my apartment, to the point that unshed tears line my eyes. How does someone stand someone up without an explanation? Someone who forgets you even exist and that they had plans with you, that's who.

The once-familiar sensation of not being good enough causes me to blink back tears against the cold wind. Not even the sight of the first snowflake lightens my mood. I can't even muster up a smile for Mrs. Hoffmeister when I pass her bundled up in her coat, smoking on the steps of our building. I simply wave and walk past.

Once I'm in my apartment, I change into some comfy loungewear and decide to try to forget about Andrew. So what if he forgot about me? It doesn't matter. Who cares if he found me forgettable? Better I find out now than later what kind of person he is.

I make popcorn, snuggle in my bed, and turn on the Hallmark channel, wanting to get lost in a winter wonderland where people's problems always magically get sorted out. My phone rings a few minutes after I start the movie, but I ignore it. It doesn't matter who it is. I don't feel like talking to anyone.

About an hour later, there's a knock at my apartment door.

My forehead wrinkles as I take the fifteen steps from my bed to the door. Mrs. Hoffmeister probably needs something. I stand on my tiptoes and look through the peephole to find Andrew pacing in front of my door.

My stomach swoops down toward the floor like a soaring bird and I drop back down flat-footed. I hadn't expected him.

I startle at the second knock on the door.

"I know you're in there, Kenzie. Mrs. Hoffmeister told me you came home about an hour ago."

Damn Mrs. Hoffmeister, the busybody. See if I ever go to the corner store to buy her cigarettes again.

Without a word, I unlocked the dead bolt, the chain, and the door lock and swing the door open. When I pictured Andrew in my space—because yes, I certainly have daydreamed—I was always nervous about what he might think, knowing his place is bound to be much more impressive than my studio apartment. But in this moment, I don't give a shit what he thinks.

“I'm so sorry.” He rushes past me into my apartment, then turns to face me while I close and lock the door.

When I turn around, it's with a good amount of attitude on my face and in my body language—crossed arms and hip jutted out. I'm not impressed.

“I'm sorry, Kenz. There was an issue at work with one of my clients and I got caught on the phone with them for, like, an hour, then I had to sort something out immediately. I lost track of time.”

I will not like the fact that he's shortened my name into a nickname of sorts. I will not. So rather than swoon over it, I narrow my eyes. “I texted you.”

“I know, I'm sorry.” He pushes his hands through his hair. “I had it on silent because I was in a meeting earlier with some of the partners and I forgot to switch it back.”

I mean, that makes sense. But still, I feel like an idiot. I thought... oh, it doesn't matter what I thought. “Still... you totally forgot about our plans. How am I not going to be upset about it?”

Part of me feels as if maybe I'm putting some of my own baggage onto Andrew and overreacting, but any way you cut it, standing me up was rude and disrespectful.

He steps up and squeezes my shoulders with both hands. “You deserve to be upset. I can’t apologize enough.”

I stare up at him and I can see his sincerity. Some of the ire leaves my body. At least he feels bad. Unlike my parents, when they forgot about me time and time again when I was younger. They’d always act as though I was overreacting and brush it off. Andrew is taking responsibility and apologizing for his actions.

“It’s fine. Just don’t do it again.”

“You have my word.” He holds his right hand up in the Boy Scout salute.

I can’t help but chuckle. “Do they even have Boy Scouts in England?”

He shrugs. “We have Scouts. You Americans always think you have everything.” He lets his other hand drop from my shoulder. “Do you forgive me?”

My shoulders slump. “Well, put it this way... my birthday is next month, and I’ll be lucky if either of my parents even remembers to send me a text about it. So, your error wasn’t as egregious as theirs.”

He cocks his head to the side. “When is your birthday?”

“On the tenth.” I wave it off. “That’s not the point. My point is that I know I had a right to be upset, but I may have taken some of my own shit out on you. For that, I’m sorry.”

“I can’t believe you.”

My forehead wrinkles. “What?”

“I’m in the wrong, but somehow you find a reason to apologize to me.” He steps closer to me and cups my face.

All the air leaves my lungs in one giant whoosh, because the feel of his palm on my cheek sends tingles straight down my throat to my abdomen and between my thighs.

“You’re always thinking of others and putting them first, which is amazing, but don’t forget to stand up for yourself.” He steps even closer, and now I can feel the fabric of his coat brush against the cotton hoodie I’m wearing. “You’re an amazing woman, Kenz.”

There it is. That shortened version of my name again.

He tilts his head down and we stand there, breathing each other in, on the precipice of something more.

I feel as though I’m standing at the edge of a cliff with a parachute on, looking down into a cavernous void, wanting to take the dive, feel the adrenaline and excitement of the free fall, but worried my parachute will fail and I’ll plummet to the ground.

My breathing grows erratic as the hand in my cheek slides around to the back of my head and he leans in. The scent of his cologne swirls around us, and when he tightens his grip in my hair and presses his lips to mine, I give in completely. I have no thoughts about whether this is the right thing to do, the smart thing to do, or whether it will lead to pain down the road. No, I give in completely, and when his tongue finds the seam of my lips, I open and hand myself over to him.

He groans when our tongues meet, and I slide my arms around his waist, clutching him to me while he kisses me slowly, thoroughly, as though he’s savoring the moment. Andrew’s hand in my hair grips tighter as he deepens the kiss and steps into me. Because his jacket is open, I feel the swell of his cock pressed against my stomach and it makes me moan.

The evidence of his arousal, coupled with my own undoing when he gently coasts his hand up my waist, over my breast, and holds my chin while he finishes the kiss, causes wetness between my thighs. When he pulls back, he continues to hold my face, angling it toward his while he stares at me with heavy-lidded eyes.

We're both breathing heavily as we take the other in. Then he lets his hand drop from my face. This is the moment of truth where he'll either take it back or push forward. I hold my breath and wait.

Chapter Twenty-One

ANDREW

“I’ve been wanting to do that for a very long time,” I say and feel her energy shift from tense to relaxed.

“So have I.” Her voice is as soft as cashmere.

I drop my hand and rest my forehead on hers.

I’ve crossed a line I can’t come back from. I know it, but it’s hard to feel guilty about it when she looks at me as if I’m her world.

Still, I can do right by Finn by making sure I don’t hurt Kenzie. If I’m honest, I’m worried about myself too. I once thought I knew exactly what the other person was thinking and feeling for me, and look how wrong I turned out to be. Clearly, I can’t rely on my own judgment.

I step back and shove my hands in my pockets, determined to keep them off Kenzie until we’ve had a conversation. “If it’s not obvious, I’m attracted to you.”

Her smile makes her eyes sparkle. “I’m attracted to you as well.”

“But I want to make sure we go about this in the right way. It’s not like I’d want to hurt you either way, but I feel beholden to your brother to do right by you. So, before we do anything... more—and I’m not saying that you want to or

anything, I'm just putting it out there—I think maybe we should date for a bit. See what happens?"

I hold my breath to gauge her reaction. I hope she doesn't take it as rejection because that's not how I mean it at all. If I listened to my loins, I'd have her naked and pressed up against the wall in a heartbeat.

With a very small smile, she tilts her head. "I'm on board with that. But I do have one request."

I nod. "All right, let's hear it."

"I don't want my brother to know anything is going on between us." When I frown, she raises her hand. "I know I gave you the gears about Thanksgiving, but we were platonic then. Now it's different. I just don't want the pressure of his expectations weighing on us."

A long breath flows out of my mouth. I didn't feel good about keeping it from Finn before, but now that I'll be dating his sister, not telling him feels like an even bigger betrayal.

"Please?" She raises her hands into a prayer pose. "I'm not saying we're never going to tell him, but why don't we see how things go and take it from there?"

I reluctantly nod. "Yeah, okay. If that's what you want."

Kenzie steps toward me. "Does that mean we can kiss again now that we've gotten that out of the way?"

I wrap my arms around her and draw her in. "Damn straight."

When I bring my lips down to hers, she wraps her arms around my neck. Our kisses start off slow but become more heated until I pull away once my cock is stiff and pushing into her stomach.

“It might be harder to take things slow, don’t you think?” she says, her gaze dipping between my legs.

I chuckle and adjust myself. “Yeah, I’m getting that.”

The amusement in her eyes causes a warm sensation to spread through my chest.

“Did you want to stay and watch a movie with me?” She gestures behind me, and I turn.

Her apartment is small and absolutely loaded with holiday decor. There’s a Christmas tree against the wall between the kitchen and the living room/bedroom and another smaller one on the modest-sized kitchen island. She has garland strung from one corner of the room to the other and strands of Christmas lights hang across the window, giving the room a warm glow.

I swallow hard when I see the bed, the TV on the wall across from it. I turn back to look at her. “No couch?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. It was a pull-out couch or a bed, and since I rarely have anyone here, I opted for the bed. Figured a comfortable sleep was more important than comfortable TV viewing.”

“What are you watching?”

She gives me a duh look. “A Christmas movie of course.”

I smile. “Right. Should’ve guessed.”

“Well, will you stay?”

She sounds oddly vulnerable, and I nod even though I know once I’m sitting next to her on a bed, it’ll be a struggle to back up the words I just said. My cock is sure to have other things on the agenda besides viewing a holiday movie.

We situate ourselves on the bed, both of us leaning against the headboard, my arm wrapped around Kenzie and her leaning into my chest. Something about it feels so right to me, and of course that spurs a panic because it's still a struggle to trust my own judgment when it comes to love and relationships. Which is probably why I haven't been in a relationship with anyone since Audrey and I split.

I do my best to push the thoughts of my past from my mind, not wanting to ruin this moment or chance with Kenzie. In a lot of ways, cuddling with her like this without her knowing all the doubts that are swirling through my brain feels disingenuous.

After about twenty minutes, I'm able to get out of my head and enjoy the movie, even if I wish it were an action flick and not a Hallmark movie.

* * *

Kenzie and I meet down the street from Saks Fifth Avenue. We plan to watch the light show on the outside of the building, then take a walk to see some of the Christmas windows the high-end department stores have put together. This is her third and final attempt to show me what I'm missing about Christmas.

I spot Kenzie rushing toward me through the crowd. She has on a grey coat with an ivory hat and matching scarf and gloves. "I'm so sorry I'm late."

I glance at my watch. "You're a minute late. Nothing to worry about."

She places a quick kiss on my lips. "You know I hate being late."

All I can do is nod. I know most of that comes from her relationship with her parents and always feeling like an afterthought. There's nothing I can do to change that, but I can be the person who shows her that she isn't at all an afterthought. In fact, I feel as though she's all I can think about these days.

"I know. You ready to do this?"

She nods enthusiastically then takes my hand and we walk down the street. After a few steps, I realize how much I've missed feeling like one half of a whole. Missed the things you do with someone you care about without thinking about it—the kiss on the lips when you first see them again, the handholding, the texts throughout the day just checking in.

"How was work today?" she asks.

"The usual. Darla is completely inept, and I had to pick up the slack."

She chuckles and squeezes my hand.

"How about you? How's that party you're working on going? The one with the Santa visit for all the kids." I look over and see that she's smiling.

"It's going well. That family is so great to work for. Things are really coming together."

"That's great." We walk in silence for a bit, but it's comfortable and not at all awkward, until we reach the crowd that's gathered outside Saks.

"Have you ever watched the show before?" she asks once we find a good spot to watch before it starts up again.

I shake my head. "I mean, I've ridden past in a cab before but never really paid it much attention. If I'm honest, I think I

probably thought, ‘What are these people doing here wasting their time watching a bunch of lights?’” I cringe.

Kenzie’s laugh rings out in the crisp night air and it sounds musical. “Well, you’re about to find out.”

No sooner has she finished speaking than the first note rings out. Different parts of the exterior of the building light up with the different notes until it becomes clear the lights form the shape of a castle with icicles dangling overtop. The lights change color and move with the beat of the music. It keeps building and building until the music crescendos and there’s a big finale, after which the crowd cheers and claps their approval.

Once a lot of the crowd has departed, Kenzie turns to me. “So, what did you think?”

“It’s quite impressive.” She frowns, and I chuckle. “What? I said it was impressive.”

She places her hand over my heart. “Didn’t it give you that warm, hopeful feeling inside like everything is possible and everything will be all right?”

Damn it. The way she’s looking at me with such hope in her eyes makes me wish I could tell her it did. But I don’t want to lie to her.

“Not really.” I cringe.

She rolls her eyes playfully. “Let’s go look at some Christmas windows and see if that will do the trick.”

She takes my hand, and we cross the street over to Saks and walk around, discovering more Christmas cheer that’s supposed to kick-start my pathetic heart into loving the holiday.

But none of them makes me feel anything more than being with Kenzie already does. My heart has been kick-started, it just has nothing to do with Christmas.

Chapter Twenty-Two

KENZIE

My nose is frozen and starting to run and my feet are growing numb because of how long we've been outside walking around. Still, I don't want our night to end.

Ever since the first kiss we shared, all I want to do is spend time with Andrew. Which seems crazy given my first impression of him. But since I've gotten to know him, I've discovered a different side to him. He's not the pompous, difficult asshole I once thought he was.

Oh sure, he can be that at times, but it's not the whole of who he is.

"I don't know about you, but I'm freezing," he says.

"Same."

To my delight, it doesn't seem as if he wants the night to end either. "I was wondering... since we're not that far from my place... any chance you want to head back there for some hot chocolate?" He grips the back of his neck in what I think is a nervous gesture, which I find charming.

"How can I resist an invitation for hot chocolate?"

He smiles and takes my hand again. He lives in Lenox Hill, so we make our way to the Upper East Side, chatting along the way. His building looks to be built prewar and has a charm that my brother's doesn't. We make our way inside and

head up to the top level where he unlocks his apartment and motions for me to enter ahead of him.

I don't know what I expected—I guess something along the lines of my brother's place—but this certainly isn't it. Rich wood floors set in a herringbone pattern lead from the foyer into the main living area, where a fireplace with a gorgeous carved wood mantel is the centerpiece of the room. The furniture, a mix of cabinets and the art on the wall—I'm surprised he even has any—is fairly eclectic as well. The vibe is comfortable, a little moody and cozy. Though some of the furniture pieces lean toward traditional, there's nothing stuffy about the way it's presented. It definitely feels like the kind of place you could kick up your feet and relax after a long day.

“This is really nice, Andrew. How long have you lived here?” I turn around to look at where he still stands in the entryway, watching me soak in his place.

“About three years. It needed a fair amount of work when I got it, so it was a project the first couple of years.”

“Job well done.”

“Thanks.” He walks over to me. “Can I take your coat?”

I pull off my mittens and my hat, then unwind my scarf, unbutton my coat and slip it off, and hand it all to him.

“I'm going to hang all this up and then turn on the kettle. Be right back. Make yourself at home.”

I smile and watch him put all my belongings in the closet in the foyer, then he disappears into a doorway just outside the living area. I do a sweep of the room, walking in a circle around all the furniture to check out the view out of the window. This late in the day, it's a bunch of twinkling lights breaking up the darkness below.

The built-in bookcase surrounding the TV mounted to the wall is filled with thrillers, and it's clear which are his favorites because the spines are cracked and worn as if he's gone back to reread them a thousand times.

Andrew returns a few minutes later with a tray, and when he sets it on the coffee table, I grin. I walk over to take a seat on the couch.

"I wasn't sure what you like, so when I went to the store earlier this week, I grabbed a bunch of different kinds. Let's see, I've got regular hot chocolate, white hot chocolate, gingerbread hot chocolate, candy cane hot chocolate, truffle hot chocolate, and rainbow hot chocolate, whatever that is. Pick your poison."

My cheeks hurt from smiling while inspecting the assortment of hot chocolate and marshmallows of different shapes and sizes, a can of whipped cream and some chocolate stir sticks. I feel incredibly special that he went to so much trouble.

"I'm going to go with the regular hot chocolate, please."

"A traditionalist. I like it. I'll do the same."

He opens the packages and pours the powder into the mugs on the tray, then he tips the hot water from the kettle into the mugs before stirring each one. "I wasn't sure what kind of toppings you like on yours, so I got a bunch."

I reach for some of the small, white marshmallows and drop them in my mug. He leaves his without any toppings.

"Want to see what Christmas movies are on?" he asks.

I stare at him over my hot chocolate mug. "Have I brought you over to the dark side?" I lean back into the couch and blow on my drink.

“I’m not sure I’d go that far, but I figure that’d be your preference and I aim to please.”

Part of me is disappointed I haven’t been able to make him fall in love with Christmas, but I still think I’ve softened him to the idea. This might be a marathon and not a sprint. The man I met on our blind date would not have put together a spread of hot chocolates and offered to watch a holiday movie. Baby steps, but steps forward just the same.

“Well, I’ll never turn down a Christmas movie. But you pick this time.”

“All right.” He lifts the remote off the table and scrolls the stations for a few minutes before he settles on *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*, which probably ranks at the top of my list of all-time favorite holiday comedy movies.

Once we’re both done enjoying our hot chocolates, I cuddle up to where he’s seated in the corner. His arm wraps around me and drapes over my shoulders, his hand hanging near my upper arm where he aimlessly lets his thumb rub the cotton of my shirt. There’s nothing innately sexy about the movement, but with each pass of his thumb, it feels as if he’s running it over a raw nerve that makes me want to press my thighs together. My breathing picks up and my breasts grow heavy.

I know Andrew said he wants to hold off on progressing physically with each other, but man oh man, he’s making it difficult. With this one gentle touch, it feels as if he’s mercilessly teasing me. That, coupled with the scent of his heady cologne and the feel of his hard chest against my cheek, has long since stolen my attention away from Clark Griswold.

The tension in my body grows tighter and tighter until I feel as if I’m a rubber band that’s been stretched to its limit. I

tilt my head back and look up at Andrew. As though he feels my gaze on him, he looks down and our eyes find one another's. Only seconds pass before our lips meet.

I guess I'm not the only one strung tight with the sexual tension between us. Our kiss is deep and desperate.

He tastes sweet like hot chocolate, and he devours me with his kiss. I grow wet between my thighs and my nipples pebble. A soft moan escapes me, and it must be his undoing because he grabs my waist with both hands and hoists me up and over so that I'm straddling him.

The feel of the hard ridge of his cock in his pants causes me to grind down onto him. He lets out a growl and his tongue glides up the side of my neck to my earlobe.

"Meant to tell you when you took your coat off earlier, love the shirt."

Not what I was expecting him to say, but I smile. I was thinking of him when I put on my shirt that says, "When I think about you, I touch my elf." A cartoon elf at the very bottom hem hangs in front of my pussy.

"I thought you might." I try to keep my voice even, but it comes out weak and breathy as he bites my earlobe.

"Mind if I take it off?" He leans back and meets my gaze, waiting for approval.

I nod. I know it's not what we talked about, but I'm horny and all the reasons he talked about waiting don't matter right now.

He takes the hem of my shirt and lifts it over my head in one swoop, leaving me in my white lace bra and black leggings. My stomach fizzes with nerves as his gaze roams my

body, but it's clear he likes what he sees when I feel his dick grow even stiffer underneath me.

Andrew leans in, capturing my nipple with his mouth and running his tongue over the lace. It's just enough to give me an idea of what it would feel like if I wasn't wearing my bra, but not enough to satisfy me. He does the same thing to the other breast, and my hands push into his hair and tug. I need more.

As though he can read my mind, he undoes my bra, sliding the straps down my arms and tossing the lace aside. He squeezes and holds the weight of my tits in his palms. His thumbs rub over the nipples a few times, making them stiffer, then he pinches each and squeezes. The sensation is both pleasure and pain and my head whips back.

I feel his mouth on my right nipple while his hand explores my other breast. I look down as he worships my tits. There's something übererotic about just being the observer while he pleasures me. My breathing picks up until I'm panting.

"Andrew," I moan, expecting what, I don't know. All I know is I don't want this to end.

His fingers rub my mound over my leggings. Instinctively, I grind down on his hand, desperate for more friction.

"You like that?" He meets my gaze, waiting for my answer.

I nod, words too complex for my brain to figure out right now.

While still holding my gaze, he moves his hand away and I whimper from the loss. But he snakes his hand down past the elastic waist of my leggings to my mound.

He wastes no time spreading me, groaning when he feels how wet I am. "This all for me?"

Again, I can only nod. He grins a self-satisfied smile, and though that same grin probably would've pissed me off the night we met, right now it holds the kind of promise I'm looking for—like he knows he's already earned it.

He pushes one finger into me, then another and curves them. My hands tighten in his hair as the sensation rockets through my core and radiates outward.

I assume he's going to continue, but instead, he drags his fingers out of me and brings his hand to my breast, rubbing his wet fingers over my nipples and spreading my essence there. Then he moves in and sucks hard on one, then the other.

When he pulls back, he looks up at me and licks his lips as though he's savoring the taste of me. "You taste so fucking sweet, Kenz. A man could get addicted."

It's a strange juxtaposition to hear his posh English accent say such dirty things, but I like it. No, I love it and I want more of it.

His hand goes back down into my leggings, and this time when he pushes his fingers into me, he scissors them and drags them out. One hand stays in his hair but my other goes to his shoulder and grips hard. He does the motion again, and I feel his muscles move in his shoulder each time he pulls out of me.

Andrew adds his thumb to the mix, circling it over my clit while he's inside me. His gaze goes from roaming my face for a reaction to looking down at where his hand disappears into the dark fabric of my leggings. He picks up the pace and takes my nipple between his teeth.

I cry out as the tension grows more taut until I'm panting on the edge of release.

The sound of him fucking me with his fingers is obnoxiously loud but somehow not embarrassing. No, it's a fucking turn-on how wet I am for him, how wet he makes me.

With every stroke of his fingers against my G-spot, I inch closer to release, and when he presses harder on my clit with his thumb, it's as though he's hit the detonator and I explode.

My fingers dig into him as I cry out and spasms cause my body to jerk uncontrollably. Bliss radiates out of every pore and I'm buzzing until my orgasm recedes as he coaxes me down gently with the flutter of his fingers against my clit.

I sit there, eyes closed, while I wait to regulate my breathing. When I open my eyes, Andrew is watching me with heavy lids. He slips his hand free of my leggings and brings his hand to his mouth, licking his fingers without a word or one ounce of self-consciousness.

Before either of us can say anything, his phone rings from where it rests on the arm of the couch beside us. One glance at the screen has me cringing.

"It's your brother."

I nod. Talk about a bucket of ice water being thrown on an inferno. The energy shifts, and sensing that this is the end of any further intimacy between us, I shift to the side and slide off of Andrew's lap.

Andrew lets the call go to voice mail and adjusts his length in his pants with a small wince. Whether it's because he's so hard it's painful and he knows the moment has passed or that my brother in essence interrupted what was absolutely going to be the first time we slept together, I can't be sure.

Suddenly I feel self-conscious, so I stand and find my bra, putting it on as quickly as possible, then grab my shirt and pull

it over my head. “I should probably go. It’s getting late.”

“Kenzie—” He stands from the couch and pushes a hand through his hair.

I raise my hand to cut him off. “You don’t have to say anything.”

“Yes, I do.” He steps forward and grips my shoulders, giving them a small squeeze. “I know I said I didn’t want to move forward physically until we knew for sure that we could make this work. I’m sorry.”

I can’t help but scowl at him. “Andrew, I don’t regret what just happened. Do you?”

He shakes his head. “Not at all. It just must be confusing that I say one thing and do another. I’m usually a man of my word.”

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips and I run my fingers through the streak of gray at the front of his hairline. “I don’t regret anything. Except for the fact that my brother called.”

He chuckles and wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest. “Good, neither do I.”

I nod. Enough said.

“Can I see you home?” he asks.

My head tilts and I frown. “Absolutely not. I can make it home fine on my own. Before you came along, I was able to fend for myself, believe it or not.”

He shakes his head. “Can I at least wait with you until you get on the tube?”

I huff, knowing he won’t give in until he gets his way. “Sure.”

He kisses the end of my nose before going to retrieve our jackets.

When we make it back out onto the street, I swear everything has an extra sparkly quality to it.

Must be Christmas magic.

Chapter Twenty-Three

ANDREW

I call Finn back the following morning, partly because it was late by the time I made it back to my apartment, but mostly because as soon as I got home, I went into the shower and rubbed one out thinking of Kenzie and the way she tasted and felt and looked earlier that night.

It's official—I'm a goner.

I'm a total simp for this woman. At this point, I'd probably enter a gingerbread-house-making competition and dress up as Santa if she asked me to.

The days at work used to fly by and I wouldn't give a second thought to staying at the office until seven or eight o'clock. Now though, the minutes drag by because I'm counting down until I can see Kenzie again. It's as if time stands still when I'm at my desk.

Still, I'm trying my best to save that last little piece of me for myself. I've only once given another woman everything and look what happened there. I still don't quite understand it.

And tonight, I have to wait even longer to see Kenzie because I'm meeting Finn after work. Something I would normally look forward to, but tonight, not so much, considering I was fingers deep in his sister the night before and he's none the wiser.

I understand why Kenzie wants to keep our relationship between us for the time being. Her relationship with her family is complicated, and relationships, as a rule, are messy. I'm not sure what Finn's reaction will be if/when he finds out, but there's no sense in risking either of our relationships with him until we know we stand a chance of being together.

I leave work on time and meet him at the usual place. I find him at our usual table and see that he's ordered my usual drink.

Jesus, are we that predictable?

"How's it going?" I take the seat across from him, pick up my glass, and take a sip of my drink, hoping it will calm some of my nerves.

It's not until I take a seat that I wonder if perhaps Finn knows something about Kenzie and me. Why else would he say he has to talk to me about something and ask to meet up as soon as possible?

"Good, man. You?" He arches an eyebrow. Is it just me or does it seem like he's looking at me funny?

I clear my throat and set down my glass. "The usual. So... what's this all about? Why did you want to meet? Don't leave me in suspense." My smile feels strained and I hope Finn doesn't notice.

"Cutting right to the chase, huh?" He eyes me for an uncomfortably long moment and all my muscles grow tense. "I want you to be my best man."

A rush of air leaves my lungs, and my body relaxes. "What?" I'm a little stunned. "For real?"

"Yeah, man. So, what do you say?" He smiles.

“Of course I will.” I stand and we give each other a bro hug and I slap him on the back.

“I didn’t want to just call you on the phone or ask you via text, you know?”

I nod and take my seat again. “I’m honored, Finn. Thanks.”

We grab our drinks and cheers before taking a sip.

“Any idea when the big day will be?” I ask.

“We’re thinking in the spring. It’ll be tight to pull it all together, but we don’t want to wait long. Zahra’s a few years younger than me, but neither of us is exactly young and we want to start a family, you know?”

I don’t, but I nod anyway. “You’re having it here in New York?”

He nods while swallowing his drink. “Zahra’s going to reach out to Mac this week about booking a meeting with her to get started on the wedding plans.”

My smile slips a bit at the mention of his sister, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

We catch up with each other, and when it’s time to part, I offer him my congratulations again before heading to the tube to take it down to his sister’s place. Jesus, I feel like such a wanker.

When I reach Kenzie’s building about a half hour later, I head inside and up the stairs to her floor, where I knock on her apartment door. There’s no answer. As I’m wondering where she is, my phone vibrates in my coat pocket, so I pull it out, thinking maybe it’s from her.

But no, it's from my mother. In the message preview, I don't like what I see, so I open the message to be sure I understand correctly.

Mom: *Your dad and I will be in Montreal for his work. Thought we'd take the opportunity to visit our favorite son. Maybe we can meet in the middle? I found a charming place in upstate New York. Wouldn't that be ideal over the hustle and bustle of Manhattan? Already booked you a room!*

There's a link to some kind of resort. I don't bother to open the link, knowing that with my mother, what's done is done. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission and all that.

My shoulders slump and I sigh.

“Oh no. Did he know something?”

I whip around at the sound of Kenzie's voice. I didn't even hear her approach.

“Where were you?”

She thumbs behind her. “Mrs. Hoffmeister called and asked if I could run to the corner store to grab her some smokes. Sorry, thought I'd be back before you.”

I step back so she can unlock the door, and I follow her inside.

“So did he know anything?” she asks as soon as the door closes behind me. I'd told her about my meet-up with her brother and that I was concerned about what he might want to talk about.

“No, he asked me to be his best man.”

She beams. “That's great.” Her smile drops. “That doesn't explain why you looked so miserable out in the hallway though. What's going on?”

I step past her and push a hand through my hair. “My parents are coming to visit.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

I turn to face her. “Not completely, no. We get along fine, it’s just... it’s complicated.”

She frowns. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not especially, no.”

Kenzie wraps her arms around my neck. “Do you guys not get along?”

“Like I said, it’s complicated. And they want to meet in upstate New York at some resort. Which means an entire weekend together.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

My eyes widen. “You’d do that?”

She lifts one shoulder. “I mean, you did have to suffer through a Thanksgiving meal with my parents where I ran off angry, so I suppose I could.”

Having Kenzie there will definitely make things more bearable, and it might even keep my parents off my back.

“Wait. It’s next weekend though. Saturday is your birthday. You should be here, celebrating with Tessa and your brother and whoever else.”

She waves me off. “Andrew Wainwright, if you haven’t figured out that there’s no one I’d rather hang out with on my birthday than you, I don’t know what to do with you. Besides, it’s my twenty-eighth birthday, not a milestone or anything.”

I press my lips to hers. This woman is phenomenal.

Our kiss deepens until I pull back, because I haven't actually answered her yet. "I'd love it if you came with me, thank you."

"Just remember you said that the next time you have to spend a few hours with my parents and they start fighting."

I like the way she talks as though it's inevitable that will be a reality. It means she sees us having a future, right?

Chapter Twenty-Four

KENZIE

The week leading up to my weekend away with Andrew goes by in a flash. We don't have much time to see each other because we're both slammed with work, trying to get it wrapped up before we leave Friday at lunch.

Andrew rented a car to drive us to the resort, and I'm packed and waiting in the small foyer of my building for him to pick me up when my phone dings.

Tessa: *You'd better get some dick this weekend otherwise I'll be personally offended that you ditched me for your birthday.*

I laugh and the sound echoes in the enclosed space.

Tessa was upset that I wouldn't be around for my birthday, especially because it falls on a Saturday this year, so we went out for drinks earlier in the week. I told her what's going on with Andrew and she was mortified we hadn't slept together. Even more so when I told her it was at his insistence.

Me: *Who knows. But I came prepared in case.*

She responds immediately.

Tessa: *No maybe. Make it happen sista. Big British D for the win!*

I shake my head and slide my phone back into my purse.

A few minutes later, a white luxury SUV pulls up to the curb outside my building and Andrew climbs out of the vehicle. I start down the steps with my small suitcase, and Andrew rushes to grab it from me.

“I’ll take this.” He gives me a quick kiss then hurries to take the suitcase to the back and put it inside.

I understand why he’s hurrying. The wind is cutting, so I rush to the SUV and get inside. The heated seat has already been turned on and I relax into it.

Andrew joins me a few seconds later. “Have everything you need?”

I nod. I’m jittery and a little nervous. This is our first weekend away and a weekend away feels like a big deal for a couple, no matter how long they’ve been seeing each other. We’ve only been together for a couple of weeks. I hope I’m not going to discover some weird habits of Andrew’s that will turn me off.

I push away those thoughts, determined to enjoy myself and my time with him. I’m curious to meet his parents, see the two people who raised this man I’m falling for.

We drive for a couple of hours, chatting and passing the time, taking turns on who gets to choose the song on the radio, before it begins to snow. It’s not too bad at first, but then it really picks up.

I checked the weather before we left, and it said there was a chance of snow, but it wasn’t supposed to be substantial. The final hour of our drive ends up taking two hours because of how slowly Andrew has to drive to keep the SUV on the road.

My nerves are shot and my knuckles ache from squeezing my hands into fists on my lap, but I’m proud of myself for

keeping my mouth shut and not telling him how to drive. I know my dad always hates when my mom says anything about his driving. To be fair, Andrew did a fantastic job.

He pulls the SUV down the long drive through snow-covered pine trees and parks in the roundabout at the front of the log cabin resort. The building is pretty huge and very posh. I can tell just by the greenery displays and garland hung along the front porch that spans the width of the building.

An attendant goes to greet Andrew at the driver's side, and Andrew passes him the keys while the attendant assures him our bags will be brought to our room as soon as we're checked in.

Andrew walks around the front of the SUV and holds his hand out for me. "Ready?"

I nod and we make our way up the steps. They've been shoveled, but it's snowing so hard that it doesn't matter, so Andrew helps me up the steps, ensuring I don't fall.

When we step inside the resort lobby, it's like I've stepped into a Christmas movie. It smells like a mixture of cinnamon and gingerbread, and there's a large two-sided stone fireplace in the middle of the room. The floors are some type of dark stone tile, and oversized antler chandeliers hang from the ceiling. A decorated Christmas tree that's at least fifteen feet high is set up in the far corner, and the same garland I noticed outside hangs over the fireplace and drapes across the reception desk.

"This is so beautiful," I whisper.

Andrew smiles at me and leads me to the woman behind the reception desk. I think he might be nervous to see his parents, though I don't think it's because I'll be meeting them.

He just doesn't seem totally comfortable with them or something. I'm not exactly sure, but I intend to figure it out on this trip.

"Welcome. Glad to see you made it here okay. I heard the roads are pretty bad," Sarah, as her name tag states, says.

"Could be better." Andrew digs into his coat for his wallet.

"Do you have a reservation?" Sarah asks.

"Yes, it should be under Andrew Wainwright." He pulls his photo ID and credit card from his wallet and slides them over.

"Thank you." She types something into the computer, then looks back up at us. "Your room is all ready. You'll be on the third floor with a view of the lake."

"Terrific." Andrew accepts his cards back from the woman and returns them to his wallet.

She does a few more things then passes us the keys for the room. "Wi-Fi password is on the sticker inside the holder. Dining room closes at ten p.m. every night, and the bar closes at midnight. If you need anything during your stay, please don't hesitate to let us know."

We head to the elevator and take it up to the third floor.

Andrew uses the card to unlock our room's door and I step inside. It's certainly the nicest hotel room I've ever stayed in. In a lot of ways, it reminds me of Andrew's apartment—there's a lot of wood furniture and a mix of fabrics. In one corner of the room is a fireplace with two armchairs angled toward it and a table between them. It's the perfect place to cozy up with a book and some hot chocolate.

The room has some Christmas decorations too—garland on the fireplace and a medium-sized tree in the other corner of

the room. A door in the middle of the far wall leads to the bathroom, I assume.

“This is really nice.” I look over my shoulder at Andrew, who’s looking past me, mouth set in a thin line. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s only one bed.” He pushes a hand through his hair like I’ve noticed he does when he’s stressed or frustrated. “My mum booked the room. I didn’t even think of the fact that she would have only booked one bed. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, Andrew. We’re both adults.” I chuckle and set my purse on the end of the bed then walk over to him. “I mean... I was sort of hoping we’d only need one bed on this little trip anyway.” I go on my tippy-toes and bring my mouth to his, wrapping my arms around his neck.

He returns the kiss then forces himself to step away. “I’m trying to be a gentleman, Kenzie, and you’re making it rather difficult.”

“Maybe I don’t want you to be a gentleman. Maybe I think they’re overrated?” My voice is coaxing and low.

“Jesus, woman.”

Before he can say anything else, there’s a knock at the door. It’s the porter with our luggage, and he brings it into the room. Andrew tips him when he leaves, then turns to face me with his hands on his hips.

“So... what should we do?” My tone makes it clear that what I want to do involves the two of us being naked.

“I’d really love a shower after that stressful drive. Do you want to go first?”

I shake my head. “I’m going to unpack before all my clothes get wrinkled. You go ahead.”

He nods and walks over to where the porter left his luggage.

“When are you expecting your parents to arrive?” I have to admit, I’m nervous. I haven’t even asked Andrew what he’s told his parents about me. Do they think I’m his girlfriend, his friend... something in between, which is probably closest to the truth?

Andrew glances at his watch. “I’m surprised I haven’t heard from them yet. Any minute, I suppose.”

“All right, well, you shower and then I’ll freshen up.”

“Right.” He takes his things into the bathroom and closes the door. I think I might hear the door lock click into place, which means he’s really taking this whole gentlemanly thing seriously.

I get to work unpacking and settling in. When I go to check the view from the big window to the right of the fireplace, I can’t make out the lake because of how hard the snow is falling. Deciding to enjoy this peaceful moment, I sit in one of the chairs by the fireplace, relax, and watch the snowfall.

It feels like being in a Christmas movie. The setting couldn’t be more perfect.

I hear the water from the shower stop and I do my best not to think about the fact that Andrew is naked behind the door and what he looks like. My libido doesn’t get the message though. Try as I might, I’m still trying to picture what he might be doing behind that door. The faucet goes on and off a

couple of times and I wonder if perhaps he's shaving. I noticed he wasn't his usual clean-cut self when he picked me up.

I picture him wrapped in a white towel, shirtless, beads of water running down his muscular chest, and leaning in to drag the razor over his face. I've always thought there's something innately sexy about watching a man shave.

The shrill ring of a phone startles me from my thoughts. I look at the small table beside the chair and realize it's not my phone. It must be Andrew's.

I can't really make out what he's saying as he's talking low, but he's put the call on speaker. I hear a woman with a posh English accent speaking, though I can only make out a few words of each sentence.

But then he must come closer to the door with the phone in his hand because I very clearly hear his mother say, "It's been so long... and after what happened with Audrey..."

"I do not want to discuss Audrey, and if you do ever meet Kenzie, you are not to bring her up. Understood?" His voice is clipped and clearly irritated. He really doesn't want to talk about Audrey, whoever that is.

But what I know is that if he doesn't want to talk about her, she's exactly what we need to discuss.

Chapter Twenty-Five

ANDREW

I hit End on the call and push my hand through my wet hair, staring at the floor for a minute before there's a soft knock on the bathroom door. I clear my throat and shake out some of the tension in my body before I open the door to find Kenzie with a hesitant expression.

"Is everything okay? You've been in there a while." She presses her lips together.

"That was my mum. She and my dad got caught in this storm and had to stop at the first place they found. I guess it's even worse north of here."

She frowns. "They're not coming?"

I shake my head. "Not unless, by some miracle, this storm stops and all the snow is cleared by morning."

If I'm honest, I'm relieved. It's not that I don't want Kenzie to meet my parents. It's just that they come with a lot of baggage, and after my mom's comment about Audrey, I know it's better, at least for where Kenzie and I are at with our relationship—just starting out—that she doesn't meet them.

If Kenzie and I go the distance, there's plenty of time to talk about Audrey.

"I'm sorry. You must be disappointed. We came all this way."

I step into her, loosely wrapping my arms around her waist. “It’s not all bad. It just means I get you to myself for the weekend.”

Her eyes dilate the smallest amount before I kiss her. She brings her hand to my chest and moans when she feels my bare skin. The heat of her palm feels like a branding iron, but instead of wanting to retreat, I want her to press harder.

I deepen the kiss, and my cock hardens under the towel, threatening to poke through the slit. I’m supposed to be at least attempting to be a gentleman, so what the fuck am I doing? I’m one swift tug on my towel and a jerk of her knickers away from shoving inside her.

I force myself to close the kiss and pull away, staring at her. She’s so beautiful, so open with her feelings and warm heart. I can tell exactly what she’s feeling when she looks at me with those sky-blue eyes of hers. That’s what it feels like when she looks at me the way she is now, like a ray of sunshine is warming my skin.

“Guess we have the rest of the day to ourselves. Why don’t I get dressed and we can go check out the rest of the resort? Sound good?”

She nods. “Sure, if that’s what you want to do.”

I give her a strained smile because no, most assuredly it is not what I want to do. But I won’t play around with Finn’s little sister. I have to be sure before we sleep together, even if I did fuck up the other night at my place.

I return to the bathroom and change into the clothes I brought in with me, then join her in the bedroom.

Kenzie’s leaning against the frame of the large window beside the fireplace, watching the falling snow. She doesn’t

turn to me when she speaks. “Andrew, who is Audrey? I heard your mom mention something about her when she called.”

I stick to the spot in shock and stare at her. I wasn’t expecting this. Not at all. And I’m in no way prepared to relive the most difficult time of my life when I’m supposed to be getting to know Kenzie and enjoying my time with her.

“Were you eavesdropping?” I immediately regret my snide tone, but Audrey’s name coming out of Kenzie’s mouth just feels wrong. It doesn’t matter who it is. The mention of Audrey gets my back up and makes me feel defensive, like an idiot. Hell, like the idiot I was.

She scowls at me. “You had your phone on speaker and I heard it.”

My face falls. I need to resist the urge to lash out and be an asshole to her just because she wants to talk about something I’ve now made very clear with my reaction is a big deal. “Why don’t we head to the bar and grab a drink, and I can tell you about it?”

My chest tightens. Since I arrived in America, I haven’t discussed what went down with anyone. Not even Finn knows. I wasn’t eager to bring those memories over here with me. In fact, I left London in big part to get away from them, but I suppose in trying to outrun them, I’ve grown tired and allowed them to catch up with me.

The rational part of me knows that if I want this to work with Kenzie, I need to be open with her, let her understand who I am and why I am the way I am. But being that open with someone again scares the shit out of me.

I can only hope that my gut instinct is right about Kenzie, even if it was so wrong about Audrey all those years ago.

* * *

We settle at a table in the corner of the bar, beside a window.

After the waitress brings us each a pint, Kenzie looks expectantly at me.

I bring the pint glass to my lips, hoping for a drop of liquid courage to get this started. “Audrey was my girlfriend back in university.”

There. The first sentence is out, and rather than the feeling of a dagger to the heart as I was expecting, I feel more like weight is being lifted off my chest, as though I can breathe a little easier knowing I’m going to do this.

Kenzie nods at me to continue.

“We started dating our freshmen year of university, and we were pretty inseparable. I had my plan—mark at the top of my class to get into a good law school. She was taking English lit and wanted to be a teacher. The two of us were from posh upper-class families and I don’t want to sound cocky or conceited when I say this, but we were sort of known around campus as the *it* couple.”

“You? Come off as cocky? Never.” Kenzie smiles.

The bit of humor in her tone relaxes me further and I press on. “Audrey was the first girl I ever loved, and I fell hard. Things between us were easy. We didn’t really ever disagree on anything, and for the most part, we were completely compatible. So... in December of our final year at university, I decided to propose to her. I thought it was the perfect time of year for such an event.”

Kenzie's mouth falls open, but she recovers quickly, picking up her pint and taking a sip.

"It was extravagant. I was so excited that I wanted everyone in our lives there to bear witness to our joyous event. And I mean everyone—my parents, some of the family members I'm closest with, all our friends, her parents. I got everyone together under the guise of it being a graduation dinner for us. Reserved a spot at the poshest restaurant in London, asked my mother if I could have my grandmother's ring to propose with, and got ready for the big day."

As though she can sense this is the part of the story where things take a turn, she takes my hand that rests beside the glass.

"My plan was to take her onto the dance floor, and in the middle of our song, I'd get down on my knee and propose. Which I did... except instead of being met with the excitement I expected, she pulled her hand away and stepped back." My stomach sinks and turns over as I picture the expression on her face in that moment and my dawning horror that my proposal wasn't going as planned. "Everyone was watching, knowing that was the moment I was going to pop the question. Instead of applause, there was a sort of collective gasp. Audrey started crying, and when I looked around, everyone had their phones out, filming. I remember thinking how they were all going to have a record of the worst moment of my life in their pockets when they left that night."

Kenzie squeezes my hand, drawing me from my thoughts. "I'm so sorry, Andrew. That must have been incredibly difficult."

I push my free hand through my hair. "You have no idea. I mean, I was so sure. So sure. It didn't even cross my mind that

she'd say no. We'd talked about our future so many times and she'd never given any indication that anything was amiss or that she wasn't on board. I was completely blindsided."

"Did she give you a reason she couldn't marry you?" Her voice is gentle.

"Nothing specific, no. She just said she'd thought it was what she wanted, but in the moment, when I was down on my knee, pouring out my feelings to her and asking her to be my wife, it just felt wrong. Said she didn't know she felt that way until I'd asked the question."

Kenzie cringes. "That's rough."

I frown and nod. "Yeah. And then besides being dumped and losing the woman I loved, everyone I cared for and respected was there to see the whole humiliation."

The corners of Kenzie's lips turn down and she squeezes my hand again. "I'm sure everyone felt terrible for you."

I let a caustic laugh slip out. "Of course they did. You should've seen the pity in their eyes. It was mortifying. I don't know what was worse: that night when everyone felt sorry for me, or a few days later when they all started to act as if it wasn't a big deal, told me to brush it off, get on with my life. Said I was better for it and I'd find someone else. Everyone wanted me to have a stiff upper lip. Meanwhile, I was heartbroken and in pain. The future I'd planned, counted on, and could see with such clarity had vanished."

My chest tightens as I think about how difficult that time in my life was. Not only was I dealing with a breakup, but everyone had borne witness to my failure.

"What did you do?"

I shrug. “Licked my wounds for a bit, and after a couple of weeks, when it felt like too much to stay in England because everyone I knew and spent time with reminded me of that moment, I applied for law school in New York. Suffered through the rest of the school year, then moved here and never looked back.”

She studies me for a moment. “And that’s why you hate Christmas.”

I pull my hand away from hers. “I don’t hate Christmas.”

“You certainly don’t like it.”

“I tolerate it.” I shrug.

It’s true that anything to do with the holidays inevitably reminds me of that time in my life.

“And the reason you were so weird when my brother asked Zahra to marry him?”

I nod. “I hate the reminders.”

“Where is she now?”

I half laugh, half scoff. “She got married to the next guy she met. I guess when you know, you know.” And I wasn’t the one, which made that sting that much more hurtful.

She’s quiet for a moment as though she’s collecting her thoughts. “I’m going to ask you something and I need you to be honest with me.”

I nod for her to go on.

“Promise?”

“I just laid out my most traumatizing, embarrassing story for you. I’m certainly not going to lie to you about my favorite color or what color knickers I prefer on a woman.”

She doesn't smile at my quip like I expect her to. "Do you still love her?" She sounds almost afraid to hear my answer.

My forehead wrinkles. "What? No, of course not. Why would you even ask that?"

She looks at the table instead of at me. "I don't know. It just happened so long ago, and you still seem really hung up on it... I thought maybe that's because you still have feelings for her."

I lean in over the table and take both Kenzie's hands. "It's not because I still have feelings for Audrey. If anything, I can see now that she did me a favor. She was right to turn me down. The two of us were too much alike. Sure, it made things easy, but that's just it." I stop for a moment, wanting to make sure I say this the way I mean it. "I think I fell in love with the fact that we were easy. I had lofty ambitions and goals and she was happy to let me pursue them. I think what she realized before me was that things were easy because neither of us had that 'I have to have you or I'll die' feeling for the other. And I think that's what you need to make it through the tough times. Otherwise, you'll just dust your hands off and let the relationship go when things get tough."

What I want to tell Kenzie but don't, for fear that saying it so early into us seeing each other will freak her out, is it that she's shown me that feeling. I can't stop thinking of her all the time, wondering what she's doing, whether she's thinking of me. I never did that with Audrey. With her, I pushed all thoughts of her aside when I was working on my studies.

"Does that make sense?" I ask.

She nods and gives me a small smile. "Yeah, I understand what you mean."

“MacKenzie.” I use her whole name so that she’ll really pay attention to what I’m going to say. “I need you to know that I don’t feel anything for Audrey anymore. I wouldn’t be here if I did. There’s only one woman I obsess over these days, and that’s you.” I tug on her hands so she’ll stand, and I drag her over onto my lap so her legs dangle down one side. “Tell me you believe me.”

She grazes her fingertips down my face. “I believe you.”

“Good. Now let me show you.”

I palm the back of her head and bring her in for a kiss that lasts longer than it should, given that we’re in public. Unlike the me of yesteryear, I don’t have any reservations about anyone here knowing this woman is mine.

Chapter Twenty-Six

KENZIE

Andrew and I head back to the room hand in hand after we finish another drink at the bar.

After he dragged me onto his lap and kissed me like that, I wanted to bolt to our room and rip the man's clothes off, but I sensed that talking about his past had taken a lot out of him. So I thought it might be best if we stuck around for another drink, changed the topic of conversation, and lightened the mood.

My idea did the trick. He seems somehow lighter and less tense now that he's told me about Audrey.

I feel for Andrew. The pain in his eyes was evident when he told me about her, and I can't imagine having something so devastating play out in front of everyone you know. Let's face it, a man doesn't usually propose unless he's sure the woman will say yes. Being so blindsided must've really been terrible.

It helps me understand him more. When we met, he kept me at a distance and was brisk and cold, and since we've officially started seeing each other, I still felt he wasn't completely letting me in. But with his confession this afternoon, I know that he will. It may take time, but I can be patient because he's worth it.

We arrive at our room and Andrew unlocks the door, opening it wide and motioning for me to enter first. I do, and the moment the door closes behind us, the tension in the room ratchets up to a ten.

Andrew has been clear that he's not comfortable sleeping with me without knowing for certain that he thinks we can go the distance, and I respect and appreciate his chivalry. But if I'm honest, all I want is for this man to strip me down and fuck my brains out. Before, when we were just friends, I tried to push those thoughts out of my head, but since we've started dating, that's proved impossible.

"Would you mind if I had a catnap before we head down for some dinner?" he asks. "Maybe we could take a walk after we eat if the snow has stopped. Apparently they have a lighted path through the forest that you can wander when it's dark."

I set aside my disappointment that Andrew doesn't plan on ravishing me and smile at him. "Of course not. If I watch a Christmas movie on TV, will that keep you up?"

He shakes his head. "Not at all. That drive really took it out of me, and I was up early to pack since I didn't get home from the office until late last night."

"Shocker," I joke.

He rolls his eyes and walks over to the bed, folds down the covers on the bed, and climbs in, fully clothed.

My shoulders sag a bit, but I walk to the other side, grabbing the remote on the way and turn on the TV. I settle in under the covers and flick through the channels until I find a Christmas movie, then I settle back into the pillows to relax.

* * *

I must drift off, because the next thing I feel is Andrew pressed into me from behind, his arm snaking around my waist to rest on my stomach.

My reaction is instant. I roll my hips and press into the considerable girth I feel pressed against my ass.

Andrew leans in, and his deep, rough voice sounds in my ear. "I tried to sleep. I really did. But all I could think about was how you were only a few feet from me in bed. And then my mind went all kinds of filthy places." He accentuates his words by rubbing his hard length against my ass crack.

It makes me moan and I tilt my head back. His tongue traces a path up my neck until he nibbles on my ear as his hand coasts up my abdomen and he palms my breast. My breathing grows labored when he somehow finds my nipple through my sweater and flicks his thumb back and forth over it.

I swear to God, if he's doing this and has no intention of having sex with me, I might have to strangle him.

As amazing as what he's doing feels, I want his lips on mine, so I roll over until I'm facing him. His blue eyes are the color of a turbulent sea, and his lids are heavy.

"Andrew, please don't tease me. If we're not going to sleep together, say so now so we can stop."

I see the briefest moment of apprehension in his eyes before he blinks it away. "It's all I can think about."

His lips hit mine with an intensity I've not yet felt from him. He's definitely been holding back. We melt into the kiss

like molten lava coming together until we're one.

I moan into his mouth, and he hitches my leg up over his waist. The effect is that the tip of his cock is pressed against my most sensitive part and he grinds into it. A whimper escapes me and his hand dives into my hair, pulling down so that my chin rises and exposes my neck. He runs his tongue over my exposed flesh as we continue to grind against each other.

"We have too many clothes on," I pant.

I get no argument from him. The next thing I know, Andrew is lifting the hem of my sweater over my head. Next, he makes quick work of my bra. I pull off my leggings, socks, and underwear while he rolls off the bed and gets all his clothes off in record time.

Now we're both naked and taking each other in. It should be awkward, but it's not.

While Andrew's gaze feasts on me, I study the dips and curves of his body. His cock is thick and proud as it points up, the tip only an inch or two from his navel and, I realize, uncircumcised. I've never been with a man who wasn't circumcised and briefly wonder if there's anything I need to know or do differently.

Since it's winter in New York, his skin is pale, but he's fit and muscular. Not overly developed like a gym rat, but lean and strong. The whole of him is hot as hell, but oddly it's his forearms and the muscles and veins there that my gaze trips on.

He puts a knee on the king-size bed and crawls over to me, his cock hanging heavy between his legs. I can't help but lick my lips, and he notices because his cock jerks in response.

He must have grabbed a condom out of his wallet or his pants or something because I didn't notice it before, but I do now when he tosses it to the side of my body.

"I hope you have more where that one came from, seeing as we won't be going anywhere in this storm." I glance at the window where the snow is still coming down.

"Do I strike you as a man who doesn't come prepared?"

I bite my lip and shake my head.

"I plan on feasting on your pussy until you're begging for my cock, Kenzie." He pushes a hand in my hair and grips it tightly. "Are you ready to beg?"

I grin. "Let's see if you can make me."

His lips are on mine in a flash, and our tongues fight for dominance. Andrew uses the hand in my hair to tilt my head at whatever angle he wants while his other hand trails down my stomach. When he reaches my mound, he grips it possessively, as if saying without words that it belongs to him.

And I wholeheartedly agree. Right now, my center is buzzing from the contact, desperate for more.

He slips a finger past my swollen lips to discover how wet I am. A low sound of approval erupts from his throat when he finds me soaked. I can't help but jerk my hips up, searching for more contact. He chuckles in a way that sounds both delighted and villainous.

Andrew keeps kissing me, all the while teasing me, his finger dancing around my entrance but not breaching it. I hear a whimper and realize it's mine, a wordless request for him to push inside me.

But he doesn't. Instead, to my surprise, he rolls right off me.

I go up on my elbows, blinking rapidly, trying to figure out exactly what the hell happened, and see him tossing all the pillows on the bed to the floor. I'm about to say something when he flops onto his back, head near the headboard, and says to me, "Come here."

I crawl over to him, and my face must display my confusion because he gestures to take my hand. When I hold it out for him, he drags me beside him.

"Now straddle my face." There's zero waver in his voice and I feel my cheeks heat.

I've had a guy give me oral sex before—of course I have. But I've never sat on someone's face. Something about it feels a little crude and a lot dirty, and although embarrassment is my first reaction, my core tingles at the thought.

So I do what he says, figuring if he didn't like it, he wouldn't demand I do it.

As soon as my knees are on either side of his face, Andrew hooks his arms under and around my upper thighs, dragging me closer to his mouth. His assault is immediate.

At the first swipe of his tongue, I grip the headboard. My fingers dig into the padded fabric as he concentrates his efforts on my clit.

I glance down to see him with his eyes closed, concentrating on the task at hand. As if he can sense my attention, his eyes pop open and meet my gaze. I'm transfixed as I watch him lap at me. He uses the hand around my thigh to force me even farther down. I was trying to keep myself

hovering a bit so that I wouldn't suffocate the man, but he seems to want my weight on him.

He groans as though my taste is enough to satisfy him for days. He flicks the bud back and forth while one hand snakes up my abdomen and cups my breast. Then he sucks on my clit as he pinches my nipple. The duality of the pleasure and the pain has me throwing my head back.

“Oh my god, Andrew.” My voice is raspy, as though I've been screaming at a concert all night. One hand dives into the hair at the top of his head and I pull, earning me a sound of satisfaction rumbling from his throat.

He pulls away for a moment and says, “Ride my face, Kenz. Take it how you want it.”

Me from an hour ago would be aghast at the idea. But me in the present thinks nothing of his request except obedience. I jerk my hips back and forth, bearing down on him. The friction is blissful, and Andrew knows exactly what to do with his tongue.

I'm so close... so close.

My hands tighten in his hair, and with one final grind of my hips, I come, a strangled cry leaving my lips while my back arches then bows forward in the throes of my release.

Andrew laps even more vigorously, apparently desperate for the taste of me.

I've just barely gotten my bearings when he lifts me up by the waist and deposits me on my back beside him.

“That was unbelievable, woman. You've ruined me.” He hovers over me and kisses me thoroughly.

The taste of myself on his tongue has arousal swimming in my bloodstream once more, and I briefly wonder if I'll ever get enough of this man. When he closes the kiss, he immediately reaches for the condom package, ripping it open with his teeth.

“Here, let me.” I take the condom from him and pinch the tip before rolling it down his considerable length while he hovers over me. His cock jerks at my touch, making me smile.

He lets himself fall, his elbows on either side of my face so that I can feel some of his weight, but not all of it. I gasp as he pushes the head of his cock into me, all the while studying my face. Meeting his gaze, I cup his cheek as he pushes in a little more, withdraws, and repeats the same pattern until he's fully seated inside me.

My fingers go from his cheek into his hair as he stretches me. It's not uncomfortable per se. I've just never felt this full before.

“You good?” His voice makes it clear he's holding back, forcing himself to stay still to check in with me.

I nod, my teeth pressed into my bottom lip because I can't manage words right now.

He slowly pulls his hips back, and the slide of his cock lights up every single nerve ending I have. My eyes flutter closed. He burrows his head in my neck, his tongue dragging over my heated flesh as he draws himself in and out of me. I wrap my arms around him, my fingernails digging into his back, desperate for something to anchor me to this moment.

Without saying anything at all, he pulls all the way out of me. A whine leaves my lips and my eyes pop open in question.

Andrew sits back on his ankles and drags my ass up onto his thighs. When he pushes inside me again, his dick strokes my G-spot and my hands fly out and grip the sheets beneath me.

“Andrew...” I’m not sure if I’m begging for him to stop or keep going. The feeling is so intense, it’s coupled with a feeling that I might lose control.

With every thrust in, he pushes me closer and closer to climax until it’s beyond my power to hold back. I come with a ragged cry.

He stills and groans as though he too is coming, but he’s not. “Fuck, I feel you. I feel you pulsing around my cock.”

His head is thrown back and his sweaty chest is heaving, but his mouth is open with the smallest of smiles, as if he’s never experienced anything more euphoric. Once the pulsing stops, he drags me off of him and flips me onto my hands and knees before roughly pushing inside me. His pace is punishing, his fingers digging into my hips as though he can’t fuck me hard enough.

“Fuck, Kenz, you are so. Fucking. Perfect.” He punctuates each word with a thrust into my body and I can’t help but cry out because it feels so good.

He grabs a fistful of my hair and uses it to pull me up so that I’m basically sitting up on my knees, back arched, while he fucks me like a savage. The hand that isn’t in my hair wraps around my waist and trails down to my mound. He finds my swollen clit and rubs it in a circular motion.

“Oh god... I can’t... I can’t again,” I pant. I’ve never come three times with a man all in one session. My body feels as if it’s a wet towel that’s been wrung dry.

“Can and will,” he whispers in my ear.

He continues to pound into me while teasing my clit, and my arousal grows and grows until once more, I feel as though I can't hold back the tidal wave of pleasure. I come on a ragged cry, my body jerking and convulsing at the sheer amount of pleasure coursing through it, as though it's not equipped to handle it all.

With a final few thrusts, Andrew lets out a savage groan and stills inside me. I feel his cock jerk a few times, then we both go lax and fall down to the mattress beside each other.

Holy shit.

I think I know the meaning of the phrase “Fuck your brains out” now.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

ANDREW

I lie beside Kenzie, panting after having come so hard I think I might have blacked out.

That was... Jesus. I've never had it be like that with anyone else.

I felt primal, as though I needed to mark her as mine. As though I couldn't get deep enough into her if I tried. As though I wanted us to become one. I need to check in with her, make sure it wasn't too rough, and she doesn't think I'm a madman or something.

I roll onto my side. "Was that too much?"

Her eyes pop open, and without moving her body, she turns her head in my direction. "I just had three orgasms back-to-back, Andrew. What would I possibly complain about?"

I chuckle and grin, then give her a chaste kiss. "Just let me take care of this condom."

I stand and head to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. When I return to the room, Kenzie is already up from the bed and walking toward the bathroom. She's still naked and I love how confident she is in her own skin around me. Most women I've been with seem to want to cover up as soon as we're done, as though I hadn't already seen them naked. But Kenzie

just gives me a saucy grin over her shoulder before she shuts the bathroom door.

I return the pillows to the bed, then prop myself up against the headboard.

The toilet flushes and the tap runs, then Kenzie opens the door and makes her way over to the bed. I watch with avid interest the way her tits bounce ever so slightly when she walks. I have to shift my position to get comfortable because my dick is once again at half-chub.

She slips under the covers and scoots close to me, laying her cheek on my chest and wrapping her arm around my waist.

The TV is on, still playing some Christmas movie, but I get the sense that neither of us are paying it much attention. We're both in our heads, mulling over what happened—at least I am.

After a few minutes, she tilts her head up to look at me. “Does this mean you think we can go the distance?”

For a moment, my muscles tense. It's not because my answer is no. It's just a decade of telling myself I can't trust my instincts when it comes to women rearing its head. But I take a deep breath, forcing myself to relax.

I know, have known for some time, that at some point, I'm going to have to take the plunge unless I want to end up alone for the rest of my life. So I swallow back every piece of me that wants to retreat and create some distance between us because this thing with Kenzie does feel right. If I can't trust my own feelings, maybe I can trust hers.

I nod. “That's the goal of any relationship, isn't it? I guess the question is whether you want to go the distance with me.” My heart hammers while I wait for her response.

She smiles, and I swear it makes her eyes seem even more blue. “I want to go the distance with you, Andrew Wainwright.” Neither her voice nor her gaze wavers. Oh, how I’m jealous of her certainty.

I brush some of her hair off the side of her face. “I definitely want to go the distance with you, MacKenzie Montgomery.”

We meet halfway and seal our declarations with a slow, languid kiss, as though we have all the time in the world. I only hope that’s true.

* * *

We ended up ordering room service for dinner, neither of us wanting to make ourselves presentable to go down to the dining room. Then we took a bath—where we managed to behave ourselves—followed by a shower so we could both wash our hair—where we didn’t behave ourselves.

I’m surprised there’s not a dent in the tiled shower wall from how hard I took her against it.

Afterward, we got a fire going in the fireplace and cuddled and watched the movie *One Magic Christmas*. It wasn’t terrible, I’ll admit. Even if it was filmed way back in the 1980s.

I don’t want to wake up Kenzie, so I quietly get dressed and sneak down to the valet because I have to retrieve something from the back of the rental SUV. My hands feel a little shaky with nerves as I reach into the back and pull out the wrapped gift.

Today is Kenzie’s birthday.

I have something for her I was certain she'd like when I bought it, but now that it's time to give it to her, I'm second-guessing myself.

After thanking the valet, I head back up to the room and sneak back inside, then place the present under the Christmas tree. I head over to the bed, where Kenzie's hair is still splayed across the pillow and she's sleeping soundly.

I should probably let her sleep, but I want today to be special for her. After she opens her present and we have breakfast in bed, I thought we'd take a walk around the trails on the property. Maybe tonight we'll even make it out of bed to check out the trail with all the lights. The resort also has snowmobiles and a horse-drawn carriage ride.

I'm down for whatever she wants to do. Since we won't be distracted by my parents, I want her first birthday with us as a couple to be special.

I sit on the edge of the bed and tuck her hair behind her ear. "Happy birthday, birthday girl."

She groans, then her eyes flutter open. Her expression shows her confusion for a moment while she glances around the room, but when she sees me, she gives me a soft smile that I return.

"Happy birthday." I press a kiss to her forehead.

She smiles wider. "Thank you." Her gaze darts up and down my body. "You're all ready for the day. Why didn't you wake me?"

I shrug. "Figured you'd want to sleep. I put you through your paces last night." I wink.

She chuckles. "Yeah, but I liked it. A lot."

“As did I.” I can’t fight my grin. “I took a look at what the resort has to offer, so you’ll need to decide what you feel like doing, birthday girl.”

She sits up in bed. “Okay, let me go freshen up, then you can tell me all about it.” Kenzie gets out of bed and walks over to the bathroom, shutting the door.

I turn on the TV and find those stations that play music, flicking through all the channels until I find one with holiday music, knowing Kenzie will like it.

She comes out of the bathroom wearing the T-shirt I left hanging on a hook in there, and with her long, blonde hair down and flowing and no makeup on, she looks as beautiful as ever. I don’t know what it is about seeing a woman wearing my clothes, but it’s a helluva turn-on.

I force myself to set my libido aside. This day is about Kenzie and making it special for her.

Getting off the bed, I walk over to her and take her hand, then lead her to the Christmas tree. “I have something I want to give you for your birthday.”

“You do?” Her voice is soft and disbelieving.

“Of course I do. Come have a seat by the tree.”

We both sit down cross-legged beside the tree and I pull the gift out from underneath.

“Where did this come from? I didn’t see this last night.” She inspects it.

“I snuck it in this morning while you were still sleeping.” I slide it over to her on the floor. “Careful opening it. It’s breakable, and I did the wrapping job, so don’t expect much.”

Though I don't know for sure, I'll bet that Kenzie's gifts are all perfectly wrapped with coordinating ribbons and bows and the perfect gift tag attached.

"I think you did a great job." She inspects the floral wrapping paper for a second before she rips it off the outside of the box.

She has no idea what's inside at this point because it's a plain brown box. I couldn't exactly give her this present in its original packaging.

My nerves start up again as she takes the tape off the top of the box and digs through the foam peanuts inside. She reaches in and pulls out her gift, gasping when the peanuts fall away.

"Oh my god, Andrew."

It's the vintage white ceramic Christmas tree her grandma had when she was young. Well, I think it's like it. It's exactly how she described to me that day we were out shopping. I had to really search for one and, in the end, had to pay an obscene amount of money to have it shipped over from Europe fast enough to arrive before her birthday. Judging by the look on her face, it's a replica of the original, which makes all the money and trouble worth it.

Tears fill her eyes, but she's beaming as she turns the tree in her hands.

"The lights to put in the holes are in a container in the box." I nod toward the open box.

She sets the tree to her side and lunges for me, wrapping her arms around my neck and kissing me repeatedly all over my face.

I chuckle. "I take it you like it?"

She pulls back and places both hands on my cheeks. “It’s the best gift I’ve ever received. I swear. Thank you, Andrew. I can’t believe you hunted this down for me.”

I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. “I could tell how many good memories you associated with that tree, and I wanted you to have it.”

She leans in and kisses me with fervor, pouring all her excitement and gratitude into the meeting of our mouths. “I brought something for you too.”

I frown. “It’s not my birthday.”

“Well, it’s not a present per se... more like a gift for the both of us. I brought it just in case, and after last night, I was going to save it for tonight, but I think the time is right.”

“Should I be scared?”

She laughs. “No. What you need to be is naked and sitting on the edge of the bed.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

She stands and carefully walks around the ceramic tree. “You heard me. Now go.”

Kenzie quickly goes over to her suitcase and grabs something out of it before disappearing into the bathroom. Puzzled, I do what she says, feeling like an idiot while I sit naked on the edge of the bed with my dick hanging between my legs.

A few minutes later, the bathroom door opens, and Kenzie stands there looking like temptation personified. My cock hardens when my eyes soak her in.

“I thought you might approve of this elf costume more than you did the one I wore on our first date.”

She's wearing red-and-white-striped hosiery that goes up to her mid thigh and bright-red stilettos. On the top half, she has a very short green velvet dress with fur at the bottom that cuts off right at the apex of her thighs. I'll bet that if she turned around, I could see the bottom curve of her ass cheeks. But the best part is the chest. Because although a red underwire bra is built into the dress and white fur runs over the tops of her tits, there's no fabric in between. Her chest is on full display, despite being surrounded by fabric.

"So, what do you think?" She raises one hand and leans against the bathroom doorway, one hip cocked to the side.

"I'm speechless."

She grins and walks toward me, sashaying in an exaggerated way that makes me want to grip her hips while I pound into her. When she reaches me, I expect her to straddle me. I'm thinking maybe she'll fuck me. But to my surprise and elation, she drops to her knees in front of me.

"What are you doing?" My voice is hoarse.

"You're an intelligent man. What do you think?" She raises an eyebrow before reaching with one hand and gripping the base of my cock.

"This feels like it's my birthday, not yours."

She leans toward my dick, then tilts her head up enough so that I can see her eyes, wicked with intent. "I'm merely showing you my appreciation for your thoughtful gift." Then she leans in and licks my shaft from base to tip.

"Message received." My hands squeeze the edge of the mattress.

Once my cock is thoroughly wet with her saliva, she uses both hands to jerk me off, alternating the direction of each of

her hands.

My breathing is ragged by the time precum seeps out of the tip.

“Whoopsie,” she says all innocent-like, then leans in and sucks the tip into her mouth, swirling her tongue around.

“Fuck.” One hand flies into the hair at the back of her head and I widen my legs, giving her as much room as she needs to get close to me.

Then she really turns on the afterburners. She bobs on my cock, dragging it in and out of her mouth. She pushes it as far back into her throat as she can go, still using one hand to follow the path of her mouth since she can't fit the entire length of my cock in there.

Tingling starts at the base of my spine, and my balls tighten in anticipation of release. My heart thunders and I'm helpless, transfixed by the image of me fucking her mouth and unable to look away. My hips move of their own accord, and I grip her hair harder.

She has on bright-red lipstick, and it's gotten smeared around her lips from my cock dragging in and out of her mouth. The sight only ratchets up my need.

“Kenz, I'm gonna come,” I tell her because I'm nothing if not a gentleman.

She stops bobbing her head and stills, letting me fuck her mouth for all I'm worth. And when she doesn't pull away at my warning, I let myself spill down the back of her throat, holding myself there for a few beats until it feels as if I've emptied my soul into this woman.

She takes it all, swallowing my cum and meeting my gaze for every second of it.

“Jesus,” I pant, pushing a hand through my hair.

“You like?” She arches an eyebrow in a sexy way.

“Come here.” I tug her by her upper arms so she’s sitting on my lap. “More than like.” I kiss her.

I wonder briefly if she’s figured out that I was talking about more than just her ability to give me head.

* * *

Once we’ve cleaned up and had some breakfast in our room, I present all the options to Kenzie as to how we can spend our day.

She opts for the horse-drawn carriage ride because apparently, it’s something she’s always wanted to do. When I ask her why she’s never done one of the rides they offer in Central Park, she tells me she doesn’t think those horses are taken care of properly. But out here in the country, she feels comfortable that the horses have better accommodations and don’t have to work all day long, dragging around tourists.

Like most things, she’s very passionate about it, and I really have no idea, so I just smile and nod.

We’re about to leave the room when her phone rings. She pulls it out of her coat pocket and looks at the screen, then worries her lip.

“Who is it?” I ask.

She looks at me. “My brother. Maybe I should let it go to voice mail.”

“He’s probably calling to wish you a happy birthday. You should answer it.”

She hesitates, then answers the call. “Hello? Oh hey... Thank you... Not much, probably just go for dinner and drinks with Tessa.” She widens her eyes at me because he’s clearly asking what she’s doing for her birthday. “Oh, that’s so nice, but I have so much work to do tomorrow and I’m not sure what time I’ll be done... Yeah, I have a couple of events coming up next week... Okay, I’ll give you a call after that... Thanks for calling, Finn.” She hits End on the call and pockets her phone.

“Did he want you to go over there tomorrow night?” I ask.

She nods. “It’s like he got engaged and now he’s the host with the most. We’ve never really hung out that much.”

I step closer to her and grip the edges of her open jacket. “Well, maybe with all the wedding stuff, he’s realizing how important family is to him.”

“Yeah, maybe. It was nice of him to call.”

“Have your parents called or texted to wish you a happy birthday?” I regret the question as soon as the words leave my mouth because some of the light leaves her eyes.

She shakes her head. “Not yet, no.”

She’s trying to act as though it doesn’t affect her, but it does, so I squeeze her hand.

“Some years they forget entirely, depending on what they have going on at work.” She shrugs as though she’s indifferent to the hurt.

I frown. “That’s not right.”

Kenzie shakes her head. “No, it’s not. But that’s the way it is.”

I sigh, wishing it weren't, but there's nothing I can do to make it any different for her. Since we're already on an iffy subject, I figure I might as well use the opportunity to talk to her about something I've been thinking of since I woke this morning.

"Speaking of your brother..." I stop when she sighs.

"I know what you're going to say. You want to tell him we're seeing each other."

"Don't you think we should?" I ask.

She looks over my shoulder for a moment, then meets my gaze. "Can we just tell my brother after the firm's holiday party next weekend? I have so much to do this week to finish getting ready for it, not to mention the Santa party I have midweek for the Mancinis. I don't know how Finn's gonna take it, and if he's going to be upset, I'd really rather deal with that after these two big jobs have passed. I don't need the distractions this week." She steps into me and wraps her arms around my neck. "I have a feeling I'm already going to be distracted enough." Then she rises onto her tiptoes and kisses me.

After we close the kiss, I say, "Fine. But we can't put it off after that. He deserves to know."

She nods and steps back. "Deal. Now let's go enjoy the rest of our day."

I take her hand and kiss the top of her head.

I don't feel good about hiding the truth from my best friend, but I feel better than anything about this woman. What difference can one week really make?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

KENZIE

Last weekend was magical.

I've basically been floating on a cloud all week. I wasn't kidding when I told Andrew I have a lot to do this week, though it hasn't stopped me from daydreaming about him nonstop since he dropped me off at home on Sunday evening.

It's Wednesday and the evening of the Mancinis' party. It's an intimate gathering of just them and their closest family and friends with Santa greeting all the children first, followed by a festive dinner.

I'm putting the final touches on the place settings and making sure all the decor is on point when my cell phone rings. I smile as I pull it out of my dress pants pocket, hoping that it's Andrew, but sadly, it's an unknown number.

"Hello?"

"Hey, is this Kenzie?" a man asks.

"This is she."

"Yeah, it's Matt. Just wanted to let you know I won't be able to make it for that Santa gig tonight. Booked a spot on a TV series as an extra and they're shooting a night scene tonight."

I suck in a breath and pull the phone away from my cheek to check the time. “But you’re supposed to be here in three hours!” My voice is shrill and panicky.

“Yeah, sorry about that. This could be my big chance though. Can’t pass it up. You gotta understand.”

I shake my head, wondering if I should argue with him—I mean an extra? I don’t think that’s going to be his big break. He doesn’t even have lines, not to mention he’s in his sixties. If he hasn’t made it yet, I’m gonna go out on a limb and say maybe it’s not going to happen for him.

“Okay, well, thank you for letting me know.” I hit End and cringe.

Andrew would probably tell me I should have stood up for myself and gone up and down the other side of the guy, but that won’t accomplish anything. It’s T minus three hours and I don’t have a Santa. Something I need to rectify immediately.

I consider calling the agency I used, but it’s nearing the end of the day and I doubt they’d be able to get someone over here in time. And even if they could, I certainly wouldn’t be able to vet that the person is of sound mind, not a pervert, and can actually give a convincing *Ho ho ho*.

I work through my mental database and my mind snags on one person. No, he’s not ideal for the job, given the role he’d have to play, but he might be more inclined to say yes than anyone else I know. I’m pretty sure my brother would laugh at me if I asked him.

So I press Andrew’s name on my phone and cross my fingers he won’t be in the middle of something at work that doesn’t allow him to pick up. He answers on the second ring.

“I was just thinking of you,” he says by way of answering.

“Oh really. What about?” I’m in a rush, but I can’t help my curiosity.

“Just thinking about that elf costume.”

“The one at the restaurant?”

“Not likely.” There’s amusement in his tone. “What’s up? I thought you had that party to set up for? I’m surprised to hear from you.”

“Well... I have a favor to ask.” I bite my bottom lip.

“Okay, let’s hear it.” Papers shuffle in the background, and I know he’s always so busy.

“It’s a big favor. Like really big. Huge.”

He chuckles. “What is it?”

“And keep in mind how much you love that elf costume and that I intend to wear it whenever you want as a thank-you.”

“Now you’ve got me intrigued.”

“The guy I hired to play Santa tonight just canceled and I’m in a bind. I need someone, a.k.a. you, to play Santa for an hour for a handful of kids.”

I’m met with silence.

“Andrew?” I pull my phone away from my face and see that the call timer is still counting. “Andrew?”

“You want me to play Santa. Me? A man who doesn’t even like Christmas?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperate.” I look behind me to make sure neither Enzo nor Annie have come into the room. I don’t want them to panic. They’re hosting this year, and last

they told me, they were going to get showered and ready for the party. The kids are out somewhere with the nanny.

“Didn’t you call me Scrooge once?”

I sigh. “That was before I really knew you. And let’s remember Scrooge came around.”

“Oh, so now you think I’m suited to play Father Christmas?”

I huff. “No, I’m desperate and have no one else to ask. So, will you do it? Please!” I cross the fingers on my free hand.

“Kenzie, I don’t think I can pull it off. What if I bugger it up and then the kids know that Santa isn’t real?”

“It will be really easy, I promise. The presents already have each child’s name on them. You just ask what they want for Christmas, tell them to be good, and give them their present before they get off your lap. I’ll be next to you the entire time.”

I hear him blow out a breath. I’m fully aware I’m putting him in a bad situation because he wants me to be happy. “It’s not like I just happen to have a Santa suit lying around.”

“I already have one. I had to rent it for the guy who was going to do it, so it’s here waiting.”

Again, he’s silent for a moment.

“Please...”

“Fine. Text me the info. I have something I have to finish up here. It’ll probably be an hour before I can leave.”

“You’re the best! Thank you!”

“You’re welcome. Now you better get that elf costume out after this party tonight or I won’t consider my services to be

paid in full.”

I laugh. “You have my word.”

I end the call and cradle the phone to my chest, where a warm sensation blooms. It feels good to have someone to put you first and who won’t let you down.

* * *

“So, my boyfriend agreed to step in and play the role of Santa for the night.” I’m explaining to the host, Annie Mancini, about the last-minute change.

That’s the first time I’ve called Andrew my boyfriend to anyone else, and I almost get giddy like a middle schooler using the term. I mean, I filled Tessa in on everything that happened over the weekend, but I didn’t call him my boyfriend during our conversation.

Annie smiles, rubbing her pregnant belly. “That’s very sweet of him. And very industrious of you. Thanks for taking care of that, Kenzie.”

I can’t help but smile. I really like the three Mancini brothers and their wives. They shift the hosting of the event around every year, so I’ve worked with each of them now, and they’re all equally impressive. Despite being überriich and successful, they’ve always treated me well and with respect, not like one of their minions doing their bidding.

“I’m just going to go make sure everything is coming along with dinner and go over everything with the chef one more time. If Andrew arrives, can you please let him in and send him my way?”

“Of course. I’ll sneak him in. I’m going to check how the kids are coming along at getting ready.” She shakes her head as she leaves, as though she doesn’t think they’ll have gotten that far.

I’ve been in the kitchen for a few minutes when Enzo walks in with Andrew.

“Kenzie, I think this belongs to you,” Enzo says and motions to Andrew.

“Yes, thank you.” I smile and resist the urge to give Andrew a kiss.

Enzo turns to Andrew and clamps him on the shoulder. “You must really love this one”—he motions at me—“if you’re willing to get in a Santa suit and let these kids climb all over you. Good luck.” He chuckles and leaves the kitchen.

We both sort of stand there awkwardly for a beat after Enzo’s mention of love. We haven’t been seeing each other that long and neither of us has said that word to the other or even suggested it. But I’d be lying if I said that’s not the direction my feelings are tipping as of late.

I introduce Andrew and the chef, then I drag Andrew out of the kitchen and, after making sure none of the kids are around, down to the guest room. As soon as the guest room door is closed, I whip around, wrap my arms around Andrew’s neck, and kiss him.

“Thank you so much. I owe you big time,” I say when I pull away.

He slides his hands around and grips my ass. “Yeah, and don’t forget what you owe me.”

“Just consider me Santa’s little helper.” I wink, and he groans.

“All right, stop with that, or I’m going to be Santa sporting a hard-on all night.”

I laugh and walk over to the closet where I hung the Santa suit in a garment bag earlier. “Everything you should need is in there, even the belly. Hopefully the boots will fit.”

He unzips the garment bag and shakes his head. “I can’t believe I’m doing this. Things have really gone full circle.”

I place my hands on his chest. “You’re going to be great. Now I have to go make sure everything is set. You’re up before dinner, and we can leave together afterward. I’ll meet you downstairs in the condo lobby.”

His eyes widen. “Wait. You mean I can’t come back in here and change?”

I shake my head. “No, you have to leave as soon as you’ve handed out all the presents, otherwise the kids will know you aren’t actually Santa.”

“So I have to go home like this?” He gestures to the garment bag on the bed with the bright-red velvety fabric poking out.

I cringe. “I’ll bring your stuff down with me. I guess we could ask the concierge if you can use the restroom to change.”

He shakes his head. “Actually, I think I’ll stay dressed like this. No one will be able to tell who I am, but you’re the one who will have to walk beside me.” He grins.

“As if I care if I have to walk with Santa.”

He rolls his eyes playfully. “That’s right, it’s probably foreplay for you.”

I chuckle. “I’ll have you know, I’ve never wanted to bang Santa in all my life, regardless of how much I love Christmas.”

“Well, you’ll be banging him tonight, so you better get used to the idea.”

Shaking my head, I walk over to the door before we find ourselves with our lips locked and pawing at each other. “I’ll come get you when we’re ready for you. All you have to do is ask each child their name, what they want for Christmas, whether they’ve been good or not... you know the drill. Then I’ll pass you a present to give to them as an early Christmas gift and that’s it.”

He pushes a hand through his hair. “All right, I can handle that.”

“If you have any problems with the suit, text me. I’ll come in here as soon as I can step away.”

He nods. “Got it.”

“And thank you. I really appreciate it.”

His face softens, and I hope that’s because he sees how appreciative I am to him for stepping in to help. A soft smile creases the corner of his lips. “Anything for you.”

I give him a smile of my own and leave the room in disbelief at how lucky I am to have found this man and have him in my life. It’s a Christmas miracle.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

ANDREW

I cannot believe I'm going through with this. I look beyond ridiculous. There's no way these kids are going to believe I'm Santa. I feel like a phony.

There's a soft knock on the door, then Kenzie peeks her head in. I can tell she's trying not to laugh. Her blue eyes flicker with amusement and she presses her lips together as though she's trying not to lose it.

I point at her. "Not a word."

She raises her hands as though she would never, but it's so obvious she's about three seconds away from busting a gut. "We're ready for you, Santa. The kids are very excited."

I point at her. "Elf costume. Don't forget."

"I wouldn't dare."

She leads me out of the room and back into the enormous living area the owner, Enzo, led me through earlier. I do a quick survey of the room and find six adults a little older than me, who I assume are the parents of all the dressed-up kids running around like maniacs. There are also some older people who must be the grandparents of the little ones.

The entire group turns their attention to me and looks at me expectantly. Showtime.

I place my hand on my fake belly and lower my voice. “Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas.”

“Santa!” one of the kids screams, and they all rush over to me, circling my legs.

I sneak a glance at Kenzie, who’s standing off to the side with a smile.

“Santa! I want to talk to you first,” one of the little boys says.

“Let’s let Santa take his seat first, Mateo, then we can figure out who goes first,” the pregnant woman says.

Mateo frowns before spinning on his heel and going to sit on the couch with his arms crossed.

“Santa, we have you set up over here.” Kenzie directs my attention to the chair beside the Christmas tree. It looks just like something you’d find Santa sitting on at the mall. These people have spared no expense to give their children the ultimate Santa experience.

I follow Kenzie to the chair and sit. All the children hover eagerly around me in a semicircle, waiting for the go-ahead from their parents.

“Mommy, who gets to go first?” asks a little girl in a red dress, her hair pulled back into a curly ponytail.

The pregnant woman who must be her mum—and I think is Enzo’s wife, based on the fact that he has his arm wrapped around her waist—answers. “Arianna, it’s going to go from oldest to youngest this year since last year we did the opposite.”

She crosses her arms and frowns. “I’m never gonna get to go first. I’m not the oldest or the youngest.”

A few of the adults laugh.

“Welcome to being the middle child, kiddo,” Enzo says and tugs on the end of her ponytail affectionately.

“You’re up, Giuliana,” one of the men says. He and Enzo look like they could be brothers, except he’s a little older than Enzo.

“Yay!” Giuliana rushes over, her long dark hair swinging and her sparkly navy-blue dress swishing. She plops herself right down on my lap when she reaches me.

“Hello, Giuliana. Now tell me, how old are you now?” I ask in my best low Santa voice.

“I’m eight,” she says proudly, and I see with her grin that she’s missing one of her front teeth.

“You’re getting so big. Have you been a good girl this year?”

We go through the usual questions, then it’s Arianna’s turn, who turns out to be seven, and her brother Mateo, who’s six years old. Finally, it’s time for the little guy who’s been hovering around his parents the whole time, fidgeting as though he can’t wait for it to be his turn.

“Hi, Dante,” I say when I help him up onto my lap.

“Hi, Santa. I’m five. I know you’re going to ask.”

I chuckle. “I was. Now tell me, have you been a good boy this year?”

His mouth twists to the side as though he’s not sure how to answer. “I’ve been good, but Santa, I want to know why you have an accent.”

My eyes widen and I immediately seek out Kenzie for help. She's looking at me with the same expression I imagine is on my own face. Shock and disbelief, neither of us thought of that.

When I don't answer right away, Dante goes on to say, "You didn't have an accent last year or the year before that."

Shit. I say the only thing that comes to mind. "Well... I visit countries all over the world. Sometimes I like to speak in their different accents."

His eyes narrow and his mouth twists as if he's thinking seriously about that, then nods as though it's an acceptable answer. "Can you do a French accent? One of my teachers is French and I really like how it sounds when she speaks."

I have to press my lips together to keep myself from laughing. "You know, Dante, I'd really rather hear what you want for Christmas since you've been such a good boy all year."

He goes on to list about thirty toys I've never heard of before I hand him his present.

"Thanks, Santa. Now you have to do my little sister, Allegra. She doesn't talk yet, but she's been really good."

I glance at the baby the auburn-haired woman is holding. I'm not the best judge of how many months old an infant is, but I know this kid isn't even a year old.

"Honey, I think Santa probably has to be getting on to his next stop," Dante's mum says, bouncing the baby on her hip.

"She has to sit with Santa, Mommy, otherwise he won't bring her any presents." He turns to me with what I now understand can be described as puppy-dog eyes, his bottom lip jutted out.

“I do have to be going, but I can sit with her for a minute.”

My heart races as the mum gives me a grateful look and makes her way to me with the baby. “Thank you,” she mouths before passing the baby over.

I’ve never held a baby, so my heart thunders. I reach out, saying a small prayer that I won’t mess this up and send the baby tumbling to the floor. I grip her under the arms and bring her closer, then set her on my lap. She flaps her arms and legs, which startles me at first, but I recover quickly, tightening my grip. A few pictures are taken, and I happily pass her back to her mum.

I place my hands on both sides of my fake belly. “Well, children, I’d better be—”

“What about Ryder?” Giuliana asks.

I make eye contact with one of the parents, hoping they get the message that I don’t understand.

“Yeah, Ryder has to have a turn,” Mateo says.

A twentysomething guy steps out from around the back of the parents. I hadn’t even noticed him. My guess is that he’s doing his best to hide and doesn’t really even want to be here. I know I wouldn’t if I were his age.

“I’m good, you guys. I think I’m too old to sit on Santa’s lap anymore,” Ryder says.

“You have to have a turn. Allegra got one and she’s just little,” Dante says, always so helpful.

I look at Kenzie, and she rushes forward. “That’s all the time Santa has, everyone. Let’s say goodbye to him.”

I stand from the chair as the adults all cheer and the little ones rush me to give me a hug. They’re so forceful I almost

fall backward but manage to catch myself.

“Okay, little ones. You keep being good for your parents and I think you’ll find you’ll be happy on Christmas morning.” I pat them on their backs, and as soon as they let me go, I make my way to the condo door.

“Why is he going out the door?” Dante says.

“I think his magic only works on Christmas,” Arianna says.

“Bye, children!” I give them one final wave before I open the door, Kenzie behind me. “Merry Christmas!”

“I’ll meet you downstairs shortly,” Kenzie whispers then shuts the door.

* * *

“You were amazing!” Kenzie comes rushing toward me out of the elevator.

I’m glad she’s here. The front desk guy was starting to look at me as though he was going to call the cops to escort me out.

She wraps her arms around my neck, giving me a big hug. “You really saved me in there. Thank you!” Then she pulls down the beard to kiss me.

I keep it decent since I can feel the guy at the desk staring a hole through my back.

“You probably didn’t eat before you got here. Do you want to stop somewhere before we go back to my place?” she asks.

“Are we headed back to your place?”

She shrugs. “Well, that’s where the elf costume is so...”

I grin. “Then I’m definitely going to need some sustenance if I’m going to have any kind of stamina. Something quick though. Let’s stop at a sandwich shop or a café on the way. You sure you don’t mind that I’m dressed like this?”

Kenzie gives me the once-over. “Are you kidding? The fact that you’re even willing to be seen in public in that thing is like a wet dream. I think I’m rubbing off on you.”

I take the bag she’s carrying and reach for her hand, being sure to give the guy behind the desk a wink as we pass.

* * *

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“What? Nothing,” Kenzie says—or lies, would be a more apt description.

“Bullshit. You do this thing with your nose when you don’t like something.” I pick up my sandwich out of the wax paper and take a bite. Bloody hell, they gave me the wrong sandwich.

“What thing with my nose?” She tilts her head.

I shrug. “I don’t know. This thing... it sort of wiggles a bit. I don’t know how to describe it. Anyway, you’re avoiding the question.”

She sighs and her shoulders sag. “I think they put whole milk in my peppermint tea instead of skim. It’s not a big deal.” She lifts the cup off the table to take a sip as though to prove what a big deal it isn’t, but I snatch it from her grip first. “Hey!”

“I’m going to have them make it properly for you and ask them to make me a new sandwich without the tomato like you

asked for.” I walk over to the counter and explain the issue to the girl.

She apologizes and is more than happy to make a replacement drink and a new sandwich. When she slides the new items over the counter to me, I accept them with a smile, go back to our table, sit, and eat my sandwich again.

“You didn’t have to do that.” Kenzie looks at the cup as though it’s personally offended her.

“I don’t like that you won’t stand up for yourself. I’m not saying you have to be an asshole, but don’t let people take advantage of you. You’re too nice.” I grab my drink and take a swig of it.

“I just don’t feel comfortable complaining. I mean, what will they think?”

“That they fucked up your order and need to fix it.” I take another bite of my sandwich.

She frowns. “But what if they think I’m a bitch?”

“First off, you couldn’t be a bitch if you tried. You’re basically a ray of sunshine in human form. And second, you care too much about what other people think of you. Do you know you’re a good person with good intentions?”

She looks at her hands in her lap. “Yeah...”

“Then what’s it matter what anyone else thinks?”

“I guess. I just like it better when people like me.” She spins her cup around in place.

I can’t help but think that her need to be liked is somehow tied to the lack of attention she received from her parents growing up, but I’m not idiot enough to say that.

“Listen...” I take her hand. “I just don’t want to see anyone take advantage of your kindness because you’re afraid to speak up for yourself, that’s all.”

She squeezes my hand and nods. “I know. I know you only want what’s best for me.”

With a nod, I let her hand go and finish off my sandwich. “You ready to make good on our deal?”

Pink suffuses her cheeks. “Ready, willing, and able.”

Kenzie always knows the right thing to say.

Chapter Thirty

KENZIE

We walk home in the cold, hand in hand. A few people give us a funny look, but Andrew doesn't seem to notice.

When we're only a few blocks from my house, it begins to snow. It's the kind of snow that sort of drifts down and looks light as a feather. The kind that won't stick or be here tomorrow.

As we approach my building, I spot Mrs. Hoffmeister wrapped up in her coat, scarf, and hat, smoking a cigarette.

She looks our way and smiles wide when she sees me. "Just the girl I've been looking for. I called you earlier, but you didn't pick up. Must've been out with this one, I guess?" She nods at Andrew and narrows her eyes.

"Hi, Mrs. Hoffmeister. Why were you looking for me?"

"My bathtub is getting kind of dirty, and you know how I can't bend over very well. Means I can't clean it properly. I was hoping you'd be a dear and stop in and give it a good scrub for me."

I feel Andrew turn his head slowly and look at me, waiting to see how I'll respond. His words from earlier ring through my head like Christmas bells.

I like Mrs. Hoffmeister and don't mind helping her. But what began as neighborly acts of kindness have slowly morphed into housekeeping and butler services. Andrew's not wrong when he says that she can walk down to the corner store to buy her own cigarettes or do any myriad of the other things she often requests of me. If I step back, I can see clearly that she's taken advantage of me over time.

"Actually, I have a really busy week with work, so I'm not going to be able to do that for you. I'm sorry." My heart drums after the words leave my mouth and I wait for her to reply.

I register her shock at first, but it slowly morphs into acceptance. "Oh okay. Well, I'll call one of my sons, or maybe I'll have to start getting someone in to tidy the place."

A rush of air leaves my mouth. I don't know what I expected her to say, but I realize that my deepest fears didn't come true just because I stood up for myself.

This realization makes me feel a little foolish. Did I expect her to rant and rave about what a horrible person I am? Honestly, a little. But she immediately backed down and I think maybe that's given me the confidence I need to stand up for myself again.

"Thanks for understanding." I take Andrew's hand and squeeze, leading him up the stairs, feeling buoyant.

Once we're inside, he tugs on my hand, forcing me to stop before I start up the stairs. I turn to face him.

He places his hands on my cheeks. "I'm proud of you. You finally stood up to her."

I grin like a child on Christmas Eve. "I know, and the world didn't fall apart."

Andrew kisses me slowly, thumbs grazing across my cheeks while he does. My nipples stiffen in my bra, and I grow wet between my legs. When he pulls away, I can't help but gaze into his stormy eyes and think about how much he's brought to my life in a short time. Suddenly, I can't get to my apartment fast enough to show this man with my body exactly how much he means to me.

I turn and race up the stairs. Andrew seems to understand my urgency without me having to voice it.

By the time we reach my apartment door, I'm panting, fussing with the key to get it into the lock and the door open. Finally, I get it and push the door open. As soon as we're through and I've closed and locked the door, we're on each other—lips on lips, hands all over the other's body, clothes stripped off.

“Thank you for today,” I murmur against his mouth.

He pulls away for a second and looks down at me. “It was a given. You need help, I can help... I'm there.”

Our mouths meet again, desperate. All the while, my mind is spinning.

Between showing up for me today and doing something I know he was uncomfortable with, to encouraging me to stand up for myself, and the effort he must have gone to in order to get me my birthday present, Andrew has made me feel more special and wanted and loved than I have in my entire life.

It's then I realize that I'm wholly in love with this man—body and soul.

There's no way I'm going to tell him that though. Not a chance. I have some pride.

But I cherish the thought, whether he feels the same about me or not. If he doesn't, maybe he will in time. After all, he has more baggage than I do in the past relationship department.

All I know is that when I'm with him, it *feels* like he loves me. And that's enough, for now.

Once we're undressed, Andrew picks me up and I wrap my arms around his neck. He walks us over to my bed and gently sets me on my back.

The way he stares at me feels like a caress. As though I can feel his thoughts trail against my heated skin everywhere his gaze moves.

I move so I'm at the top of the bed, anxious and waiting for him. The need to feel this man inside me, to be joined with him, is more intense than I've ever known it.

He crawls up the bed until he's hovering over me, holding my eyes with his the entire time. I draw in a deep breath. This feels different than the other times we've been together.

"I don't want anything between us tonight." He brushes a strand of hair off my forehead. "I'm clean."

My teeth press into my bottom lip for a second. "I am too, and I'm on birth control."

"We don't have—"

Bringing my hand to palm his cheek, I whisper, "I want to," and spread my legs in invitation.

Without another word, he pushes inside me, and I fight not to close my eyes so I can keep my gaze locked on his. He moves slowly, almost languidly, in and out of me. All the while, his lips trail over my skin. He drags his tongue from my

collarbone to my neck to the shell of my ear, where he whispers how good I feel, how he can't believe he found me, what an amazing woman I am.

The drag and pull of his cock pushes me closer to orgasm, and when he swivels his hips once he's fully seated, a soft moan leaves my lips. He repeats the motion until I'm spilling over the edge of a waterfall, coming on a soft cry, and clinging to him.

It might not be the most intense physical orgasm I've ever had. But emotionally, it's by far the most powerful.

He follows me over seconds later, then he drops some of his weight onto me. We cling to each other until he softens inside me.

Our hearts beat in tandem while I try to right my world once again. What just happened wasn't fucking, it wasn't sex, it was a whole lot more. We made love, and it's hard to feel as though something hasn't shifted between us.

He gets up off me, mumbling something about cleaning up the two of us, and I can't help feeling nervous over what his reaction to what just happened might be.

Will his past cause him to pull away? Will he double down?

He must collect himself in the bathroom for a moment, because he takes a few minutes to return. But when he does, it's clear he hasn't shuttered himself off. His eyes tell me everything I need them to—he's still in this.

Andrew brings a warm washcloth over to me and cleans me up before throwing the washcloth in my laundry bin. Then we slip under the covers, and he draws me in so I'm half lying

on his chest. He strokes his fingertips along my spine while I let my own drift aimlessly over his pecs.

I'm not sure what to say about what just happened and perhaps he doesn't know either, because for a while, neither of us speaks. When he finally does, it has nothing to do with us.

“Are you feeling ready for the firm's party in a few days?”

“I have a few final details to button up, but I'm confident they won't be an issue.”

I feel rather than see him nod. “It's going to be weird seeing you there and pretending we're acquaintances. Maybe we should—”

“Andrew, it's fine.”

On the drive home from the resort last weekend, we talked about whether I should be his date for the party. A big part of me wants to be on his arm, but at the same time, I'm there to do a job. I'd hate for my professionalism to be questioned or for people to think I got the job because I'm sleeping with Andrew.

For his part, he doesn't want any of his coworkers up in his personal business. I'm not sure if that's because of his past or if he's just the kind of guy who likes to keep business and pleasure separate, but we agreed that it's best to act as though we have a platonic relationship at the party. It doesn't mean that no one at his work will ever know that we're together. It's just easiest for now.

I tilt my head up to meet his gaze. “We agreed it's for the best right now.”

His lips form a thin line, and he nods.

Smiling, I trail my fingers through the front of his hair where the streak of gray is. “Have you always had this?”

“Yeah.” His lips tip down a bit. “It even has a name.”

“It does?”

He nods. “It’s called a Mallen streak. God, the kids teased me endlessly about it in primary school.” The light in his eyes dims a bit as though he’s remembering how bad it was.

I shift myself up and straddle him, pushing my hand through the gray streak again. “Well, I love it. I think it’s sexy.”

Andrew’s hands settle on my hips. “You do, do you? How sexy?”

I feel his shaft grow harder beneath me.

“Super sexy,” I say, leaning in to give him a kiss.

“Well, as long as you think it’s sexy, that’s all that matters.” His hands coast up and down the sides of my body and my nipples pucker.

Andrew notices. Of course he does. He leans forward and takes one in his mouth.

From there, we spend the rest of the night in bed and I make it very clear to him just how sexy I think he is.

Chapter Thirty-One

ANDREW

The night of the party is here. I wish I could say I'm looking forward to it after all the work Kenzie has put into the party, but I can't seem to shake the nerves that have been plaguing me all day.

I've never been nervous for one of the firm's Christmas parties before—more like annoyed that I must attend—so I assume I'm nervous on Kenzie's behalf. I want this to be a huge success for her after all the work she's put into it. Not to mention if it's not, I'll feel responsible since I dragged her into this. I knew how flighty and impulsive Bethaney could be when I twisted Kenzie's arm into taking the job. I just hope Bethaney doesn't make any impossible last-minute demands of Kenzie.

I check myself in the mirror one last time. I'm wearing my navy three-piece suit because Kenzie insisted the blue would draw the same blue from my eyes. Since she liked that idea, I didn't hesitate to agree. After one last adjustment to my tie, I pocket my phone and my wallet and leave my condo.

The Uber ride over to the venue feels as though it takes forever due to Manhattan traffic, so I text Kenzie.

Me: *On my way now. How's everything going?*

It takes a couple of minutes, but she does respond.

Kenzie: *Bethaney arrived here an hour ago and wanted to make a few last-minute adjustments but nothing I can't handle.*

I chuckle, thinking back to a conversation the two of us had on Wednesday after playing Santa. We both agreed that Bethaney would spring something on Kenzie last minute.

Thinking back to Wednesday has me shifting in my seat to adjust myself.

Neither Kenzie nor I have discussed it, but it's obvious that what we shared that night was special and went beyond two people dating and having sex with each other. It meant something more profound than a physical release.

I arrive at the St. Regis hotel and thank my driver, stepping out into the cold night air. My breath is visible before I walk through the doors the doorman holds open for me.

I'm jittery as I head up the elevator to the ballroom. I don't know whether it's because I really want this to go well for my girlfriend's sake, or whether it's because I have to pretend she isn't my girlfriend all night. I wish I had her at my side tonight.

The elevator reaches its destination and dings before the doors open. I step out and make my way to the entry to the ballroom, then I stand in the doorway for a moment to assess the situation.

The room looks exactly how Kenzie described it to me. Tables are set at one end of the room for guests to rest or eat after grabbing items from the different vendors, then along the other half of the room are the vendors set up like little storefronts of a small town, the dance floor filling the "road" between them.

Everything is decked out in holiday colors and decor, from the makeshift storefronts to the table linens and centerpieces. The room looks exceptional.

Then Kenzie comes into view and takes my breath away.

She looks absolutely gorgeous. Her blonde hair is down and in curls, and she's wearing a deep-red dress with spaghetti straps that dips in the front enough to give a hint of her cleavage. The dress tucks in at her waist and cascades out. Attached to the fabric of her dress every so often are these feather-like things that make it look as if she's almost floating as she moves around the room.

Keeping my hands off her tonight is absolutely going to be a test of restraint.

"Phenomenal, right?"

The voice draws me from gawking at my girlfriend. I turn to my right to see Bethaney standing there with a wide smile.

"Sorry?" Did she catch me looking at Kenzie?

"Didn't everything turn out phenomenal?"

"Oh yeah, it looks fantastic." I nod.

"Thanks again for hooking me up with Kenzie. She's a lifesaver."

I glance in Kenzie's direction again. She's talking to the DJ who's set up in the corner. "She sure is."

She leans in and whispers, "I know, you know."

I whip my head back in Bethaney's direction. "What do you mean?"

She shrugs with a sly grin. "I know you two are a thing. Or at the very least that you like each other." She sips whatever

pink liquid is in her glass.

I clear my throat and shift in place. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Oh please.” She rolls her eyes. “It was obvious the first time I saw you guys together. I could’ve cut the sexual tension with a knife.”

I open my mouth to say something, but before I can, Mr. Simons steps up and wraps his arm around Bethaney’s waist. “There you are, sweetheart. Thought I’d lost you.”

“No, just chatting with Andrew.”

Mr. Simons surveys the room. “You did good, babe. This place looks amazing. Way better than the usual stuffy affairs we always have. Am I right?” He looks at me with an arched brow.

“Definite improvement.” I nod.

Bethaney soaks in our praise, beaming. “Thanks, you two. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go make the rounds. I want to make sure everyone is having a good time.”

“All right. Just make sure you save a dance for me.” He swats her ass, and she squeaks. To my surprise, Mr. Simons wraps his arm around my shoulders as he watches his fiancée walk away. “I want to thank you for finding that event planner to help Bethaney with this. I know she can be... overly enthusiastic at times, but this was important to her. She sees this as her coming out to all the employees at the firm and she wanted to do a good job. So thanks for your role in making that happen.”

I don’t know why the love I hear in his voice surprises me, but it does. I figured she was nothing more than a good time

and a hot piece of arm candy for him, but it's clear that she's much more than that. He might love her.

“You're welcome.”

He squeezes my shoulder and lets his arm drop. “That partner position is looking better and better for you, Wainwright.” Without another word, he walks off.

My pulse picks up and I have to bite back a whoop. Of course, I know nothing is set in stone, but having his endorsement is key to convincing the other partners that I'm the one who should make partner when Berns retires next year.

Rather than rush right over to Kenzie, which is what I want to do, I decide to detour to the bar. I see that she's speaking to Bethaney anyway. They each have one of those pink drinks in hand and are smiling and clinking their glasses together.

I make some small talk on my way over to the bar, doing my damndest to avoid Darla. I despise having to talk to my assistant on a daily basis at work, and I certainly don't want to do it at a social function. No such luck though. She corners me while I'm waiting for the bartender to make my drink.

“Hi, Andrew. I mean, Mr. Wainwright.”

I give her a small smile. “Hi, Darla. How are you this evening?” I don't bother to turn toward her, hoping she'll catch my hint.

“Great! Didn't the party turn out amazing? Bethaney really outdid herself.”

I want to tell her that it had nothing to do with Bethaney and everything to do with Kenzie and her ability to steer Bethaney away from her asinine ideas, but instead I say, “Everything looks wonderful.”

The bartender slides my drink toward me and I throw a bill in the tip jar.

“What’d you get to drink?”

I wrap my hand around the cold glass. “Scotch on the rocks.”

“Oh, you should try one of the drinks Bethaney gave me. They’re so good. Doesn’t even taste like there’s alcohol in them.” She holds up a glass with the same pink liquid that Bethaney had earlier. “I forget what they’re called though, so I’m hoping the bartender will know.”

“Well, I’ll step aside and let you get to it then. It was good to see you.” I give her a nod and disappear into the crowd.

It’s much busier in the room than when I first arrived, and it takes my eyes a moment to locate Kenzie again. I need to go tell her how beautiful she looks. But when I spot her, my stomach sinks, followed shortly by my viselike grip on the glass in my hand.

She’s on the outskirts of the dance floor, chatting with Tom Harding—my biggest competition for partner. He’s clearly into her. It’s obvious from his body language and the way he’s leaning into her more than is polite when she speaks.

For her part, Kenzie would have no idea who he is, and more than that, she has a smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes the way it does when she speaks with me.

That knowledge doesn’t stop the jealousy from flaring up inside me or my feet from moving in their direction. I push through the crowd, not stopping to talk to the handful of people who say hello until I reach them.

“Evening. What’s so funny?” I take a sip of my scotch and narrow my eyes over the rim of the glass at Tom. Corporate

law isn't exactly a riot, and that seems to be all Tom ever wants to talk about regardless of his audience.

“Hey, Wainwright. I just came over to tell our party planner here what a great job she did. Way better than years past, am I right?”

I sort of grunt and nod, then finally dare to look at Kenzie. She's looking between the two of us with a sort of amused expression.

“Well, I see Simons over there. I'd better go tell him what a great job Bethaney did on all this.” Tom clamps me on the shoulder. “That partner position isn't going to fill itself.” He gives me a cheesy wink that makes me want to punch the look off his face. That feeling intensifies when he turns to Kenzie and says, “Save a dance for me tonight, okay, beautiful?”

She blinks a few times. “I don't think I'll be dancing tonight. I must stay on top of things and make sure everything is going smoothly.” Then she takes a big swig of her drink.

Tom shrugs and walks off.

Though jealousy burns like a hot coal in my chest where my heart would normally be, I make what I think is the mature decision and decide not to mention it.

“You look gorgeous tonight.” My gaze dips to her cleavage, all the way down her body, and then up again.

“This old thing?” She pulls the skirt out to her sides and does a small curtsy.

“You're ravishing. You have no idea how bad I wish I could kiss you.” I lick my lips just thinking about it.

She chuckles. “I have some idea.” She rises on her tiptoes and whispers, “Because you are the epitome of suit porn

tonight.”

I laugh. “I don’t know what that is, but it has the word porn in it, so I’m going to say it’s a good thing.”

She steps closer. “It’s a great thing.” Then she takes another sip of her drink.

“Everything looks amazing. This never would have come together if it weren’t for you.”

She smiles at me. “Thank you. And thank you for getting me this gig. Bethaney already asked if I could help with next year’s party too.”

“That’s wonderful.” Forgetting myself, I step forward to embrace her but stop short at the last second. “It’s so hard remembering not to touch you.”

She sticks out her bottom lip. “I know, but it’s important to me that I be looked at as a professional.”

“I understand.”

We stand there awkwardly for a beat, unsure what to do since we can’t touch each other or do any of the things we want to right now.

“Well, I have to go check with the kitchen that dinner will be ready to be served shortly. Would you excuse me?”

“Sure thing.” I step back. “I’ll go mingle with all the boring lawyers. But just know that I’m counting down the minutes until I can take you home and strip that dress off you with my teeth.”

Her cheeks turn almost the same shade of red as her dress. Then she blows out a breath and leans in to whisper to me, “Want to know a secret? I’m not wearing any panties.”

She pulls away and winks before turning on her heel and disappearing through a door at the back that must lead to the kitchen.

Jesus, what this girl does to me.

Chapter Thirty-Two

KENZIE

After dinner is served, each of the partners says a few words to all the employees, then the DJ turns up the music to pull people onto the dance floor.

I'm starving, so I take another swig of the refilled drink Bethaney gave me. I don't know what it is, but it is *so* yummy. Especially for not having any alcohol in it.

I only had a chance to eat breakfast today. I was too busy making sure everything was perfect for tonight to grab lunch, and since then, I've been working and chatting with some of the firm's employees who have come to tell me how much they're enjoying themselves.

I glance across the room to see Andrew stuck talking to Darla at his table. I smile because I can tell he's merely biding his time until he can get away from her.

There's supposed to be a dessert bar later in the evening after the hour of karaoke. Yep, karaoke. It was the one thing I couldn't talk Bethaney out of, but at least I narrowed down the time frame from two hours to one.

I slip through the door at the back of the event space that leads to the kitchen to go let the chef know what time karaoke will start so he can ensure his staff has the dessert bar set up in time. It seems the best way to distract the guests from the fact

that their drunk coworkers will be singing karaoke is with sweets.

Once I nail down the timing with the chef, I leave the kitchen to head back down the hall to the party, but I hear my name when I pass one of the staff rooms.

“Kenzie!”

I stop and double back, finding Andrew inside the small room that looks as though it’s a break room for the waitstaff. He pulls me into the room and presses his lips to mine.

So much for being professional. I sink into the kiss, running my hands up his chest and into the back of his hair. Our tongues tangle and his hand roams, coming to settle over my breast.

“Do you really not have any knickers on?” His hand slips down under my dress, fighting with the layers until he’s able to feel between my thighs, then he groans. “Fuck me, you don’t.”

He drags one finger over my clit, and though I moan and my head falls back, I manage to remember where we are when I spot an eyewash station on the wall.

“Andrew, we can’t. Not here.” I bat his hand away and step back.

“Jesus, I know, I know.” He pushes a hand through his hair and turns away from me. “It’s just you look so hot tonight. It’s hard to stay away from you.”

I smile, knowing exactly what he means. He’s droolworthy in his three-piece suit.

“We only have a few more hours left,” I tell him, and he nods.

“Yep. I can do this. But all bets are off when we get back to my place.” He looks at me in a predatory way and it fires up all my nerve endings.

I can't wait to be alone with him later.

“Okay, you go out first. I'll wait a minute before I rejoin the party.” I motion for him to go. If he doesn't leave soon, I'm going to let him fuck me right here.

He frowns and nods but turns to leave. I wait about two minutes, then slip back into the party myself. I stand on the outskirts of the crowd, observing and making sure everything is as it should be.

Bethaney comes up beside me. “So... I saw you and Andrew come out of the back hallway a little bit ago. What's going on with the two of you?”

I swallow hard. Oh shit. Turning to face her, I give her a look I hope says, “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Don't try to hide it. I know what you two were probably doing back there.”

My cheeks heat in embarrassment.

“I'm not gonna tell anyone, don't worry. Richie and I do that kinda stuff all the time. It's more fun if you think you might get caught, am I right?” She waggles her eyebrows. “Here, you look like you need this.”

She passes me a fresh glass of that pink stuff and I take it and practically chug the whole thing.

What will Andrew say when he finds out Bethaney is on to us? I was the one worried tonight, so we never really discussed the problem. I'm not sure how Andrew would feel if we were outed.

“Please don’t say anything.”

She meets my gaze. “I said I wouldn’t, but like, duh. It’s been obvious he’s into you since you started coming into the office, just sayin’.”

“You think so?” I finish what’s left of my drink.

“Absolutely. The way he looks at you with puppy-dog eyes when you’re talking or coming up with ideas for the party. How he used to walk you all the way down to the lobby anytime you left? The fact that he suggested you for the party in the first place and offered to help you with it? He doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who enjoys party planning.”

I can’t help but laugh. “True enough.”

Sometimes I think I could actually be friends with Bethaney. She’s not what she first appears, not really.

I glance over to see Andrew talking with one of the other partners. He’s not really what he seems at first either.

“Anyway, I’m going to go dance for a bit before karaoke. I have my perfect song picked out. Can’t wait!” She takes a couple of steps away then spins back around. “You want another of those drinks?”

I hold up the now empty glass as my stomach rumbles. “Sure thing.”

“All right. I’ll circle back around after I grab myself one.” She disappears into the crowd.

* * *

We’re a few songs into karaoke and I’m wondering what I was so worried about. This is actually a lot of fun! In fact, I’m

having the best time tonight!

I'm feeling so good right now, and I'm so tired of standing off in the corner and not having any of the fun. I've had to watch Andrew from afar all night when all I really want to do is drag him back to the break room and have my way with him.

In fact, maybe I should do that. I'm pondering that as an option when Bethaney finishes her version of Elvis's "Blue Christmas" and hands the microphone back to the DJ, who cues up the next song and passes it to a guy I met earlier. I think he said he worked in accounting.

"That was awesome!" I tell her as she passes me.

"Thank you! I see you're feeling good off the good stuff." She motions to the drink in my hand.

I look at her funny. "What do you mean? This is just juice." I start laughing but stop when I realize she's not joining me in finding this funny. I hold up the drink and some of the liquid splashes over the side onto my hand. "Wait. Bethaney, there's no alcohol in this, right? You said there wasn't any."

"Of course there's alcohol in it." She gives me a duh look. "It's a party! I was just giving you a little liquid courage so you could let Andrew know how you feel." She grins at me, and her lips sort of move in waves.

I don't know if that's actually happening or if it's the alcohol, but it's kinda cool.

I shake my head, trying to get back to my original thoughts. Alcohol. Right.

"Bethaney, I can't be drinking at a work event!" Panic tries to grip me, but its hold is fuzzy at best in my current state. I

just can't seem to work up the indignation I know I should feel.

"It's fine. Everyone's drinking. It's a party!" Circling around and dancing in place, she holds up her glass and finishes off what's in there as if to prove how much of a party it is.

"I guess."

She stops dancing and her eyes go wide. "Hey, I have an idea," she says as though she just figured out how to solve world hunger.

I step closer to her. "What is it?"

She leans in and whispers in my ear. Even though I have a momentary pause where I wonder whether this really is the best thing, I push that thought aside because who doesn't love surprises? Especially surprises that involve Christmas!

"Good idea."

"Yay!" She claps her free hand against her glass and rushes off toward the DJ to make it happen.

As soon as the guy from accounting is done singing "Silver Bells"—God, what a snooze fest that is for a party as fun as this—Bethaney takes the microphone from him and leans in to tell the DJ something. I toss back the remainder of my drink and leave the glass on a nearby table while I make my way to the center of the dance floor. It's a little harder to walk than I remember, but I get there nonetheless.

Glancing around, I don't see Andrew in the crowd until he makes his way to the edge of the dance floor. I wave enthusiastically to him, and he returns my gesture with the lamest wave known to man.

Bethaney's voice comes over the mic. "Okay, everyone, we have a very special performer this time. This is our event planner, Kenzie. Let's give it up for her."

Everyone cheers and it feels good, so I raise my hands in the air, sort of how a boxer might if they won a match.

"Kenzie is going to sing this song to someone very special tonight. It's the perfect way to tell him how he feels. Andrew Wainwright, will you please come out onto the dance floor?" She grabs a chair from a nearby table and drags it over so it's in front of me. "Andrew, where are you?"

"There he is." I point to where he still stands, except now, he has this weird expression on his face, almost like he might puke.

When he doesn't move, Bethaney rushes over and grabs Andrew's arm, dragging him out onto the floor. She forces him to sit in the chair as the opening sounds of Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas" play.

She quickly passes the mic off to me, and I sing. The crowd really cheers me on when the tempo of the song picks up and I make a show of dragging my hand over Andrew's chest and walking around him, peeking over his shoulder while singing to him. At some point, I sit on his lap and shimmy around, but when I start to use my free hand to pull my dress up a bit and be cheeky, he stops me.

I frown. Why is he ruining my fun?

I try it again, and when he does the same thing, I stand and turn to face him, shimmying close to him, shaking my chest so my breasts bounce in his face.

But he's not even looking at me. He's looking around at the crowd and I look over too. A lot of them have their cell

phones out, taping us, and are laughing and cheering me on. I smile at the cameras and turn back to face Andrew, but I pause.

His face looks weird, and he seems as though he's breathing kind of funny. Without a word, he stands and pushes past me, running out of the room.

I stand there dumbfounded until the music cuts out and someone comes over and takes the microphone from my hand.

Something is wrong with him. I'd better go see what.

I find him waiting at the elevator.

"Why did you run off?" I stand beside him and place my hand on his shoulder.

He brushes it off, and that's when I realize he might be mad at me.

"Andrew, what's wrong?"

He whips around to face me. "What's wrong? You really have to ask?"

I blink, not sure what to say and unprepared for his anger.

"You practically just gave me a striptease in front of all my coworkers and my bosses. I'm trying to make partner. What the hell were you thinking?" His voice is raised and there's so much venom in it that it takes me a minute to respond.

"I was thinking it would be a fun way to show you I love you."

He stills at my words then, similar to the night I first met him, all the emotion on his face is shuttered away. "If that were true, you wouldn't have done what you just did. You would've thought about how I'd feel about it."

“Well, I’m sorry. I’m pretty tipsy right now!” I throw my hands out to my sides and almost lose my balance but reach out for the wall to keep myself upright.

“Why the hell were you drinking? Can’t you be a professional? Jesus.”

The elevator dings and he walks straight in, not even bothering to check if I follow. Which I do, because screw him. He’s being a jerk.

He hits the button for the lobby and doesn’t bother to look in my direction.

“I’m sorry if I embarrassed you,” I say meekly.

That causes him to look at me but not the way he normally does. “Embarrassed me? I’m fucking mortified. Not only do I not want my coworkers to know my business, but you basically just handed them a juicy story to gossip about by singing and dancing around me like a lunatic. Did you see everyone filming? That’s gonna be online by the end of the night. Use your head, Kenzie.”

Tears spring to my eyes. Maybe I made a mistake, but I don’t deserve to be made to feel this way. It’s too familiar. Andrew’s words rip open the scab I’ve been trying to heal since childhood.

“Bethaney gave me some drinks and told me there wasn’t alcohol in them, but there was. By the time I knew, it was too late. And when she suggested...” What does it matter what I say? His mind is made up. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well, sorry doesn’t fix it. I thought you really cared about me, but as usual, I was wrong. If you did, you would’ve never pulled a stunt like that. Fucking Christmas.”

The elevator dings and the doors open. He steps out, but I stay put, watching as he makes his way through the hotel lobby without once glancing back.

His words ring through my head over and over, and each one feels like a stab to the chest. I watch as the elevator doors close on any future the two of us could have had.

Chapter Thirty-Three

ANDREW

I haven't slept. Not even for a minute, though my body feels completely fatigued and a little like it got run over by a truck.

I don't know what happened last night. One minute I was in the present at the firm's party, and the next thing I know, I was back in London on the night I proposed, a hundred cameras bearing witness to my utter humiliation. My chest grew tight, and I felt as though I couldn't breathe. All I knew was that I needed to get out of there and away from Kenzie. Away from anyone.

But in the light of day, I can see that I overreacted. Sure, Kenzie was drunk and will probably be mortified about her behavior, but I shouldn't have left her there. I have no idea how she got home and whether she made it safely. What kind of boyfriend does that?

I push my hand through my hair while I sip my second cup of coffee, wondering how I'm going to fix this. I'm not too worried about work. I mean, it's not against company policy to run out of the Christmas party, albeit embarrassing. And I'll certainly have some explaining to do about exactly why Kenzie was attempting to do a striptease for me in the middle of the party.

But I am worried about Kenzie and what she'll have to say about what happened, the words I spit at her.

Rather than putting it off any longer, I dial her number, but she doesn't answer. Maybe she's still sleeping off her hangover. It's still early.

I figure I'll clean myself up, so I go shower. I dial her number again once I'm dressed. Still no answer.

Unease makes my digestive tract feel like river rapids.

Fuck it, I'll just go to her place. At the very least, I need to make sure she got home all right.

This early on a Saturday morning, it doesn't take me long to make it to her building. The morning is bitter cold, and since I left my place in a rush, I don't have a hat or gloves. After I buzz her apartment, I rub my hands together and wait for her to answer.

Unease turns to worry when there's no answer. I hit the button again and wait.

When I hear something behind me, I turn, hoping it will be Kenzie, but I find Mrs. Hoffmeister at the bottom of the stairs with a plastic bag from the corner store.

I rush down the steps to her. "Mrs. Hoffmeister. I'm so glad to see you. Do you know if Kenzie is home?"

She narrows her eyes at me and gives me the once-over. "Shouldn't you know that, lover boy?"

"Something... happened last night. I just want to make sure she's okay."

She brushes past me and starts slowly up the stairs. "Maybe she just doesn't want to see you."

“Do you know if she made it home all right last night?” I ask again.

She shrugs.

“I know you sit out here late smoking. Did you see her at all?”

“Maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t.” She reaches the top step and takes a break to catch her breath.

I walk back up the steps and stand beside her. “Will you let me in the building? I need to see her. Even if it’s just to make sure she’s okay. If she doesn’t want to talk to me, I’ll leave. I swear.” I hold up my hands to show her I mean no harm.

The old woman sighs and studies me. “Fine. But I’m only letting you in because you’re good for her. But if she doesn’t want to see you, you must leave.”

I nod a bunch of times. “I will. I just need to make sure she’s okay.”

Mrs. Hoffmeister grumbles something I can’t make out and unlocks the building door. She turns to look at me over her shoulder. “Don’t make me regret this.”

As soon as the door is open, I bolt past her. “I won’t!”

I take the stairs two at a time and bang on Kenzie’s door when I reach it.

“Kenzie, are you in there? Please open up. I need to know you’re okay.”

I hear nothing for a minute, but when I’m about to knock again, the locks on the door disengage and the door whips open. Despite how rough Kenzie looks, my muscles relax with relief that she made it home okay.

“What are you doing here?” Her voice is rough, and from how puffy her eyes are, it’s clear she’s been crying. A fissure forms in my heart, knowing I’m the one who caused those tears.

“I had to make sure you got home after I...”

“You don’t need to worry about me anymore, Andrew. You made it pretty clear last night that I’m an embarrassment to you.”

I cringe at the memory of what I said. “I didn’t mean it. I don’t know what happened. The whole thing just brought up a lot of stuff for me from the past and that, coupled with the realization that I was falling in—”

She holds up her hand as though she might just cover my mouth with her hand if I finish that sentence. “Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare say it now.”

“I panicked. I’m sorry, Kenzie.” I reach out to take her shoulders, but she steps back. The door starts to close between us, and I stick my foot out to stop it.

“I have never felt more rejected or embarrassed or unloved than I did last night and that’s saying something for me.” She points at herself.

That fissure becomes a gorge through my heart.

“Can I just come in so we can talk about this?” I plead.

She shakes her head before I’m even finished speaking. “No, I think you said everything you needed to say last night.”

“I didn’t mean what I said last night.” My eyes burn as I try to hold back tears.

“I think maybe you did.”

I stare at her, begging with my eyes for her to let me explain.

“I know what happened when Audrey did a number on you, Andrew, but I can’t be with someone who continues to let the past rule him. I want to live in the present with someone who can give me all of himself. Not just the pieces he’s not holding back to protect himself. I deserve that.”

“I know you deserve that.” I let my chin drop and stare at the floor.

“And because I love you, I’m going to tell you this... you need to figure this shit out before you’ll be able to be happy with anyone. Sometimes you have to let yourself go, be willing to fall, and have faith that you’ll stick the landing. Even if you didn’t the first time.”

She starts to close the door, but it bumps against my foot.

“Please, Kenzie.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t.” She pushes on the door, and I step back, letting her close the door in my face and on our future.

Chapter Thirty-Four

ANDREW

I end up at the only person's house who can help me make it right with Kenzie, since he's known her the longest.

"Hey, man. Surprised to see you," Finn says when he opens the door of his condo.

I didn't tell him I was coming. I've been wandering the city, aimlessly walking for hours and thinking about what Kenzie said about figuring my shit out.

"Yeah, sorry to barge in unannounced, but it's important."

"No problem. Though you look like you're freezing your ass off. How long were you out there? Want a coffee or something?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah, that'd be great, thanks."

I wait in his living room while he makes some coffee with the fancy machine in his kitchen. The feeling in my fingers has come back a bit by the time he joins me, handing me a mug.

"Thanks." I wrap both hands around the mug, hoping it will help warm up my hands faster. "Where's Zahra?"

"She's out with her sister doing some last-minute Christmas shopping."

I nod, trying to buy time and figure out how I want to start this conversation. I really have no idea how he'll react when

he finds out Kenzie and I have been sneaking around behind his back. There's no guarantee he'll even want to help me get her back.

“So, what's going on? You look like shit. What's up?” he asks, leaning back in the chair across from where I sit on the couch.

I stand, unable to sit still while I confess my sins. And so, I tell him. All of it. From the first date to me asking her to help with the firm's party to why Kenzie didn't want him to know about us quite yet. I even tell him about our weekend away, minus the sex stuff. Figure he doesn't want to hear about how many times I made his sister come that weekend.

When I finish, I sit back down and wait for his censure. I couldn't read him while I was talking. He kept his expression blank. Though I did notice him squeeze the armrests of the chair a few times throughout my speech.

“You mean that when I introduced you two on Thanksgiving, you actually already knew each other?”

I sigh, then nod. “To be clear, we hadn't started dating at that point.”

“But not long after. And you guys were doing stuff and basically going on dates together whether you were calling it that or not.”

I nod again, then hang my head.

He stands abruptly and paces, pushing his hand through his hair. “I can't fucking believe this. You've been running around with my little sister and lying to me about it.”

I don't even bother to defend myself. What would be the point? He's right.

“So why are you here telling me this now? Why isn’t Mac here with you?”

This is the hard part. Even harder than telling him that I’ve been fucking his sister is telling him that I hurt his sister.

So I launch into my story about the past and the proposal to Audrey, something Finn knows nothing about. Then I explain what happened last night and this morning, watching as his jaw tics when I describe how I hurt his sister.

“Oh, and so now I’m worth telling... now that you need my help, is that it?”

Jesus, I feel like a piece of shit. “It’s not like that. We planned to tell you before Christmas anyway. Kenz just wanted to get through this week and all the events she had going for work.”

“Kenz?” He arches an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry I lied to you, Finn. You’re my best mate, and if it’s any consolation, I didn’t like doing it. But I love your sister, and I’m positive she loves me, and whether I have your help or not, I’m going to do everything in my power to get her back.” My words are like steel—hard and impenetrable.

“You love her?”

I nod. “Very much. I just haven’t had an opportunity to tell her yet.”

Slowly, a huge grin forms on his face. He walks over to me and tugs me up off the couch, pulling me into an embrace and smacking me on the back. “Talk about burying the lede. Why the hell didn’t you start with that?”

A relieved chuckle leaves my lips.

He pulls back and clamps me on the shoulder. “Of course I’ll help you. I know what I’d feel like if Zahra left me. If you love Mac, I’ll do whatever I can to help you win her back. But know that she’s a stubborn one when she wants to be.”

I think of her refusal to accept that I didn’t like Christmas and how determined she was to change my mind. “Oh, trust me, I know.”

Let the plotting begin.

* * *

When I return to work on Monday, I go into Mr. Simons’s office to provide some sort of explanation about what happened at the holiday party. To my surprise, he doesn’t seem concerned about it.

“Love makes you do crazy things, I get it.” He waves me off as though it’s no big deal.

“Still, it was wholly unprofessional of me, so please accept my apology.”

“Consider it done. Can I tell you something though?”

I nod for him to continue.

“Don’t worry about what everyone else thinks. If you love this girl, do whatever it takes to make it happen. Look at me. I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life. And believe me, I know what everyone says behind my back—that I divorced my wife because I met someone younger and I wanted a trophy wife. But that’s not it. I was in an unhappy marriage for a very long time, and I’d accepted that the rest of my days would be spent here, giving my all to the firm because I didn’t want to give anything to my partner. But then I met Bethaney.”

He chuckles and shakes his head, clearly picturing something about their first meeting. “I met her, and she knocked me off my feet. She wasn’t trying to, and I wasn’t looking for her. It just happened. So before I pursued anything with Bethaney, I went home and told my wife I wanted a divorce. Do you know she didn’t fight me on it? I think she was almost relieved that one of us had said what we both knew for a long time—that our marriage was over. And now, from what my kids tell me, she’s happily dating around and seems more content than they’ve ever known her.”

“That’s wonderful, sir.”

“Don’t let what other people think stop you from taking a risk at being happy. That’s what I’m saying to you.”

I nod, understanding now that he’s right. It just took me too long to get my head out of my ass.

The other two partners aren’t as understanding as Mr. Simons, but they accept my apology for making a scene after I assure them it will never happen again.

Making partner doesn’t seem so important right now, because what I care about the most is getting Kenzie back. If she agrees to be with me after my grand gesture on Friday, then I’ll be a happy man—partner or not.

There’s so much to do to get ready for Friday, so rather than get to work as soon as I get back to my office, I make a few phone calls to put everything in place.

This has to work. It has to.

I cannot live without her.

Chapter Thirty-Five

KENZIE

It's Christmas Eve. I should be on top of the world, but instead of listening to Christmas carols in my earbuds, I'm listening to Nine Inch Nails' "Hurt." This is the first Christmas I can remember, besides the year my grandparents died, when I'm not in the mood to celebrate.

After Andrew left my apartment Saturday morning, I called Tessa, and she came over and we watched every sad movie known to man while gorging on pizza and chocolate. None of it made me feel better though.

So when my brother called earlier this week and insisted I join him and Zahra down at the Rockefeller tree tonight, I tried to get out of it, but I couldn't because I couldn't tell him why I was so depressed. That his best friend had broken my heart when he made me feel unworthy.

I had enough of that feeling growing up with my parents, and I'm not willing to accept it from the man I love. Even if I did almost call him five times this week to hear him out. The point is, I never did. I stayed strong.

I pull my earbuds from my ears as I approach the tree, shining tall and bright and strong in the night, return them to the case, and slide it into my purse. Time to put on a brave face.

I pull out my phone and text my brother to tell him where I am. There're so many people here, it will be hard to find him on my own. He messages me back that he and Zahra are standing right in front of the tree.

Sliding my phone into my pocket, I make my way over there, pushing through the crowd and doing my best to duck under people's phones as they film or take pictures of the massive tree. Normally the sight of the tree would send a ripple of excitement through me, especially on Christmas Eve, but tonight it makes my stomach clench. This Christmas isn't at all what I hoped it would be.

I spot my brother and Zahra, bundled up in their coats, hats, and scarves and standing together. Zahra sees me first and gives me an excited wave, which I return.

I'm looking forward to having a sister-in-law, especially one as upbeat as she always seems to be.

As I approach, I notice an extra gleam in both their eyes. I'm not sure what for. Maybe it's because it's their first Christmas together.

"Hi, guys." I put on my best smile and hug them both.

"Hey, Mac. Thanks for meeting us here." Finn gives me a weird look I can't quite decipher.

"Well, you wouldn't let me say no, so..." I lift both my arms in a "here I am" gesture, unintentionally hitting someone on my right side. "Oh, I'm sorry." I turn as I'm speaking and still.

Andrew stands there, and the way his gaze bounces all over my face reminds me of a man in the desert who's just come upon water.

I turn to my brother. “You didn’t say he’d be joining us.” I try to keep my voice even so as not to give anything away, but I’m only ninety percent sure I’m successful.

Before my brother can respond, Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas” plays through the massive speakers. It’s all I can do not to roll my eyes. It’s like the universe is trolling me.

“Kenzie.” It’s Andrew’s voice, but it’s not just coming from beside me. It’s coming from the speakers, louder than the music.

With wide eyes, I turn to my right again and see Andrew’s holding a microphone.

What the hell is going on?

I glance at Finn and Zahra, and they both have wide smiles, void of any surprise.

“Kenzie Montgomery, when we first met, I didn’t know what to make of you, and I know you didn’t like me.”

I glance around and see that a lot of people in the crowd are noticing what’s going on and turning their attention our way.

“I know I messed up, and you were right to call me out on my crap. But I refuse to accept that this is the end of us. In the short time I’ve known you, you’ve made me feel a way I didn’t think was possible. Something I’ve never felt before, something I know I’ll never feel again if I let you go.”

Andrew steps forward and takes my hand. I don’t pull away. I can’t. I’m lost in his gaze and in this crazy thing he’s doing in front of all these people. I mean, if he’s doing this, he has to be over the past, right?

“For too long, I let the past rule the present, and I want you to know that I am done with that. I’m done with being afraid and second-guessing what I think you feel for me. I’m done with caring whether I’m being vulnerable in front of other people or not, and I’m done with holding back. The holidays used to make me think of the worst time in my life. Now, they make me think of you, which in case you haven’t figured it out yet, means that I’m thinking of the best time of my life because Christmas is when I fell in love with you.” He smiles so brilliantly it takes my breath away.

I hear a few awws in the crowd, but I can’t look away from this man who holds my whole heart.

“I once asked you what you loved about Christmas and what made it so great. You had your list of reasons and they all made sense, but I want you to know that I finally figured out what makes Christmas great to me. Having someone to share it with. And having someone in my life I love so much that her joy brings me greater joy.”

He holds the microphone out to my brother, who takes it and keeps it close to Andrew’s mouth as he gets down on one knee in front of me.

All the air leaves my lungs in a whoosh and my hands fly up to cover my mouth.

“MacKenzie Alisha Montgomery... I had to ask your brother your middle name, by the way.” He winks, and I chuckle. “Will you do me the greatest honor of my life and agree to become my wife? I cannot imagine my life without you in it, and I refuse to celebrate any more Christmases without you by my side.”

He pulls a ring box out of his coat pocket and opens it, revealing a gorgeous large cushion-cut diamond surrounded by

smaller diamonds on a thin band.

Tears stream down my face while I attempt to collect myself. I'm so filled with love for this man that I fear I can't contain it and I'll burst like a balloon.

"Did she say yes?" someone shouts in the crowd, and it snaps me out of my daze.

I nod, sticking my hand out toward Andrew, who's still on his knee. He gently pulls off my leather glove and slides the ring onto my finger before squeezing my hand.

The crowd cheers and shouts their congratulations.

Without hesitation, I drop to my knees and wrap my arms around his neck. "I missed you. I can't believe you did this in front of everyone."

When I pull back, he cups my cheeks. "I had to prove to you that I'd do anything for you. Even face my greatest fear."

We come together in a meeting of lips and limbs, clinging to each other as though we'll never let go.

And I won't, because I found my Christmas miracle—I transformed a Scrooge.

Epilogue

ANDREW

Exactly One Year Later...

I stare anxiously at the end of the hallway, waiting for my bride to appear.

We opted for a Christmas Eve wedding, because of course we did. I'm marrying Kenzie Montgomery after all.

It didn't matter to me what day we were married, as long as I got to make this woman my wife.

After our engagement last Christmas Eve, we toyed with the idea of a large wedding and went back and forth on whether Kenzie should plan it or let someone else do it so she could enjoy her day. In the end, we decided to have a small wedding at my condo, now our condo.

I mean, really small. There's only Finn, Zahra, Tessa, and the minister here.

Yeah, we're both going to catch shit from our parents when they figure out that we got married without them, but we want an intimate ceremony that's about us. Not about the pomp and circumstance. And when the discussion began between our parents about whether or not the wedding should

take place in America or London, we knew there would be no pleasing everyone, so we might as well please ourselves.

“You ready for this?” Finn clamps me on the shoulder, his wedding band catching the light.

“Are you kidding me? I’ve been counting down the days.”

Finn and Zahra were married in the summer, and Kenzie did a phenomenal job on their wedding. Her parents even complimented her, which I know meant a lot to her.

“Quite the year for you. First an engagement, then you made partner, and now you’re getting married. What will be next?” he asks.

He glances at Zahra, who’s emerging from the hallway, hand on her slightly swollen belly. They weren’t kidding when they said they wanted to start a family right away. I’m happy for those two, but Kenzie and I have discussed it and we’re going to wait a couple of years before we start a family.

I was made partner earlier this year, and though it’s meant I’m working more than ever, Kenzie doesn’t seem to mind. Her business has really taken off, and she’s working a lot too. It just means we value the time we have together more.

Though I’d be lying if I said I’m not looking forward to our two-week honeymoon in Fiji starting on the twenty-sixth. Two weeks of sun, relaxation, and sex with my wife sounds divine.

“Our girl is all set.” Zahra grins and gives Finn a chaste kiss.

“Fantastic.” I glance once again at the hall as if Kenzie will magically appear there.

Tessa joins us a minute later, wearing a silver-colored bridesmaid's dress, and gives us the go-ahead.

The minister takes his position and I wait, holding my breath until my bride appears. Then it all whooshes out of my lungs because this woman leaves me breathless.

Kenzie appears at the end of the hallway in a cap-sleeve gown with a sweetheart neckline. I know all this because of the plethora of wedding dress magazines she forced me to look at this year. Lace covers the top part of her dress and falls just below the A-line skirt. But the lace is threaded through with silver accents. Her hair is curled and pulled back from her face, and on one side, it looks as though she has a small birch branch with red berries and a hint of evergreen. I realize it matches her bouquet.

She's every bit a Christmas bride, and I grin at her. I'm so happy and lucky to be able to spend the rest of my life with her.

Tessa starts the bridal march, and Kenzie makes her way to me. We don't drop our gazes once. Over the soft music, there's a ringing I can't place. I'm certain it's not coming from the music.

As soon as she reaches me, I cup her face. "You look exquisite."

"Thank you. You clean up pretty well yourself. I love you in a tux."

"Maybe I'll wear this the next time you wear the elf costume." I wink at her and she laughs.

"All right, you two, get on with it," Finn warns, clearly understanding that we're talking about sex.

Kenzie hands her bouquet to Tessa, and the minister begins.

We each promise ourselves to the other for the rest of our lives, and when all is said and done, Kenzie holds up a mistletoe—as if I need greenery to kiss her. I dip my new bride and kiss her in a way that should probably be saved for the bedroom.

We walk down the small aisle, and again bells ring. All I can hear is that little girl’s voice from that Christmas movie, “Every time a bell rings, an angel gets their wings.”

I stop Kenzie at the end of the aisle. “Do you hear them?”

Her smile says she’s up to something. “What?”

“The bells?”

She points down and lifts the bottom of her dress, showing off the green elf shoes with bells that she was wearing on our first date. “They’re good luck.”

I bend and kiss her. “Yes, they are.”

We’re having a catered meal, so after we take some pictures with our phones—neither of us wanted to have professional photos done—we sit in the dining room to eat. The caterer has just placed the food on the table—a Christmas dinner, of course—when I pour everyone a glass of champagne and raise my glass.

I stand beside Kenzie at the head of the table. “I’d like to give a toast to my new bride. Kenzie, I have never been happier than I have been since I met you. Thank you for taking pity on a Scrooge and making him see the error of his ways. I know that whatever life brings us, we’ll face it together. I love you.”

We all clink our glasses, and I notice that Kenzie doesn't drink from hers.

I sit back down and kiss her, then say, "You know it's bad luck if you toast and don't drink from your glass."

I'm not really a superstitious person, but there's no point in tempting fate.

Her mouth drops open as though she wants to say something, but she looks unsure of herself.

"What's wrong?" My forehead wrinkles.

She sighs and her shoulders sag a bit. "I was going to wait until the honeymoon but... we've spawned a little elf of our own!"

My eyes widen and my mouth drops open. I close it and open it again, trying to find words.

"Are you upset?"

I see the concern in her eyes, and that snaps me out of my shock. "Why would I be upset?" I cup her face.

"I know we said we'd wait a couple of years and we didn't plan this—"

I shut her up by pressing my lips to hers, and when I pull away, I take her hand. "Know this, MacKenzie *Wainwright*. Nothing could make me happier than starting a family with you, even if it's not exactly when we planned it. Sometimes life gives you the best surprises when you don't think you're ready for them."

She nods, her eyes watery. "Just look at us."

"Exactly... just look at us. Am I to assume the elf shoes will be at the hospital during delivery?"

She giggles and moves her feet, making the bells ring. I guess that's a yes.

* * *

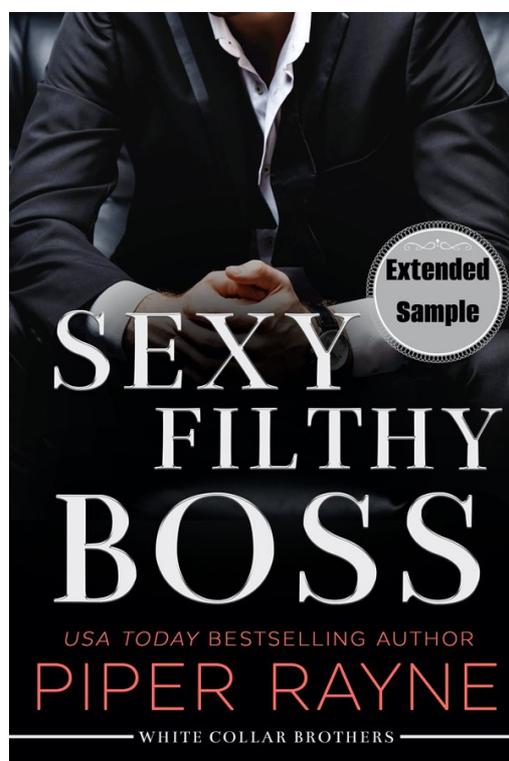
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He’s the sexy alpha male in the corner office who goes through assistants faster than free donuts in the breakroom.

I’m the assistant who was chosen to cover for his last fire.

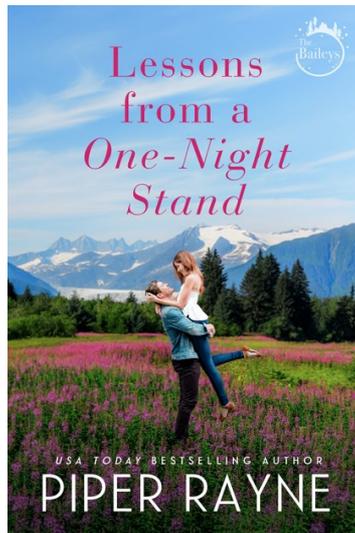
The owner of the company is clear—hook the biggest client in our firm’s history and there’s a partnership for him and a promotion for me. Stipulation—we do it together.

It doesn’t take a tarot card-reading psychic to figure out where our story is headed... late nights, trips out of town, and more than a few awkward moments filled with sexual tension.

No worries though. I pride myself on my willpower. I can totally ignore his sexy grin, his rock-hard body and his dreamy brown eyes. I will not become the woman other women hate.

But it turns out that Enzo Mancini has a lot of layers and if I don’t stop peeling, I’m going to lose everything, including my dignity.

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Austin

The handsome guy on stage with his jaw hanging wide open, shock and awe in his eyes?

That'd be me. Austin Bailey. Eldest brother of the Bailey clan, guardian to my younger siblings, biology teacher extraordinaire, baseball coach, good neighbor, and all-round pretty great guy.

Before we dive into the fact that karma just raised its middle finger at me, you should hear how my day began.

Today started like every other day. I woke up, got ready, prepared breakfast for my ungrateful twin sisters, Phoenix and Sedona, then we all hopped into my Jeep to head to school.

Of course, Phoenix didn't eat the pancakes. Her exact words, if I remember correctly were, "They taste like cardboard. Can't you just follow the recipe?"

Sedona ate the pancakes, but as soon as we pulled into the parking lot of Lake Starlight High School, where they're seniors, her appreciation for me ended. "Park in the back, I don't want to be seen stepping out of this monstrosity."

I've learned that there's no pleasing a teenager, especially a female one—no offense, ladies, but her comment still irks me. How is my Jeep embarrassing? It has a snorkel so when I off-road, I don't have to spend my money on a new engine and can instead afford to buy her whatever new outfit she wants. She should be grateful, thanking me. But she's seventeen. Pleasing her is impossible.

I purposely park in the first row and honk my horn to announce our arrival, because pissing off Sedona is one of my top five favorite things to do. *I'll miss that come next year.*

Phoenix's stomach rumbles as she exits the car. Sedona has already raced off to the nearest entrance as if that creepy *IT* clown is following her.

I stroll toward the door, reloading my emails on my phone, hoping I received the response I've been waiting for and that it contains good news. Elijah, my star pitcher, cuts me off.

"Coach, I need some advice." He runs his fingers through his long hair.

“How to cut your hair? Come see me. I’ve got clippers in my office.”

It’s like a contest these days for the kids to see who can grow their hair and look the most unkempt. I don’t get the appeal, and Elijah is the worst of them all.

“No, Coach, Becca broke up with me.” There’s a hitch in his voice. His eyes scour the courtyard, where most of the kids hang out until the first bell rings.

I stuff my phone into the pocket of my jacket. “Why?”

“Well...” He runs his fingers through his hair again.

For the love of God. Next season if I’m still here, I’m making a new rule—if your hair covers your eyes, I’m your barber.

Of course, then JP’s mom will call to complain. She *always* calls. I think if we changed the flavor of the performance drink we give them from strawberry to lime, she’d call. You know the type. She probably still wipes his ass to make sure he did it right. And though I understand that the Andrews family has had its share of heartbreak, she was like that before *and* after.

I push JP’s mom out of my head because just the thought of dealing with her will give me a headache. “What’d you do?”

I open the door to the hallway. With it being Monday morning, my fellow teachers nod, gripping their coffee mugs like life vests.

A group of three girls lingering around one locker follow Elijah as we head down the hall. I’m not blind. He’s kind of a big deal around here, and I can guess what path his teenage hormones led him down. They’re tricky fuckers to manage.

“You know Sara Pylar?” Elijah asks in a tentative voice.

See? Too bad I can’t bet on my players’ screw-ups. I wouldn’t be working here, that’s for sure. I’d be a rich man.

I open up the door to my classroom, and Elijah heads in first.

Do I know Sara Pylar? Of course, I do. She’s usually the one in the short skirt with her finger twirling a strand of her hair. The worse her grades are, the more bubble gum she chews while she asks to move to the front row so she can see the smart board better. Sara would eat up and spit out a kid like Elijah if he ever tried to tangle with her.

“Yeah, I know Sara.”

He sits in the chair next to my desk. “There was this dare...”

“Nothing good comes from those.” I cross my arms.

“JP was razzing me about how I’ve only ever kissed Becca and that when I go to college, we’ll break up and how the girls at college are on another level.” His eyes widen, silently asking me.

I went to college. I played in college, and at one time, I thought maybe I’d hit the majors. Then family responsibilities brought me back to Lake Starlight. Now I teach and try to advise kids like Elijah not to make the mistakes I did. Then again, youth is your free pass to do stupid shit.

“Girls in college are the girls you went to high school with but a little older.” I sit in my chair, grabbing a pen.

“He said I’d regret not having experience.”

My gaze lands on the clock. Elijah has about five minutes before first class bell. I hold up my hand to stop him from

rambling. “Listen.”

Elijah is good enough to be drafted first round, and this town can't wait to see him succeed. He'll have plenty of temptation come his way over the years, and he needs to decide now how he's going to handle it.

“Did you kiss Sara?” I ask.

“No, but...”

“I'm gonna guess here and tell me if I'm wrong.” He closes his mouth, so I continue. “You let your friends get to you. JP, whose mom probably follows him on his dates you do realize, tells you that you don't have enough experience and should kiss another girl.”

He's nodding and smirking because everyone knows JP's mom will probably put up spy cameras in his dorm room next year.

“You thought, ‘Hey, what if Becca does break my heart and fall for someone next fall? Where does that leave me?’ So, you went into a bedroom or somewhere private with a very willing Sara. Then Becca somehow walked in on you right before you finished debating in your head if you were going to kiss her?”

You see me trying to make it seem like he would never cheat on Becca? Probably bullshit. He's seventeen. He would've kissed Sara and blown his relationship with Becca into smithereens and only realized what a mistake that was down the road.

“Exactly. Coach.”

“Now you have to grovel.” I check the clock one more time. Three minutes until first bell.

“I did. I went to her house. I texted her.”

I stand to let Elijah know he’s leaving before my class arrives. “Sorry,” I smack him on the back. “You need to pull out the big guns.”

His shoulders slump.

“Just think of what makes Becca happy, why she fell in love with you, and you’ll figure it out.”

“How do you know, Coach?”

I open the door and wait for him to walk through. “Because I was you at one time. And another piece of advice?”

He waits for me on the other side of the door.

“Don’t go listening to your friends. They usually give shit advice, and honestly, you usually get a lot more experience with a girlfriend than by flipping around with multiple girls. Teenage boys have shit for brains. Don’t listen to them.”

I really don’t want to know how far he’s gotten with Becca. Especially with Phoenix and Sedona being the same age as Elijah.

He looks at me sheepishly. “Well, we have—”

“That’s a conversation I don’t want to hear and no one else should either. Don’t be a dick and kiss and tell.” The bell rings. “Go to class.”

He turns around. “You mean assembly.”

“Assembly?”

We walk out into the hallway where everyone is filing toward the auditorium.

“Yeah, remember Principal Miller had the baby?”

Shit. Now I'm running my fingers through my hair. All the teenage angst had me forgetting that we have to meet the new principal of Lake Starlight High School this morning. The last principal I'll ever be under because next year I'm heading to the college level—I hope.

“Yeah. Go. You don't want to be late.”

“Thanks, Coach... for everything.” He jogs down the hall, catching up to his friends.

I turn to go through the back entrance since I'll have to sit in a chair in front of all the students so that we can appear as a united front for the new principal. A symbol that says we have their back.

I run smack-dab into Fay Murphy, the office assistant. “Hey, Fay.”

“I'm so happy I found you.” She seems a tad flustered, and her face has that beet-red overlay she used to get when Principal Miller reprimanded her for not refilling her stapler.

Working without that dictator will be a nice change. Let me tell you, pregnant women do *not* like it when they have to give up coffee—something we all paid the price for.

“What's up?” I keep walking because we're going to be late if we don't hurry.

“We need you to introduce Principal Radcliffe.” She peers behind me then pushes up on her tiptoes to whisper in my ear, “Malcolm, I mean Vice Principal Ealey, called in this morning. I think he was still...”

Fay doesn't have to finish the sentence. Malcolm Ealey went through a public divorce last year and has been spending a lot of his time at the Lucky Tavern, drowning in a helluva lot more than his sorrows. That's why, even though he should

have become our temporary principal, the school board decided to hire someone new.

“Why me?”

She hands me a piece of paper. “The kids look up to you, and everyone thinks that the kids will welcome Principal Radcliffe if you introduce her.”

Her. Another woman. Hopefully this one is well-caffeinated and not pregnant. We’ll all stand a better chance that way.

I accept the piece of paper, looking over what I need to say. “Fine.”

I’m not scared of public speaking. I’ve got two teenage girls at home. You don’t know a hostile environment until you’re trying to break up a fight between those two.

“You’re the best, Austin.” Fay squeezes my forearm then walks down the hall.

My footsteps slow as I read over the new principal’s bio. What the hell is a Yale graduate doing in Alaska at Lake Starlight High School? After skimming over her education, I fold up the paper. I can wing it from there. Besides the kids couldn’t care less about what’s printed on that sheet.

Heading into the auditorium, I search out the face of our new principal, but I know everyone here.

“Her meeting with the superintendent is running a tad late, so if you could stall, I’ll tap you on the shoulder when it’s safe to announce her,” Fay informs me.

“I’m not a zoo keeper.”

Fay laughs.

I will not miss this part of my job next year.

Before I realize it, I'm in front of the podium, clearing my throat and introducing myself, as if everyone here doesn't already know who I am. Sedona rolls her eyes and looks away. I have no fucking clue why she's so embarrassed of me. I mean, look at me. Six foot two, two-ten, short, neat haircut. I work out four times a week, hike, bike, ski. My muscles aren't from just the gym...

Okay, before I keep sounding like a male-seeking-female want ad, let's get on with how my day went into the shitter in a matter of twenty minutes.

I tell a few jokes, and the kids loosen up a bit. Maybe I should rethink the whole college baseball coach thing and go for stand-up comedy. I'm pretty good at this.

Fay taps my shoulder, and thank God, because I'm running out of material.

I pull the paper out of my back pocket and clear my throat one more time. "All right, everyone. We all know that Principal Miller has left us to enjoy her new baby, so we're welcoming a new principal into our school. Our new principal for the remainder of the year is Dr. Radcliffe. She graduated from Yale with her doctorate in education. She comes here from the lower forty-eight, so make sure you give a big Alaskan welcome!"

About half the kids in the auditorium clap while the rest of them stare at the stage with an expression that only a bunch of unimpressed and uninterested teenagers can manage.

Time to grab their interest and get them to buy in. "Principal Radcliffe's hobbies include streaking during football games, ferret racing, and taking surveys for money."

The kids roar with laughter, finally looking as if they're interested and want to be here. Fay steps up and nudges me.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “We’ll bring Dr. Radcliffe out to explain her hobbies in more depth.” I turn from the podium at the sound of heels clicking across the stage.

This is the part where my mouth drops open and my testicles jerk up, seeking protection.

See the auburn-haired woman walking right toward me? The one who looks as pissed off as Sedona did when I honked my horn in the parking lot this morning?

Yeah, that’s my new boss.

The new principal of Lake Starlight High School.

I don’t believe in kissing and telling, but I’ll tell you—this is the first and only principal I’ve ever given an orgasm to in the backseat of my Jeep.

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Cockamamie Unicorn Ramblings

The genesis of this book was the title. It popped randomly into Piper's head a couple of years ago and we put it on the backburner until we could fit it into our schedule. The second thing to come was the meet cute—this is how a lot of books start for Piper because the meet cute is her favorite part of a book.

This is the first standalone book we've ever written. Since we usually write series, we thought that a holiday story was the perfect opportunity for a standalone. Not only could our current readership pick it up, but new to us readers could enjoy it also without feeling they're missing anything. So, if you know someone who likes a holiday story, please tell them to grab this one! LOL

This book has another first for us—a British hero! We hope Andrew was able to charm his way into your hearts once you saw past his rough exterior. When we were plotting Andrew and Kenzie's backstories, Taylor Swift's song, *Champagne Problems*, played on Piper's Spotify and we decided to use that as inspiration for Andrew's backstory. And if you're wondering who the inspiration for Andrew himself was, google Richard Madden.

Next came scenic, so of course we picked the iconic holiday city Manhattan. Piper visited New York City during the holidays a few years back. There was so much to do and see and the fact that everything was decked out for Christmas added a special magic to all her trip.

For all you who know a lot about NYC... we took some liberties as to when Rolf's puts up their holiday decorations to make it work for our timeline. Also, we pretended there would be no line-up to get in, which is certainly never the case. LOL

As always, we have a lot of people to thank for getting this book into your hands...

Nina and the entire Valentine PR team.

Our two UK readers who helped us make Andrew a little more British—Anna Hulth and Sarah Gupta.

Cassie from Joy Editing for line edits.

Ellie from My Brother's Editor for line edits.

Rosa from My Brother's Editor for proofreading.

Hang Le for the cover. She always works her magic!

Bloggers who choose to read, review and/or promote us. Thanks for helping to spread the word!

Piper Rayne Unicorns who consistently support our work and champion it to other readers!

Readers who took the time to read our story and champion this series to other readers. We are grateful beyond words for your support!

If you're a new reader and enjoyed this story, consider checking out our [White Collar Brothers series](#), starting with [Sexy Filthy Boss](#). It stars Enzo and Annie whom you saw a glimpse of when Andrew had to play Santa to their kids!

And be sure to join our newsletter for all kinds of free and exclusive content!

xo,

Piper & Rayne

About Piper & Rayne

Piper Rayne is a USA Today Bestselling Author duo who write “heartwarming humor with a side of sizzle” about families, whether that be blood or found. They both have e-readers full of one-clickable books, they’re married to husbands who drive them to drink, and they’re both chauffeurs to their kids. Most of all, they love hot heroes and quirky heroines who make them laugh, and they hope you do, too!



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