



Tangling
with
SANTA

USA Today Bestselling Author

DEBRA ELISE

TANGLING WITH SANTA
A PINEVILLE WORLD CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

TANGLING SERIES

DEBRA ELISE



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TANGLING WITH SANTA and Debra Elise—1st ed.

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TANGLING WITH SANTA

His unexpected kiss has me wanting to be on Santa's naughty list—maybe forever.

Timing is everything.

A few months ago, I thought he was into me. Then nothing but friendly smiles and nods. I miss the sultry gazes and swoon worthy smiles that left me hot and bothered.

Now, a week before Christmas, I'm mingling with friends at our favorite pub when my phone jingles, "*All I want for Christmas*," filling the air as I scramble to answer. Santa has bailed. Slade swoops in offering to be my, I mean, the party's Santa.

Needing a Santa for the party I'd been planning for months was one thing. My need for Slade Johansson, one of Pineville's most eligible and mysterious bachelors, was another.

Months of wondering turn into moments, then days of togetherness—planning the Christmas Eve party for the Children's Club where I work. Instead of sugarplums dancing in my head, my dreams turn naughty, with images of Santa offering me his special "package" of joy and giving.

Is this just a holiday hook-up or can we find a way to make the magic of the season last forever?

★♥★

Each story in the Tangling Series features characters in their 30s & 40s who decide to live their lives to the fullest, and

that includes experiencing *steamy*, sexy times. When each heroine is presented the opportunity to tangle with the one they desire—they go all in.

From second chances to insta love, each story guarantees a HEA and/or HFN. No cheating, no cliffhanger, no triggers.

All are standalone stories - enjoy in any order ♥

CHAPTER I

KARA

“No, you can’t do this to me!” The man I’d hired to play Santa at the Christmas Eve party was no longer on the other end of the call that threatened to ruin my first major event at my brand-new job. I’d been hired at the Children’s Club to assist the Executive Director on special projects and community outreach. My dream job.

This could not be happening. Not five days before the party.

“Kara, are you okay? What’s wrong?” One of my best friends, Miranda, set her drink down and grabbed my arm. Tonight was our last girl’s night of the year at O’Malley’s Pub. Our two other friends, Evie, and Heather, looked on in concern as I tried to hold it together. *I need another beer.*

Frustrated, I shoved my cell into my purse then run my fingers through my hair, messing up the blowout I’d paid a fortune for earlier in the day. “Oh, nothing. Just Santa leaving me high and dry. Where am I going to find another one? I mean, this guy wasn’t even my first choice. I’m so screwed.”

“Ladies, thanks for coming in tonight. It’s great seeing your beautiful faces again.” Slade Johansson, the pub’s new manager and our favorite bartender, well, my favorite, placed a pitcher of the house ale on the table and was wearing the sexiest smile I’d ever been lucky enough to receive, even if it was directed all of us.

Last summer, I'd thought he was into me. He'd asked Evie if I was single, then nothing. And now the guy I continued to lust after from afar was now front and center to witness one of the worst moments of my career. I couldn't let the kids down, and I wasn't about to let him see how upset I was.

"The table in the back sent this over. Typically, I don't indulge guys like them, but since two of them claim to be your husbands, I decided to play along." He flashed another smile. Goosebumps erupted all over my body. For a brief, hopeful moment, I thought he was flirting with me, but then he turned to my sister, Amber. "This is for you. Royce wanted to make sure you didn't feel left out." Slade placed a soft drink in front of Amber. And I swear, she blushed. Yeah, Slade had that kind of effect even on happily married women. Pregnant with her first baby, my sister took a drink, then lifted it up, winking at her husband across the room.

I sighed. Tonight wasn't supposed to be about my friends flirting with their husbands.

We hadn't planned on being here the same night as them. Unfortunately, this close to Christmas tonight was the only time everyone had free. My plan was to figure out if Slade was still interested.

Well, at least there was plenty of beer to drown my sorrows. How was I going to explain this to my boss? Rod had been looking for someone he felt comfortable giving more responsibility to, and I couldn't let him down. He'd been running the club almost single handily for the past few years and was only able to hire me thanks to a recent large donation. He was planning a big reveal with the donor at the party. Busy working on expansion plans I know had to let him know our Santa had bailed and I might need his help after all.

Darn it, who could I find this close to the party and who could fit into the suit I'd already rented?

"So, what are you ladies up to tonight?" Slade's silky voice pulled me from my brooding. A voice that had me squirming in my seat and my cheeks heating at all the naughty images of us together that had been playing in my head.

Suddenly my ringtone blared, "*All I want for Christmas is you,*" and I felt my face grow warmer. I quickly took my cell back out of my purse and silenced it. Another junk call. Could the timing have been worse? Because truth be told, Slade is exactly what I want for Christmas.

Another image of Slade from this past summer in his board shorts flashed. His ripped body on full display had me internally combusting. Being so close to him was endangering my ability to think straight. Taking a long drink from my beer, I mumbled, "Sorry about that. I, uh, really like Mariah Carey." *Sheesh, could I sound more like a dork?* Sinking down into the booth, I glanced at Miranda and mouthed, "*Help me.*"

She grinned, then chuckled before doing the exact opposite. "Hey, Slade. What are you doing on Christmas Eve?"

Oh no, she just didn't. Taking another sip of my beer, I looked at him from the corner of my eye. Was it my imagination, or did his smile slip just a little? If it did, he recovered quickly.

I knew where Miranda was going with that question, and I didn't like it. Not one bit. Turning my head enough so Slade couldn't see, I glared at her.

Returning my attention back to him, he did that thing where men widen their stance and cross their arms. Oh. My. He gave his full attention to Miranda, which gave me the opportunity to ogle him unnoticed. For months, I've spent a good amount of time imagining what those arms would feel like wrapped around me. And here he was, standing inches away, giving me a front row view of his muscular biceps and forearms.

His gaze flicked down to mine before landing on my mouth. Time stopped. Was I imagining things, or did I see desire fill his eyes? Either way, his intense look made me squirm in my seat once more. *Oh, my gawd.* I had to bite my lower lip to keep myself from moaning out loud. His nostrils flared when my tongue soothed my bruised lip. The moisture

dried up in my mouth. If he wasn't into me, then he was doing an awesome job at pretending to be interested.

Someone at the table giggled, breaking me out of the fog. Covering my mouth, I let out a fake cough to cover my embarrassment. I'm sure I was misreading the situation. Inhaling, I took a deep breath, hoping to settle my out-of-control pulse. Big mistake. His spicy, unique scent made hit me at the same time. It, and him was addicting, intoxicating. *Pull it together, Kara.*

After another sip of beer, I turned to Miranda and asked, "Hey, weren't we going to talk about this new guy you have a crush on?"

She didn't take the bait. Just smiled sweetly at Slade, ignoring me as I shot imaginary daggers at her through my now blurry eyes. Stupid beer. I was such a lightweight. "I'm sure Slade is very busy. He probably needs to get back to work."

"Not at all. And I like that song too, Kara."

He winked at me, and I was torn between being embarrassed and turned on.

"Things have slowed a bit and I've got some time to chat with you beautiful ladies. So, what's happening on Christmas Eve?"

My friends and sister all stared at me with expectant looks on their faces. Oh, they were so going to get it later. Another deep breath and I counted to five. Could I ask him to help me out? To be Santa. There wasn't an ounce of fat on his six-foot two frame, and he'd have to use a lot of padding to pull it off, but since the loser who bailed was about the same height, the suit would probably fit him with a few adjustments.

But could I spend time around the man who put me in the friend zone last summer?

"Wait, I think I know what this is about." Slade gazed around the table before he settled on me.

"You do?" I squeaked. Darn it, I sounded like a lovesick, pimple-faced teenager instead of a thirty-three-year-old,

mature woman who, if I had the nerve, I'd ask him what happened after he asked my friend if I was single last summer.

And I would.

If I wanted to.

But not right now. Because I had a bigger problem and possibly too much beer, too fast.

Besides, why would he want to help me out by wearing an itchy, ill-fitting suit and having kids sit on his lap the night before Christmas? He probably had a date all lined up and ready to sit on his, er, lap and...*oh, my god I didn't just say all of that out loud, did I?*

"I do. Did I hear you saying something about needing a Santa?" Slade responded with no indication that he was aware of my crazy inner monologue and freak out.

I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Yes, that," I nodded. "The guy who I booked just called and told me he had a better offer and bailed. Do you know of someone who'd be willing to spend the night listening to kids list what they want for Christmas who are hopped up on sugar and, oh also have a fake beard and hair yanked on non-stop?"

Did I just sound halfway normal? I hope so. Crossing my fingers that he knew someone, I smiled and made direct eye contact. I could no longer avoid looking directly into his eyes and I prayed he didn't pick up on the need in mine. And possibly the fear of rejection I'd been carrying with me.

Taking a chance that he'd call me, I'd turned down dates for months, thinking he might finally ask me out. But when he hadn't, I'd convinced myself that Evie must have misunderstood him. After all, a man like him could have any woman he wanted, so why would someone like him wait so long to ask me out?

"Sure. What time do you need me there?"

"Oh, I uh. That's kind of you, but you're uh, what I mean is I need someone who's a bit more...fluffy?"

Everyone laughed, easing my anxiety.

“Kara, he’d make a great Santa.” Heather jumped into the conversation. “I’m sure we could find some padding for him. The kids won’t care if he’s...fluffy or not. As long as Slade can act the part and throw in some ‘ho-ho-hos’, he’ll be great.”

What were my friends doing to me? Slade was just being nice. I’m sure he had better things to do on Christmas Eve than help me out with a bunch of kids. “You know, what was I thinking? I know just the guy that could do this. How about if it doesn’t work out, I’ll call you. Okay?”

Slade’s handsome face was unreadable. Darn it, I hope I hadn’t hurt his feelings. Reaching up to my throat, I grasped the locket I wore, rubbing the cool metal. My breath caught in my throat at the transformation on his face. His eyes darkened and his lids lowered. His gaze was focused on my hand as I rubbed the face of the locket over and over. It was a nervous habit I’d never been able to break.

Dropping my hand into my lap, he slowly lifted his gaze back up to mine, then nodded. “Sure. But let me know if things don’t work out. I’d love to help. The kids.”

“Yes, I will. And I really appreciate the offer. Thank you.”

For a moment, it felt as if we were the only two people in the room. Then someone shouted his name. He excused himself and left to deal with an employee who needed his help.

Watching him walk away, I began to doubt myself. Maybe I shouldn’t have shot down his offer. Could it be that he was being more than nice?

CHAPTER 2

SLADE

I WALKED BACK to the bar, limping from the semi-hard on being so close to Kara always seemed to ignite.

Staying away from her for the last few months had been difficult, but necessary. I hadn't anticipated her changing jobs last summer to begin working at the Children's Club. I'd begun the process of setting up an endowment fund using my grandfather's inheritance and the club for disadvantage youth was at the top of my donation list. To pursue her while I was also working with Rod, her boss, could have made for a sticky situation before the donation was finalized, and we made the announcement. On Christmas Eve during the party she now needed a Santa for.

I'd been waiting to make my feelings known to Kara because I didn't want there to be any doubt about how I felt about her.

From the moment she came into the pub, I wanted her with a desperation that was new and exciting, and I did not want to screw this up. Working as a bartender may seem strange to those who know I have enough money that I don't need to work, but I had my reasons. Having a lot of money that I did nothing to earn had been a burden. But it was hard to explain to friends and coworkers. And when they did find out, they would treat me differently.

It was one of the reasons I'd moved to Pineville. Fresh start and all that.

One of the things I like about Kara was how smart she is. Her looks and curvy body only added to her appeal. I continued to keep an eye on her table as the night went on. And now that I knew she needed help, I'd make sure she could count on me.

"Hey, Slade. How about a couple of beers over here?"

The voice belonged to Nolan Cole, a former Army Ranger who'd quickly become a friend when he'd married one of our best employees, Scarlett. Sitting beside him was an even larger guy than Cole, someone I never seen in the pub before today.

Nodding, I made my way down the bar and set them up with two drafts. "Scarlett, let you out, I see. How's she doing?" Between them, they had Matty, her son from her first marriage, and recently announced they were expecting a baby.

"Hey, I can come and go as I please." Cole chuckled, then added, "And today I decided to please my wife. You'll do the same one day. Anyway, she's been craving Taya's sliders and fries. We're having a beer while we 'wait' for the food."

Laughing at his air quotes around the word wait, I slid my gaze over to his buddy, who was checking out the table where Kara and her friends were sitting.

"Hey, this is my friend, Beck. He recently moved here after retiring from the Army. We were in the same unit."

Beck turned away from my woman, smart move, and held out his hand. The guy was straight out of central casting. If someone was looking for a jacked former military turned mountain man, he was it. "Nice to meet you, Beck. Welcome to Pineville. You're in for the best food in town. Taya is a genius in the kitchen. You wouldn't believe the number of other restaurants who've tried to steal her from us."

Cole chuckled and took a long drink from his frosted glass. "I believe it. And she's pretty easy on the eyes too. Is she seeing anyone?" Cole tipped his head toward Beck ever so slightly.

“What was that?” The mountain man growled.

“What? Nothing. I like to tease Slade about Taya. They’re good friends. By the way, why haven’t you asked her out?” He narrowed his gaze on me and I think I knew where he was heading.

Cole was up to something with his buddy. “She’s great. Actually, the best. But you know, we’re good friends. And her kids are great. The youngest is in college now too, so Taya’s an official empty nester.”

I looked between the two men, and decided I needed to stay in my lane and worry about how I was going to convince Kara how serious I was about playing Santa.

“You two enjoy your beer. I’ll see you around, Cole. And give Scarlett my best, okay? We sure miss her around here. Beck, nice to meet you.” Moving away to fill another order, I scanned the tables at the front of the pub and watched as Kara and her group gathered up their things to leave. She turned my way, then quickly looked away. She was so cute when she was flustered. One of the things that drew me to her was her lack of calculation when it came to men. She didn’t overtly flirt whenever she and her friends would come in for their girl’s night out. She was simply herself: confident and funny and with no idea how much she affected me whenever we were close.

Considering I didn’t pursue her after the party at my boss’ place in August, she was probably confused by my offer, and I wanted to catch her before she left. I finished filling another pitcher, wiped down the bar and looked over again to see her and her friends winding their way between the tables toward the exit.

It was then I noticed Cole and his buddy, Beck, leaving with their food. They arrived at the door at the same time Kara did. Even from where I stood, I could see the interest on Beck’s face as he held the door for Kara. The guy’s permanent frown lifted into a smile as he checked her out.

Oh, hell no. Not happening.

I tossed the towel down, jumped the bar and reached the door in record time. “Hey, Kara. Let me walk you out. I had a thought about our earlier conversation.”

I ignored the burly ex-Ranger’s lifted brow and low grunt at my intrusion.

Kara’s beautiful face was marred with confusion, but she let me take her arm, leading her out of the pub into the snowy night. There was no way I would let some newcomer, or anyone else, near Kara.

CHAPTER 3

KARA

“SLADE. SLOW DOWN, PLEASE.” Out of breath from the pace he was keeping, I wiped snowflakes from my eyes and stopped a few feet from my car. “What’s going on?”

Releasing my arm, he looked back at the pub, then down at me. “Do you know Beck?”

“Who? Oh, you mean Cole’s friend? No. I’ve heard he’s related to TS somehow, but we haven’t officially met.”

Thomas Scott, TS to friends and family, was the owner of the Idaho Outlaws and married to my friend Noel Snow. She was also a big supporter of the Children’s Club.

Slade seemed to relax at my response, then smiled and ran a hand through his sandy blond, snow covered hair. My fingers itched to touch the collar length wet strands that had become stuck to his polo shirt. I watched in fascination as steam rose off his body from the cold air where it touched his bare skin.

Light snow swirled around us, creating an atmosphere of intimacy. And the light from the nearby streetlamps lit the area in a soft glow. It was romantic and my mind began to wish for things to be different between us.

“Kara, I’d really like to help you out with the party and be your Santa. For the kids. You don’t need to call your friend. I’ll do it.” His tone was full of urgency and something else I couldn’t define.

Unable to control my constant blinking caused by fat snowflakes, I lifted my hand to shade my eyes. “Oh. Okay, if you’re sure. I guess that’ll be fine.” *But would it?* I’d make it somehow.

“Definitely. I’m sure and I already have the night off. So, do you need to know how big I am?”

Lust slammed into me. I couldn’t help it. The man and his words had me turning this moment into something way sexier than it was.

“Pardon me?”

“My size. For the suit.”

I almost let my gaze fall to where my thoughts had initially gone—the juncture between his thighs, but I held strong. He had to know the effect he had on women. A man who looked like he did was more than aware of his appeal. But I didn’t want him knowing I was far from immune to his charm. Besides, he’d put me in the friend zone. I wasn’t going to try for a shot at getting out of it or let him know how much that had hurt me.

“Right. Yes, for the suit. I do have one. And knowing your size would be helpful.” The cool air began clearing the fog from my brain. “I’m pretty sure it’ll fit, but we could take it to a seamstress since you’re leaner than the other guy. I’ll make some calls tomorrow and get back to you.”

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone. “Here, put in your number and I’ll text you. That way, you’ll have my number for tomorrow.” Our fingers brushed as I took his cellphone, and goosebumps erupted throughout my body. Shaking my head, I tapped in my number and quickly handing it back to him. I caught myself just in time from leaning into his warmth, praying he hadn’t noticed the movement.

Then he did something unexpected. Lifting a hand, he used a thumb to brush snowflakes from under my eyes. Frozen in place, I thought he was going to kiss me. Wished for it desperately. Instead, he took a step back, tucking his hands in

his pockets. “Great. I’ll be waiting. You good to drive?” Slade nodded at my car.

I was stone cold sober at that moment and more turned on than I’d ever been in my adult life. Trying to speak, I couldn’t. Instead, I returned his nod. Then, not to appear like a total dork, I lifted my hand and jangled my keys. “I’m good.”

At my response, his gaze narrowed and landed on my lips. Fighting to keep from licking them, I waited for his next move.

“I have no doubt about that. Goodnight, Kara. Sweet dreams,” he whispered. Bending toward me, he kissed my forehead, then jogged back to the pub while I stood watching his tall form disappear through the double doors. A bit dazed, I spun on my heel, unlocked my car door and slid bonelessly into the cold leather seat.

So much for staying away from Slade Johansson.



I WASN’T LOOKING FORWARD to calling Rod the next morning. Telling my boss that the first major event I’d been assigned was close to having no Santa wasn’t what I thought would be something even remotely possible. I’d had this guy lined up for months. He was a sought after and highly recommended Santa in the community and to have him back out on us was unacceptable. I just hoped Rod with roll with the change and wouldn’t have any objections to Slade stepping in.

“Hi, sorry to call you on the weekend.” I paced from one side of my condo to the other.

“No worry. Just got in from my run.” Rod barely sounded out of breath. He’d been a defensive end in college and was in better shape now than he’d been ten years ago. He claimed he had to just to keep up with all the kids.

“I didn’t want to wait till Monday to let you know the Santa I hired called me late yesterday and cancelled. But I have a substitute all lined up. So, no worries.”

“Okay.”

Okay? I wasn't expecting such a quick acceptance. Sinking onto the closest piece of furniture, I let out a relieved laugh. “Thanks for that. Honestly, I was a bit worried, considering the first Santa had come highly recommended.”

“I'm sure whomever you found to replace him will do a great job. Even though the other guy bailed, that's not your fault. And I trust your judgement. It's one of the main reasons I hired you.”

I accepted his compliment even though a part of me wanted him to say he'd be our Santa, but the kids would no doubt recognize him and there'd also be questions about why he wasn't at the party.

“So, who'd you get?” The noise of a blender came over the line.

“I'm not sure if you've ever been to O'Malley's Pub, but he's the manager there, Slade Johansson?”

A clatter rang out, then a curse and finally silence.

“Rod? You still there? Everything okay?”

“No, I mean yeah. Sorry. So, um yes. I've been there. I know Slade. I, uh, guess, I don't picture him as the Santa type. But you just never know, right? Anyway, I'm glad he stepped in to help.”

Maybe it was my imagination, but Rod's long-winded response sounded...off. I'd only worked for him a few months now, but I thought I'd come to know him fairly well. Could it be that Rod and Slade didn't get along?

I set the worry aside because I just didn't have the time to search for a new. And my next call had to be to a friend of a friend who knew a seamstress that might be able to fit Slade into her schedule.

“Thanks for being so understanding. I'll see you on Monday.”

Rod said his goodbye just as my call waiting chimed. From one call to the next, I spent my Saturday morning checking in

with all the people I'd hired for the party to reassure myself that no one else would be backing out and to double check they still had us on the schedule. There was a band and a caterer and two college kids I'd hired to be elves. Everyone confirmed they were all set for Christmas Eve.

The last call was to Slade. But first, maybe I needed some advice. So I started with Evie.

I got her voicemail. "Hey, Evie. Call me back. Thanks." She and her new hubby, Sam, were probably doing cute couple stuff.

On to the next. "Hey, Miranda. Could you call back when you get this message? Thanks." Then half-way through, I remembered she had an extra shift at the hospital today. Dang it.

"Amber, I'm desperate. I really need you to call me back. I need some advice on men." After the third message, I debated trying someone else, then decided I needed lunch. Or maybe a nap.

Halfway through my chicken salad sandwich, my cell pinged. My stomach did a weird flip-flip when I read the notification. Slade had texted me. Darn it, I wanted to be the one to reach out first.

I really wanted to handle this in the most professional manner, but last night's dream starring the sexy bartender had my palms sweating and my nipples standing at attention. Should I text him back or call? Do I offer to pick him up and drive him to the seamstress' shop or tell him I'll meet him there? It was like I'd been teleported back to being a teenager and all the uncertainties of talking to a boy I like bubbled to the surface.

Appetite gone, I put the remainder of my sandwich in the fridge, then went to the bathroom. I fixed my hair, then snorted at my reflection. This was lunacy. He wouldn't be able to see me. Marching back out to the kitchen, I picked up my phone and stared at his text again.

Let me know when and where you need me. S

Okay, not anxiety inducing or blood pressure rising at all. Well, maybe a little. The temptation to read innuendo into his words was too much to handle. Because I wanted this man more than anyone I'd ever met. And it was so frustrating because I thought I had rid myself of the hope he may one day want me as well. And now, there he is in my life in a big way, stirring up all the hormones I'd thought tamed. *You can do this Kara*. It's just business. For the kids and the club.

Grabbing my cell, I quickly text out the address and time of the appointment and tell him I'll meet him there. Done.

Before I can set it down, he texts back.

Can't wait. See you soon.

He then added a wink face. Ugh, this guy was killing me.

CHAPTER 4

SLADE

THE DRIVE through downtown Pineville was not as busy as I expected days before Christmas. We'd received another couple of inches of fresh snow this morning and the road crews were still clearing it up. The business district had decked out the old-fashioned lampposts with twinkle lights and three-foot-tall white bells. Even a bachelor like me who never decorated much for the holiday, I had to admit it all made the area feel magical.

Scratching the short stubble on my jaw had me wishing I had time to grow my beard out. Hopefully, I could find a fake one that would hold up to the tugging Kara had warned me about. Simply thinking about her raised my blood pressure and the closer I got to the shop where we were meeting up, the more my excitement grew.

I was looking forward to keeping her a bit off balance and showing her what I'd been holding back. At thirty-four, dating had become practically like a chore. It was weird how quickly the shift took place. For years, all I cared about was having a good time, never really planning out what I wanted my future to look like. I took for granted that I would find someone who'd I want to spend the rest of my life with. When that hadn't happened by thirty, I wasn't too concerned. I figured it would happen.

And when I first met Kara, it was like, “Oh, there you are.” It was the damndest thing because if you’d have asked me, I never believed in fate, but there she was—the perfect woman for me, and I realized she was everything I didn’t know I was missing.

Then my grandfather passed, and I had all this money I needed to figure out what to do with, and when I did, I discovered I’d waited too long to make my move because now she worked for the organization I chose for a large donation. I didn’t want there to be any question about why I was pursuing her. And I didn’t want to put Rod Davis, the Executive Director, and Kara’s boss in an awkward position. And then fate stepped in on the day my donation went through, and Kara needed a Santa. And now I fully believed in it—timing was everything.

But how did a guy let a woman know he wanted more than just a good time, or a short-term hook-up? I’d never gone out of my way with small talk or finding out what the woman I was with had any goals or dreams or anything serious.

But Kara was different, and I planned on going all in today. Parking my car, I practically ran down the street.

“Hi, I’m here to see Marion.” The shop was wall to wall clothing and costumes.

“She’s in the back. I’ll let her know. Have a seat.” The employee waved me to a couple of chairs by the street facing windows. I smiled and walked over, but I didn’t sit down. My gaze landed on the curvy, dark-haired beauty walking down the sidewalk. Kara. Even wearing a knitted hat and bundled up in a scarf and jacket, I knew it was her. My dick perked up. Shifting away from the window, I walked over to a rack of sport coats and pictured my third-year psych teacher who, at the time, was pushing eighty and wore support hose and orthopedic shoes. She was a nice woman but was better than a cold shower when I needed one. And I did. Desperately.

In unison, Marion and Kara entered the front of the shop. I turned my attention to the seamstress first and extended a

hand. “Hello, I’m Slade and here’s Kara.” I turned toward Kara, grinning. “Let me get your coat.”

Kara blushed, and I found myself wanting to find out if the flushing of her creamy skin went below her neckline.

Marion cleared her throat. “I only have thirty minutes. Slade, follow me. You too Kara. You can help.”

She led me back to a changing area, handed me the suit, and pointed to a curtain. “Change in there, then come back and stand over here.”

I took the bundle of red and flashed Kara a grin. She was holding in laugh as Marion stood, arms crossed with measuring tape hanging around her neck. “Hurry up. We don’t have time for you to flirt.” She waved her hands at me. I turned and did as instructed.

Ten minutes later, Marion had what she needed, told me to change again and leave the outfit in the changing room. She had another last-minute customer to deal with. Then I had an idea. I stuck my head out and looked around. “Kara, could you help me? I seem to be stuck.”

Kara had been scrolling on her phone. At my request, her head snapped up. It looked like she was debating on calling for Mary, but I had plans. “Please, it’ll take just a second.”

She tucked her phone into her purse and stepped inside the changing room. I slid the curtain closed behind her.

Kara’s stomach growled. I grinned. She blushed. Pretty and flustered, I wanted to reassure her. “Did you miss lunch? Because I did. After we’re done here, let’s go grab some dinner.”

A flash of something appeared in her dark chocolate eyes. Maybe uncertainty, but I wasn’t going to let it deter me. Tucking a long shiny lock of hair behind her ear, I backed up a step to give her space. “I’ll keep my hands to myself. Promise.” Crisscrossing my heart, I held her gaze until I saw her shoulders relax. I wanted her comfortable with me, not thinking I was trying to score and get into her panties.

Although I did want that and hopefully sooner than later, but I'd settle for a dinner date and getting to know her better.

"I'm not sure that's a great idea." She didn't sound convinced. Maybe I needed a different approach? Being direct had always served me well in the past, and I didn't want her confused about my feelings for her.

"I can see the wheels spinning, Kara. You're all about keeping things professional, and I admire that. But you can't deny there is something between us? A spark whenever we're together. I'd like to spend more time with you. It's not like you're my boss and I'm your employee. Besides, I'm volunteering, and if you try to pay me, I'll just donate it back to the kids and the club."

Her expression softened at the mention of the kids, and I said, "You really like your job, don't you?"

"I do. Quite a lot. That's why us being seen together right now isn't a good idea."

"Hmm, okay. What if we label this a 'working' dinner? We can discuss the schedule for the party and if we happen to learn a bit more about each other, then that's bonus."

"Why now?" Kara was staring at me intently. A little furrow appeared between her brows. Shifting again to keep myself from touching her when all I wanted to do was take her in my arms and kiss her pouty lips to reassure her that I've wanted her from the moment my eyes locked on her months ago, I rubbed the back of my neck and sighed.

"Maybe I should finish changing and I'd be happy to tell you...over dinner." There were certain moments in your life when control over something you wanted was given to someone else, and you had to roll with it. So, I would. Didn't mean I liked it, but she was worth whatever short-term obstacles I had to overcome.

"Oh, yeah." Her gaze roamed down my chest and the cute blush she had earlier returned.

I couldn't wait to reverse our status, and I could gaze at her flesh.

Her silence had me sweating, but I held her wide-eyed gaze, flashing her a hopeful smile.

Backing out of the dressing room, she broke eye contact and let out a nervous laugh. “Okay. Dinner. Salvatore’s is just down the street. I’ll wait out here.” She released the curtain.

I heard the patter of her shoes as she walked away, and I let out the breath I’d been holding. Swiftly, I put my clothes back on before she changed her mind and remembered that I had asked for help. The only thing I had needed help with was getting her to agree to going to dinner with me.

CHAPTER 5

KARA

ONE GLASS of wine and I may end up agreeing to anything Slade suggested because he was charming my socks off and I was letting him. He was also doing his best at avoiding the question I asked him earlier, when we were up a close and personal in the changing room.

So damn close. Full of want, I almost threw away the promise I'd made to myself and forgive him for not pursuing me. Oh, how I wanted to plaster my lips onto his full mouth I still wasn't sure how I kept from giving in to the urge to press myself against his deliciously hard, chiseled chest and beg him to take me had been something I'd never felt toward a man *ever* in my life. Being in that changing room had been equal parts thrilling and scary. But instead of going after what I wanted—him—I froze.

And why? Hurt feelings were one thing, and in the past, I'd been able to get over other guys not being into me pretty quickly in the past. But with Slade, who I'd been fantasizing about for months, I had hit a brick wall in getting past, or was it over him? All I really knew was that I wanted to be under him.

Maybe what I really needed to figure out was: could my heart survive if things didn't work out between us? Would it be worth the price of a hookup, learning what his touch felt like, how it would feel to be filled with him, by him, taking the

chance that I might be left with only memories after he moved on to someone else?

“Penny for your thoughts?” Slade’s smooth baritone snapped me from my worrying.

“Hmm, you might need to take out a loan. I have so many and I’m pretty sure they’re not Slade-friendly, considering we don’t know each other very well.”

“That’s why I wanted to take you to dinner.”

I finished off the merlot, pushing the glass away, then immediately began drawing a design on the base with my finger. Still not ready to look him in the eye, I brought up the question that had been nagging me for longer than just the hour we’ve been sitting sharing bits and pieces of ourselves. We’d quickly run through the details of the Christmas party. I mean, all he needed to do was show up on time, act like Santa and more important have a ton of patience with the kids. I knew his patience capacity was high. Being a bartender and manager of a restaurant practically demanded you hold a degree in it, and I’ve seen firsthand how he dealt with difficult patrons. He was a pro and a magnet for people. Especially women.

And there was the real reason I was hesitant. Deep down, I was worried about his reputation, whether it was real or not. But I’d witnessed first-hand women come on to him, and rarely subtly. He seemed to enjoy it, but maybe he was looking for more than just a short fling? I hope so because I was now ready to find out.

“Okay, Slade, I need to be straight with you. Ever since you said you wanted to be Santa...and can we be honest here?”

“I want it all. Hit me.” Slade finished his wine and gave me his full attention.

“First of all, stop with the sexy eyes.”

“Sweet Kara, I only have one set of eyes. I can’t control how they appear to you, but if you think they’re sexy, then I

don't want to be wrong. Or would it be right? Doesn't matter because either way, my eyes are yours."

"Stop. Oh my god, you don't want to hear me snort." Grabbing my stomach, I leaned to the side, taking a deep breath. It didn't work. And he was still looking at me like he wanted to eat me up. "Okay, stop."

"Stop what? You're so cute when you giggle." Slade leaned over the table and held out a hand, palm up.

Instant sobriety hit me. "Babies are cute. I'm an attractive, thirty-two-year-old woman. And I'd like us to get serious for a moment." Sitting up straight, I put my shoulders back and dug deep for the truth I wanted, no needed to share.

His gaze followed my movement, then resting on my chest for a moment before slowly lifting to my overheated face. His blue eyes darkening from glacial to a smoky blue. Damn those sexy eyes with the faint crinkle lines at the corners.

"Slade."

"Kara." Soft and sweet. He was going to test me the whole way. Alright then. Onward.

"I'd like to know why three months ago at Noel & TS's end of summer party you told Evie, I mean asked her, I mean ___"

"If you were single? And then, like a bastard, I didn't follow-up, follow through or try to hook up with you?" He asked.

"Yes. That. All of that. Well, maybe not the bastard part." Butterflies, moths and maybe a few crickets were thrumming inside me. He lifted his palm and waited. Before I could talk myself out of it, I placed my hand in his. His large fingers engulfed my hand, and he rubbed his thumb back and forth over my sensitized skin.

"Answering in detail would take too long. But know that I had a good reason and I'm here now. And I'd like more than a hookup."

Too long? Was he trying to piss me off? "Look—"

“Damn. Nothing good follows ‘look,’” he interrupted, grimacing.

“You’re right. Sorry, let me try this again. I know it sounds...silly, or maybe high-schoolish, but I was, I am attracted to you—”

“Good, I feel the same.” Another sexy grin.

“Would you stop interrupting me?” Pulling my hand from his, he held on tight, making it difficult to retrieve my hand without more force. I didn’t want to let go of him. I just wanted him to take me seriously. Why was this so hard?

“I’m sorry. I’m listening.”

He was. I searched his eyes, and finding what I needed, understanding and empathy, I continued. “At this point in my life, hooking up may be fun at first, and who doesn’t like a good orgasm now and then, but I’m looking for something more. A relationship beyond an incredible physical attraction. I’m not a prude or anything, but if all you’re looking for is a night of hot and sweaty sex, then we need to end the night here. I’m still grateful that you want to help at the party, and I hope you’ll still be Santa for the kids. We can be friends, whatever or however that looks, but no naughty times, okay?”

Slade’s face remained unchanged, unreadable, and I had no idea what kind of reaction was coming. I gave him a half smile, my heart pounding as I waited him out.

The first indication he wasn’t going to be mad was his thumb resumed its feathery glide over my skin. The simple touch sent a zing straight to my clit. Oh boy, maybe I’d been too hasty in putting the kibosh on sexy times between us. But that wouldn’t last, and I was done waking up alone with no one to share my thoughts and feelings. I wanted someone to hang out with and be happy and content doing absolutely nothing expect sharing time and space—together.

“I don’t blame you for thinking that’s all I had on my mind. In fact, till recently it’s all I thought I needed from someone. But—”

“There’s always a but isn’t there.” Letting out a heavy sigh, I readied myself for his agreement on my ‘let’s be friends’ request.

“However,...is that better?” He grinned. I grinned, then he continued. “However, if all I wanted from you was a hookup, then I wouldn’t have asked Evie about you. I would have waited until you were alone and approached you myself. So what I’d like from you, hell it’s a need at this point and so brand new to me I’m having trouble naming it, but it’s something that didn’t go away over the past several months. And I’m sorry for leaving you questioning my intentions.”

I felt my body begin to tremble. Where had this version of Slade been hiding? Was he saying he wanted a shot at a relationship with me?

“I like the sound of doing nothing with you. Learning more about you. Being silly or boring with you. Hell, I also want to touch you, find out what makes you moan my name, and that’s the truth and I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want those things. If your original Santa hadn’t bailed on you, believe it or not, I was ready to ask you out.”

Wow. Like double wow.

“I have the day off tomorrow and I’d like to spend it with you. How about a movie or we could go to the ice-skating rink?”

The thought of him on skates, for some reason, made me chuckle. Did he throw that out there because he thought it was something women secretly wanted all their dates to be into? “Do you skate?” I asked.

“It’s been years, but the weather’s supposed to be clear tomorrow and it’s what people do on dates in the winter, right?”

“I appreciate you wanting to do something typical, but I’ve never skated, and I’m not going on our first official date and try standing on skinny blades for the first time in my life. A movie sounds good.”

Slade still hadn't told me the *why* of it all and I stubbornly couldn't stop thinking there was something he wasn't telling me. But the way he was opening up to me had my thoughts ping-ponging inside my brain, desperate to land on a solution. Needing to move past the doubt and insecurity from failed relationships, I was willing to take this chance on him. On us.

We ended the evening by agreeing on a time for him to pick me up tomorrow, and he did keep his hands to himself as we walked back to where I'd parked my car on a side street a few blocks away.

There was no awkwardness or an attempt at a goodnight kiss and as I drove home, I wished that I hadn't made such a big deal about hooking up. Hours later, lying in bed, my body still heated from the few touches we shared, I spent the night dreaming of Slade.

CHAPTER 6

SLADE

THE THING about movies is you don't really get to know a person. There's little chance for a meaningful conversation. Times that by ten when the room is packed with holiday out of towners and the only thing you learn is what makes the person you're sitting next to laugh, cry or look away from the action on the screen.

I learned all those things and more sitting next to Kara in the dark megaplex surrounded by strangers. The most important of which is how hard she makes me and how difficult it was not to use the age-old move men have been using since the dawn of movies, the stretch and reach around while snuggled up close to the person you can barely stand *not* to touch.

I resisted. But it was torture. My knee bounced through most of the comedy, and I wouldn't be surprised if she guessed what I was battling. Hell, all anyone sitting within a few feet of me had to do was look in my lap to see the evidence on my body's reaction to Kara. So yeah, I'm sure she knew exactly what was running through my mind and noticed my cock straining to escape my jeans.

"That was funnier than I thought it would be. I'm glad we came." Kara flashed me a bright smile, her eyes still adjusting to the light.

“It was.” I took her hand in mine, leading her through the crowd. A wave of frigid air hit us on our way out of the warm building. Thanking the weather gods for the reset, I widened my stride and the pressure against my zipper eased. Able to think with my brain again, I asked,

“Are you up for a drink, or...?”

Kara took her time in answering. Walking in silence, I helped her into my car. Settling into the cold leather, I flipped on the heat before turning to look at her profile. Suddenly I felt that if I didn’t move faster, she’d slip through my fingers, and I couldn’t let that happen.

Shifting toward me, she wore a tentative smile. “I think I’m ready to find out why now? I mean, was it just my imagination, or haven’t we had this flirty back-and-forth thing going on for months ago?”

“We did. Really, I’ve been attracted to you since you started coming into the pub even when you had that annoying boyfriend. What was his deal, anyway? Every time I saw him, he had on a different pair of glasses.”

She let out a laugh. “That was Jonah. He’s an optometrist. He had an eyewear fetish, probably still does. I could tell you stories, but I won’t. He was nice, just...not for me.”

“I’m glad. He wasn’t for you, that is. And I promise, I don’t have any fetishes that I know of anyway.” I couldn’t hold back any longer. I leaned closer to her over the console and cupped her chin. “But maybe we could discover some together. Because I could quickly become addicted to you, Kara. I told myself I’d take this slow, but sitting next to you in the dark gave me too many ideas.”

Her eyes went round at my words. “Why...why have you been holding back?”

“For one very good reason. You matter. Maybe we haven’t spent a lot of time together, but I want to change that, and I don’t want to mess this up with sex.”

Her lids fluttered, and her breathing increased at my words and oh, damn, she wasn’t making this easy.

“What do you want? Why did you agree to dinner last night? The movie today? And if you tell me you’re doing it because I’m helping you out, I don’t think I can—”

Kara moved in and pressed her lips against mine, cutting off my rambling. I grabbed her arms and lifted her over the console onto my lap, burying my hands in her hair and deepened the kiss. She let out a low mewl. It hit me first in my gut, then my dick. She wiggled against my growing erection, and I cursed that this was happening in the front seat of my car. I wanted her naked and in my bed.

The sound of teenagers passing my window and laughing broke the spell I was under. Dammit, I didn’t want our first time to be in the front of my car, where anyone could see us. She deserved better. And so did I.

Gently, I ended the kiss, framing her face with my hands. “I want you, Kara. Have no doubt. But I want you to be absolutely sure this is what you want. Please forgive my stupidity for staying away from you. And I hope you don’t feel you owe me for helping you. I’ll back off if you want. I can’t believe I’m saying that, because there is nothing more than I want then to take you to bed and spend hours feasting on you, but—”

Fingers pressed onto my lips; Kara stopped my rambling. “I feel like the tables have been turned here. I don’t want to pressure you either. But Slade, we’re old enough to not play games. Tell me why you all but ignored me for months and months because for the first time in my life, I’m considering having sex in the front seat of a car.”

Reluctantly, I helped her back into her seat and put my car in reverse. I needed a distraction and driving was the best one I could come up with.

“Slade?” The hurt in her voice almost had me pulling over and taking her back in my arms. Almost.

“I’m the donor.” The words rushed out and an unexpected weight of what now seemed to be the dumbest idea I ever had lifted.

“Wait. Donor? As in the million-dollar donation that Rod was bouncing off the walls over, then swore he couldn’t tell me who it was until it was finalized because the donor wanted to remain anonymous. That’s you?”

“Surprise?”

CHAPTER 7

KARA

A BIT DAZED, Slade pulled into my driveway, jumped out as if on fire, then helped me from the car. Standing on my front porch, instead of digging out my keys, I turned to him and said, “I wish you would have told me.”

“I know. But I learned a long time ago money makes people do weird things. And after they find out how much you have, well, let’s just say things get awkward real fast. My intent was to make sure no one had any doubt about why I was with you and why you were with me. That might not make sense right now, but my grandfather was a big deal in the city where I grew up. And although my parents kept us away from the society stuff, I saw up close how different those who have money are treated versus the have nots and how it can ruin all kinds of relationships.”

Not the explanation I’d been anticipating. I began to shiver, and his hands came up and rubbed my arms, keeping me warm in the cool night air. My body reigniting with need at his touch, I squeezed my thighs, hoping to ease the ache, but it only increased it. “Okay, so you work at a bar, but you’re rich. And now you’re richer thanks to your grandfather, and able to give a million dollars away?”

Slade shifted, letting out a long groan. He huffed out a frustrated breath, and I so got it. We were both fighting against

the need to give in to our lust, yet getting the truth out was important.

“Don’t forget, I’m the manager now, more than just a bartender like I was for years. Originally, I did it in college to rebel, I guess, but then I found I really liked working with the public. Plus, it’s a good profession for someone who likes to travel and move around. Which I did. I never stayed anywhere for long. Until Pineville.”

He stopped speaking. His gaze on my lips. What more did I need to know? Do I wish he’d told me sooner instead of leaving me hanging? Sure. But he had a good heart, and he thought enough of me to not want anyone to think I was with him just for the donation, the money he apparently had more than enough of to give away.

“Kara Wyatt, you make me want to stay. You’re like no other woman I’ve known. I want a chance to show you I’ll take care of your heart and these gorgeous curves of yours.” As he spoke the words, his hands grasped my hips and pulling me closer to him.

A fresh wave of sparks curled up my spine, cementing my body’s vote. Months of wondering what it would be like in his embrace faded as the reality became a hundred times better and we’d barely begun. “I want you to stay.” My whispered words echoed between us, and it was now a race to get where we both wanted to be—tangled up in each other.

Tearing into my purse, I dug out my keys and miracle of miracles, even with shaking hands, I unlocked my door on the first try.

Frantic movements had us closing the door, ripping off outer clothing, then racing to my room. Slade wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me up against him, hard and tight. His hands diving into my hair, holding me still as his lips, his tongue, consumed mine.

When air became a necessity, heavy breathing filled the air. Slade grinned and said, “Clothes off now!” More than eager to follow his command, I took a step back, bumping into the end of my bed, then steadied myself. Bolder than I’d ever

been, I stripped out of my blouse, slacks, and bra in record time. His eyes blazed, but he didn't touch me.

Slade's gaze had followed my movements and when I paused before slipping out of my panties, he let out a groan that went straight to my clit.

"You're still dressed." It wasn't the same command he'd given me, but it was enough to have his arm sweeping behind his back as he tugged his shirt over his head in one smooth motion. Oh. My. I felt my jaw drop, and it was my turn to stare. Unbuttoning his jeans, he pushed them off along with his briefs, freeing his cock. I reached for it, needing to touch him, but he backed away.

"You touch me now and this will be over before I can make you scream my name." And just like that, he pushed gently on my shoulders, and I tumbled onto the mattress.

Slade bent a knee and climbed over me slowly, never breaking eye contact. "So many nights I've imagined what you taste like, how tight you'll feel wrapped around my cock. This almost doesn't seem real." His gaze swept over me, lighting me up. I felt desired and a bit wanton as I shimmed my hips then arched my back, offering myself. He didn't disappoint, taking a tight nipple into his mouth while he caressed and flicked its mate, dragging sounds from me I had no idea I was capable of. He captured my lips in a deep kiss. Time stilled.

Dropping hot, open mouth kisses from my neck to my collarbone, then down the center of my stomach where he placed the tip of his tongue inside my belly button and swirled. My hips shot into the air at the feathery contact. Liquid heat pooled in my core. I was on the verge of begging him to taste me where my pulse was now throbbing.

"You like that, baby?" Slade's words freed me.

Inhibition gone, I cried out, "Yes, lower. Please. Lick me."

"With pleasure." His first swipe made me grab my bedspread, and the second brought me to the sweet edge of a climax. I wanted, needed, more. "Slade." Was that my voice begging him for more?

He didn't make me wait. Lifting my thighs over his shoulders, he began feasting and wringing from me frantic, explicit words of praise. A light flick of my swollen clit brought white stars behind my eyelids. I rolled my hips, seeking more. More pressure, more Slade. In short, quick strokes, his tongue drove me to my peak, and I crashed in waves, his name ringing out as I silently gave thanks for finding a man who knew how to bring me pleasure beyond what I thought possible.

The sound of ripping foil filtered through my brain as it floated back to the moment. I opened my thighs wide, welcoming him, then watched as he guided himself into me, filling me. I clamped my inner walls around him, greedily taking all of him as he pounded into me. Pleasure overrode everything. Desire ruled. And his thrusts drove me wild. When I felt the rush of another orgasm, he roared my name. We came together. The moment...perfection.

I wanted to draw it out, I didn't want it to end. My inner voice, the naughty one that hadn't been confident enough to show itself until him, promised me that this was only the beginning.

EPILOGUE

KARA

ONE YEAR LATER

The children, even the teenagers, were laughing at Slade's performance. He took his role of Santa very seriously with equal parts playfulness. It was only the second year of donning the tailored suit, but he worked the room as if he'd been doing it for years. As the last notes of the Christmas carol sing-along ended, our daughter chose that moment to make her presence known.

I was standing in the corner of the gym that had been transformed into Santa's workshop, the best view in the room. I rubbed the spot where I'd just taken a double kick to the ribs. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was expressing her thoughts on not hearing her favorite song, "*All I Want for Christmas is You*." Actually, Slade had dubbed it her favorite.

Patting my belly, I assured her, "Later, little one." We had Mariah's Christmas album on a loop at home. I didn't have the heart to tell Slade I couldn't wait for Christmas to be over so we could change our playlist.

"You doing okay, Kara?" Rod handing me a cup of punch then nodded at Slade. Even with the distance, I could tell he was wearing a concerned look hidden beneath his snowy white beard.

“I’m great. Don’t you worry too. Slade’s been on me all week to relax. Just because tomorrow is my due date doesn’t mean she’ll show up on time. First babies rarely do, you know.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t know.”

Rod was a confirmed bachelor, or so he proclaimed, but I had the feeling if he found the right woman, or the right woman found him, he’d change his tune.

My sister Amber and her husband Royce, holding their six-month-old son, came up to say goodbye. “Hey, sis. You look like you need to sit down. We’re headed out. Give me a call in the morning, okay?”

I let out a long sigh. Did every pregnant woman go through this? I don’t remember being such a worry wort over Amber when she was ready to pop. “You bet. Now go on. I’m fine. Get my nephew home so you two can get some rest, too.”

An hour later, the kids were gone, and most of the staff had left as well. Slade and Rod were making the rounds and locking up the center. So much had happened in the last year. I took a moment and marveled at how far both the Children’s Club and Slade and I had come.

Slade’s donation had been more than enough to add on an addition to the center, which helped serve more kids in the community after school and on breaks.

We had a small wedding on New Year’s Day, just our family and close friends. His sister, Kelee, who was now living and working over in Cedar Ridge just an hour away, was one of my bridesmaids, along with Evie and Miranda. I may have aimed my bouquet toss directly at Miranda. She deserved to find her happily ever after soon. I suspected she was carrying a torch for someone at the hospital, but I hadn’t figured out who—yet.

And even though Amber was a little put out at having to wear a form fitting dress at four months pregnant, she made a gorgeous Matron of Honor. And tonight, exactly a year later

from the night Slade and I were together, we were ready to become a family of three.

“Kara, put that down. Please?” Rolling my eyes, I ignored my husband and finished what I was doing. “Slade, it’s a folding chair. I’m pretty sure putting it away isn’t going to put me into labor.”

“Just because you’re the one carrying our daughter doesn’t make you an expert. This is your first time, too.” His voice had gone all growly, reminding me that I had some plans for him when we got home.

I loved his overprotective nature. And he looked sexy in his Santa suit, more so now that he’d removed the fake beard and padding. The jacket was open, revealing the tight-fitting undershirt he wore. My fingers were itching to explore the abs I knew oh so well.

“Uh, uh. You just cool that look, Mrs. Johansson. You’ve had a long day, no sexy times for you tonight. But if you promise to be good and go to bed as soon as we get home, Santa will fill your stocking first thing in the morning.”

My heart skipped, and I grinned. “Oh, how I love you, Mr. Claus.” I tucked my hand through his offered arm and wrapped my arm around his waist. I lifted my gaze to his and sighed.

“I love you more, Mrs. Claus,” Slade whispered. Bending down, he captured my lips and kissed me breathless. There’d be no waiting till morning.

My husband knew me all too well. Tangling with Santa every year had become my favorite holiday tradition.

THE END



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SNEAK PEAK AT EVIE & SAM'S HEA

LOVE AT FIRST & 35TH

Chapter One

“I’m not interested. Please, listen carefully and pass it along to...to, everyone: no more blind dates, casual set-ups or invitations to join dating apps.” Evie Nolan loved her business partner and friend, but she’d had it with all the happiness surrounding her. The babies, the honeymoon pictures and all the sex talk.

Over it.

All of it.

“But Evie.” Sophie Conrad rubbed her round belly and frowned. “We all want you to—”

“Have what you all have. I get it. But love can’t be forced, it can’t be planned. Lord knows as ecstatic as I am for you and Amber and Reese having babies, and Patrice getting her second chance at love, I am not a project for any of you.”

Evie picked up the iPad they used to design floor plans for their events, tapped the screen and handed it to Sophie. “I’d really like your input on the Hines-Smith engagement party this Saturday.”

“Evie, we don’t see you as a project. It’s just, I feel awful about what happened last time.”

Last time was three months ago when Evie caved and agreed to be set up by Sophie’s husband, Grant, a co-owner of

the Idaho Outlaws baseball team. He'd thought the veteran player Sophie had mentioned might be compatible with Evie.

And truth was Evie had a crush on the player for a while. The Outlaws' outfielder was super-hot, so took a chance and agreed to the date.

“Soph, it wasn't your fault. I'm a big girl, well past thirty, and I handled it. And now I know what it's like to be confronted by someone's ex-girlfriend, in public, with photographers lurking.”

Unfortunately, her friends hadn't known about the ex-girlfriend.

Yeah, Evie was still finding bits of pasta in her car thanks to the jealous ex flipping David's plate. A full plate, mind you. And did it land on David, the intended target? No. The ex-girlfriend had lousy aim, and the dish ended up spilling, then sliding into Evie's lap.

At least David had offered to pay for her dry cleaning. But the silk blouse had been ruined, one of her favorites, and the next day she burned it in her wood-burning fireplace and swore that was her last set up.

She decided that would be the last time she let her hormones overrule her good sense. After arriving at the restaurant, she'd quickly found they had nothing in common and he was still hung up on his former girlfriend. Pictures of David and his ex in a lip-lock had been plastered all over social media the very next day. Never again was she going to be the rebound girl.

So, no. Evie Nolan was done with friends setting her up. Unfortunately, that left very little option in meeting new guys since she worked so much. There was always the old-fashioned way and meet up with a guy in a bar, or even like her grandparents and meet through a matchmaker.

Neither solution appealed to her.

Sophie was still staring at her with puppy-dog eyes as she held the iPad in her hands without looking at the screen.

“C’mon, you know I can’t take it when you do that.” Evie had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. She would not be talked into another date, even if he was *perfect* for her. She didn’t want perfect. Instead, she wanted someone she could have a good argument with, then make up, spread out on the dining room table or at the very least somewhere unexpected.

Evie wanted someone who’d could challenge her stubborn ways. Hello Capricorn, but also someone who was comfortable doing absolutely nothing besides recharging for the next workday. She wanted someone who couldn’t keep his hands off her when she cooked or walked past him in a room.

She wanted someone who could curl her toes and make her insides flutter with a look—a look meant only for her—and bonus if he knew his way around an orgasm, preferably multiple. Seeing all her friends settling down into wedded bliss made her realize she should have been more open to finding “the one” long before now.

And long before her friends started having babies, making her admit she really did want a family after years of thinking it wasn’t for her. But she still refused to be set up again. She’d find her own guy, thank you very much.

Evie waited Sophie out. She was not giving in. Besides, work was crazy and in a couple months Sophie would be on maternity leave with baby number two and work would become triple crazy.

She’d spent enough years on go-nowhere relationships and had come to terms with the conclusion that love in all its messy, heart-pounding wonderness may happen for her if she stopped trying so hard and let it happen.

Evie hadn’t always looked at love that way, that it could just happen. Like instantly. But when you’re on a cliff and the only lifeline is love, the only thing that’s missing in your life, then the thought of love at first sight seemed less...silly. There were nights lying in bed unable to sleep where she couldn’t help but wonder had it already happened? Had she messed things up?

Because there was one man she couldn't stop thinking of, no matter how hard she tried.

He was not her type.

He was too tall, too handsome, and too damn alpha for her taste.

Or maybe it was his perma-smirk and fancy three-piece suits that put her off. She could never see Sam Campbell as someone who'd spend a lazy Sunday in sweats and a t-shirt, napping, reading, or hanging out in bed with her. And yet, when she fantasied about someone, Sam's imperfectly perfectly sculpted face always appeared.

An arrogant face that no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't banish it.

Yeah, he was so not the one. Simply her hormones wishing for one night together—maybe.

“Okay, message received. You win.”

Sophie's declaration of defeat snapped Evie from her wayward spin into “it's-never-gonna happen-ville.”

“Let's lock in this floor plan, put in the order for the tables, chairs, etcetera, etcetera and call it a day because this baby needs to eat.” Sophie scrolled through app and signed off on Evie's design.

“Thanks. I know everyone wants to see me with a guy of my own. I do too, but from now on I'm done using my friends and apps as a dating service. If he's out there, he'll show up. Because, my friend, I'm not settling.”



It was almost six p.m. when his cellphone began ringing. Sam Campbell ignored it. He needed to finish reviewing his notes for tomorrow's opening arguments. He was working on an attempted murder case that had taken over a year and a half to bring to trial. When he'd been assigned to it as deputy prosecutor, he thought he had a slam dunk. They had an

informant, and a wiretap recording of the defendant arranging the murder for hire. But the man refused to take a plea deal, so here he was spending another night working on this damn case.

The local media had turned it into a circus. A cheating husband, a well-known and prominent business owner in Pineville, had gone looking in the wrong place for someone to kill his wife after she found out about his affair, well affairs.

She'd threatened to take the kids and half his business holdings. Luckily for the wife, the husband hired an ex-con who couldn't shoot straight and was willing to sell him out.

Unfortunately, the case had so many reschedules in the last year, he'd had to cancel numerous personal plans and vacation time. And dammit, he needed a vacation.

And he needed to get laid.

His position with the prosecutor's office left little time for a private life. In the beginning it hadn't bothered him, but lately he'd noticed the number of friends who could meet him for a beer or act as his wingman had been dwindling. Marriage, kids, sleep all became more important to his buddies.

Then there was his new boss, who'd taken an instant dislike to him and his facial hair. The man thought a clean-shaven appearance equaled trustworthiness in the eyes of a jury. Sam had managed to keep it by changing the subject each time it'd come up, but he wasn't sure how much longer he could hold off the older man. He needed a win in this case.

His cell started up again. If it was the judge's office or the court letting him know the defense had weaseled another delay, he was going to...well he didn't want to speculate, but the breakable objects in his office would definitely be in jeopardy. No way in hell he was answering the phone.

Blessed silence reigned for only a minute when it started up again. Sam threw down his pen, ran his hands through his hair, noting it was past time for a haircut and debated.

The phone went silent again for exactly thirty seconds. He counted before it rang once more.

“Dammit.” Sam stood, retrieved the cell from his discarded suit pocket, and looked at the screen. It was his mom. Thank God it wasn’t the judge.

“Hi, Mom. Everything okay?”

“No. My son is ignoring my calls and messages. Do I have any legal recourse counselor?” Lois Campbell’s voice sounded as stern as when he was a kid and got caught in a fib or with cookie crumbs on his face, swearing it was his sister who’d swiped the last two cookies from the cookie jar.

“I object. We had dinner just last month. Didn’t we?” Sam stretched his back and sat back down. His mother’s sigh made him wince. Okay, so two months ago. And she was right. He hadn’t returned her calls.

“Mom, I promise once this case is over, I’ll call you every day and you’ll see me at dinner so often you’ll start complaining I’m around too much.”

A loud snort erupted, then his mother chuckled. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep. And I know how busy you are, but once in a while it’s also nice to know that you’re still breathing. But that’s not the only reason I called. Noel and TS are hosting a party at their place. It’s the All-Star break and they’re having the players and their families over plus friends, some of whom are female and single, and I want you to come. It’s going to be a laid-back beach day and barbeque. You work so hard—”

“Mom, the trial begins tomorrow and will last at least through next week. As much as I’d love to play hooky, there’s just no way. When the trial is done, I plan on getting some time off and I’ll take you and Heather out for dinner. A celebration dinner, hopefully.”

“I’m sure your sister would be happy to celebrate, and I know you’ll put that no-good bastard away for a long time. What a poor excuse for a man.”

Sam smiled at his mom's colorful description of the defendant, and he did indeed plan to put the bastard away for a very long time. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. So, what have you been up to lately? Anything I should know about? Did you go back to that speed dating event at O'Malley's?" His mom had gone to one a while back with her friend Patrice, who'd recently married after years of widowhood.

"Really, can you see me going through that nonsense? No, I'm perfectly happy the way my life is. I'm not looking for a man at this point in my life, Sam. Besides, at my age, love is overrated."

He hadn't realized how cynical his mom had become about dating and men. Divorced for a long time, she'd dated sporadically over the years. Although he or his sister hadn't expected her to get remarried, not after what their father put her through, but she deserved to be wined and dined; have some fun. Maybe it was time for his mom to focus on her love life and not his or his sister's?

And he refused to think what type of fun his mother could have, nothing like the fun he'd been missing the last few months.

"So, who are you planning on setting me up with this time?" Sam closed the file he'd been reading and saved the document on his laptop he'd been typing with notes for tomorrow's court date. Might as well head home and finish his notes after grabbing something to eat.

"Oh, no one specific. All I want is to see you relax, have a bit of fun." Lois' voice held a hint of sadness.

He knew she wanted to see her kids happily coupled up and providing her grandchildren, but he would not find a woman to settle down with just for his mom. He didn't plan on settling for anyone, period. Besides, he'd yet to find anyone that would make him change his thoughts on marriage. The closest he'd come had ended before it could begin shortly after he was promoted to deputy prosecutor. He'd never been able to figure out what it was about Evie Nolan, but she managed to

piss him off and turn him on all at the same time. It just hadn't been in the cards for them.

Marriage for him was way down on his to-do list. The dye had been cast early by his father souring him on marriage. Sam was determined to avoid making the same mistakes as his father.

"I know you do, Mom. But right now, I need to focus on this case. I'll call you next week, and hopefully it'll be over, and I'll take you out to dinner." He hated disappointing her, but this job just allowed little personal time.

"Okay. But if you change your mind, just know you're welcome. I'm sure TS and Grant would love to catch up." His mom ended the call with a wistful sigh.

Sam put his phone away, gathered his things and headed home, wondering if the woman his mom wanted him to see was the same woman who'd been appearing in his dreams lately?

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