



HALEY TRAVIS

*Home Cooked
Holidays*

T rifling

with
T
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TRIFLING WITH TRISTAN

HALEY TRAVIS

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Epilogue One](#)

[Epilogue Two](#)

[Home Cooked Holidays](#)

[Excerpt](#)

[Also by Haley Travis](#)

My heart lifted unexpectedly as I walked across the parking lot from the bus stop and caught my first glimpse of Foster's Lighting and Decor. It was beautiful.

For weeks now, it seemed that every single store I passed had been stuffed full of decorations. The big box stores on either side of Foster's were crammed with as much bright red, gold, and silver as they could, filling every square inch. Honestly, it crossed the line and became tacky instead of festive.

But Foster's had old-fashioned green garlands with tiny gold fairy lights. There were several red poinsettias, and a classic wreath made from spruce on the door. Festive, yet traditional. Much classier. I paused in front of the huge glass window that wrapped around the sides, enjoying it all.

Nan would have approved, likely with a sassy quip. My grandmother always said that too many decorations meant a store was hiding something. Like a Christmas sale without discounts – they just stuck bows on things without actually lowering the prices.

Grief struck me in the center of my chest. I'd been trying not to think about this being my first holiday season without her. I kept trying to ignore the feeling as I pushed the front door open, causing a tiny bell to tinkle overhead.

The store was massive, yet organized. Tidy rows of lighting fixtures and small decor items stretched so far I could

barely see the back wall. There was something for everyone, with styles that ran from simple to fancy to ultramodern. There were a lot of glass items, especially near the front window, which caught the light beautifully.

I'd recently moved into my own apartment, and I looked forward to decorating properly someday when I had the money to do so. Moving out on my own had been rough, but I thought I finally had it all together when I found a job and an apartment not too far from my best friend, Sasha. I didn't think I'd be hunting for a second job so soon, but with rent coming, I was nervous.

There was a handful of customers browsing the aisles, yet no one at the cash register. The man on the phone had said that one staff member was out sick for several weeks, and another was injured, which was why they had urgent need of a temp.

As I wandered the aisles, I spotted a man in a crisp dark suit who clearly worked there. His large frame moved very slowly along the shelves as he rotated a lamp slightly, then buffed it carefully with a cloth.

"Excuse me?"

As I approached, I realized how tall he was. And how...oh my. Gorgeous. His dark hair, short beard, and wide shoulders looked so perfectly classic. Incredibly handsome.

"Yes?"

"I'm here for a job interview?"

He quickly scanned the store. An older couple was leaving, which only left one other couple, and a woman by herself. "Yes, of course. I'm the only one in today, so I'm afraid we can't go back to the office for privacy..."

"That's fine."

The man walked me over to the front counter. "Kelly Payne, I presume?"

"Yes."

He took a lingering, appraising look at me, then smiled. I almost wished he hadn't. The man was too good-looking. He

was probably in his mid-thirties, which should have been too old for me, but there was something about an older man that hit the right buttons. Someone who knew what they were doing in life, with direction and purpose?

It was sexy as hell.

This was not what I should be thinking about my new coworker...probably my boss. Although it increased how desperately I wanted to work there.

“I’m Tristan,” he said. “Are you interested in a temporary position for some extra Christmas money?” His smoky blue eyes weren’t judgemental. Simply curious.

“It would be regular money, I’m afraid,” I said, smiling brightly as I heard myself speaking too fast, yet unable to stop myself. “I don’t have any family around to buy gifts for, so it’s just me. Plus one tiny party at a friend’s, then Christmas itself on the couch with classic movies. It’s my first holiday all alone, and it’s going to be quiet, but that’s fine.”

Whoa. I couldn’t believe I’d just blurted all that out. Stupid nerves sometimes got the better of me.

Clearing my throat, I tried to steady my voice. “I started a job in an accountant’s office two months ago, but I didn’t realize they shut down entirely for three and a half weeks over the holidays. So I’m just looking for something to tide me over.”

Gah. I was ashamed that I’d gotten into this mess. That’s what I got when I went with my gut without checking the details.

Tristan nodded sympathetically. “Starting a new job is tough.” He smiled warmly, making me stare too intently at his perfect lips. “This job should be straightforward, since it’s not really a place for gifts, and people who want to redecorate for the holidays are done shopping for that by December tenth or so. But since we’re in between two huge stores we get a lot of foot traffic. People come in to browse, and think about what they might buy next season.”

“I understand. This is the time to gently chat people up and make them fall in love with the store, so that they definitely come back next year.”

His eyes glowed. “Exactly. Since it’s quiet, we can either give people plenty of personal attention, or let them browse in peace.”

“I’m not a lighting expert, but I’ve worked retail before,” I said. “I’m pretty good at picking up when people just want to wander around.”

Tristan studied my face for a moment. “You don’t mind constantly cleaning? The thing about shiny lights is that they show every single speck of dust.”

“Not at all. Plus, it’s an excuse to walk past customers and say hello without lurking.”

“Excellent point.” He paused, wishing the couple who were leaving a Merry Christmas, then turned back to me and extended his hand. “You’re hired. Can you start...well, immediately?”

I hoped that he didn’t hear my exhale of relief. “Yes, thank you. I’ll just need to make a few quick calls to cancel the other interviews I had booked today.”

“Great. I’ll make you a name tag as soon as I can.”

He chuckled as my gaze locked on the front of his suit, which fit terribly well but had no tag. “I’m the owner. I don’t bother with a name tag myself,” he explained.

Oh crap. He was the owner of the store? That meant he owned the chain of three stores. To me, that was a rather impressive feat. I’d thought he was just a manager or something.

Tristan led me to a back room where I could store my coat and purse, then showed me the coffee area. It was a small space, and his huge frame took up most of it. Being so close to him sent tingles through my stomach as I looked up into those stunning eyes.

“You can have a coffee at the front counter, but please keep it out of sight on the shelf below,” he said. “The counter must be pristine.”

“Of course.”

“Here are the dusting cloths,” he continued, pointing to large bins in the corridor marked Clean, Semi Clean, and Dirty. “I’ll explain later how to spot-clean various finishes. For now, simply wipe everything as you go along.”

We went back out front and luckily the cash register was the same model that I’d used a few years ago at a shoe store.

“I think that’s it for now,” he said. “Why don’t you go back to the coffee room to make your calls, then you can work the front counter until lunch?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

After pouring myself a half mug of coffee, I took a few sips to focus. It was a huge relief to have been hired at the first place I tried. Maybe if things worked out, I could stay on after the holidays and pick up a few weekend shifts on top of my regular job.

But Tristan... How would I be able to work with him every day?

I shouldn’t be having such thoughts about my new boss. Yet I felt instantly drawn to him. He felt trustworthy, which was rare. Not that I trusted my gut instincts in the slightest anymore. I mean, look at the surprise three weeks off at the accountant’s office.

As breathtaking as Tristan was, he seemed a bit...uptight. Maybe he was just particular about his store. Determined. He had such a strong presence. Not to mention those perfect lips. What it would feel like to—

No. I had to stop that train of thought dead in its tracks.

I should be focused on survival: paying rent and getting through the holiday calmly. But I *was* only a temporary employee. Would having a tiny crush on the boss be so bad?

Yeah. Probably.

He needed someone mellow, not a weird temp who couldn't stop staring at him, wondering what snuggling into those thick arms would feel like—

Stop it.

Tristan Foster was clearly a classy guy, who couldn't possibly look at me as anything more than an employee.

I was going to have to stifle my lust and absorb some of those tranquil peace on earth vibes from the soft background music.

Hiring Kelly was an easy decision. Out of the eight preliminary phone interviews I'd done yesterday, she was the only one who seemed genuinely friendly.

That's what my flagship store needed this season. A soft touch, and a friendly face. I did need to increase sales before year end, but it wasn't fair to expect that from a temporary employee.

I just would have to find a way to control my racing heart around her. I wasn't the sort of guy who got all sentimental about meeting a Christmas angel, but it was impossible to think of Kelly any other way.

Her lovely, delicate face was a vision. Like a porcelain doll, mixed with a sexy-sweet girl next door. There was a brightness in those soft big brown eyes that I found intriguing. Kelly seemed shy, or maybe she had just been nervous at the interview.

Pacing around the cash register, I double checked that everything was in order. I had planned to spend more time at the two smaller stores this week, but not now. If I was only going to have the chance to be around her for a few weeks, I'd make the most of every single moment.

When Kelly returned, that dazzling smile felt like it switched on some long-forgotten part of me: *joy*. It was actually going to be fun to work with her. My workplace hadn't been fun in ages. I'd been too fussy, trying to achieve perfection so that I could open more stores.

Now that Kelly's coat was off, I had a better view of her figure in slim-fitting black pants and a festive dark red sweater. The way she moved, inadvertently displaying every curve, showed me she had no clue how breathtakingly sexy she was.

Shoving those feelings aside, I quickly explained my usual method of dusting and examining the store. "It's great that people love touching things," I said. "But people don't want to buy something that looks like dozens of people have groped it."

Kelly smiled. "I understand. I used to work at a clothing store, and nobody wanted to try anything on if it didn't look fresh off the delivery truck."

"Well," I said, "it's my turn to go back and make a few calls. I won't be long. You've got a handle on things out here, I think?"

Kelly nodded, picking up a clean dust cloth and starting down the aisle of desk lamps.

Although I heard the bell out front ring a few times, I resisted the urge to rush out and check on her. With any other new employee, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself from breathing down their neck to make sure that everything was done correctly. But Kelly had an impeccable résumé, so I gave her some space.

When I went back out twenty minutes later, she was holding out a small wrapped package. The middle-aged couple in front of her looked delighted. "You're an angel!" the woman exclaimed. "Thank you so much."

As I came closer, I saw that Kelly had used crinkled craft paper from some packing supplies and brown string to wrap their purchase. Around the simple bow she had tucked a few sprigs of holly that must have been snipped off the flower arrangement at the end of the counter.

"Wait a moment," Kelly said, looking back and forth between them. "You said that you're going to a holiday lunch."

She snipped off another sprig of holly, then dug in the junk drawer for a safety pin. In seconds she had fashioned a tiny boutonniere and secured it to the collar of the man's suit. "Your wife is wearing that beautiful Christmas dress. You have to match, right?"

The couple looked thrilled, thanked her profusely, and I noticed the husband pocketed one of our business cards on the way out.

"You didn't mention gift wrapping services," Kelly said sheepishly as I came over to her. "But they're on their way to a party right now and needed a hostess gift."

"What did they buy?"

"That hundred-dollar set of three crystal star candleholders," she said. "But the wife also loved two of the floor lamps, and her husband is coming back after work tomorrow to pick them up."

"Assuming they're still here," I said, smiling widely.

"I told him I was new and didn't know whether or not we could hold things," she explained. "But the odds of them being bought so quickly are pretty slim, I think."

She was already tidying away the wrapping supplies, but I took the scissors and cut out two small tags and a few lengths of string. I wrote the word "Reserved", then handed her the tags. "We don't normally hold items, but they seemed charming. Just for a day, of course."

Kelly grinned as she darted over to tie the tags onto – wow, the two most expensive floor lamps we had. Amazing.

She had no clue how adorable she was. All sweetness and light, a perky little elf. The sort of charming girl I'd always dreamed of finding.

When she returned to the counter where I'd already tidied everything away, she said, "Thanks for that. I think having reserved tags on a few things might send the message that people should grab things before they're gone, right? Create a sense of urgency?"

“Good point.” I loved how observant she was. “I have to say, crafting a boutonniere seemed a bit above and beyond, but we do pride ourselves on the personal touch and excellent service. Well done.”

She beamed. “You don’t want customers for the day, you want them for life, right?” Her head perked up as she saw a young lady glance in our direction, not wanting to disturb us. Kelly went straight over. “Hi, can I help you find anything?”

They disappeared around a corner, chatting about a desk lamp. A moment later I heard them laughing together.

Even just observing the top of Kelly’s head as they went down the aisle, I could see how animated and charming she was. I admired that just as much as her beauty.

The knowledge that I was completely smitten with her rolled through me slowly, like a lazy beach wave. I was infatuated with Kelly. She was the loveliest woman I’d ever met. Even though I was her employer for a few weeks, and older, and likely far too fussy for such a free spirit, I had to take a chance.

The pull toward her was impossible to ignore. I needed her.

The sensation coursed through me with an animalistic ferocity. Possession, lust, desire... These were things I’d only thought about while watching movies. Until now.

I had to find an excuse to spend time with her away from the store. It didn’t feel right to confess my feelings in the workplace.

Not just because it was unprofessional. This girl deserved better if I was going to make her mine.

All Thursday my head was spinning at being hired so quickly. Friday I had thrown myself into my work, trying to memorize every zone of the store, and picking up cleaning tips as I went.

But by Saturday morning there was no denying it: not only did I adore the lighting store with its beautiful home decor treasures, I had serious feelings for my new boss.

Tristan's handsome presence was incredibly distracting. His methodical way of cleaning, arranging, and organizing was strangely particular, but also oddly charming. He began standing closer and closer while showing me things. I kept trying to figure out accidental ways to touch his wrist, or put a hand on his arm.

Tristan was definitely fussy, but there was a reason behind every preference. Unlike other employers, or a percentage of the general male population, he wasn't trying to throw his weight around. He simply wanted the best results. I admired how for him, everything in the store was personal.

He seemed to appreciate how easily I connected with the customers, chatting brightly about the holidays while showing them items "just for fun".

I also noticed that Tristan began lurking nearby any time I was helping a single male customer. At first I thought I was imagining it, but four times? Definitely a pattern.

Could he really be interested? Since he was only my boss for a short while, I didn't know if that was a problem.

On my next quick break to pour a fresh coffee, I checked my phone to see Sasha had sent me a text.

Sasha: Excited for tonight? Several people dropped out, so I'm asking Mark to bring some friends. It's time you started dating, so just a heads up that I'm going to fling you toward a couple of guys so that you at least talk to them.

Sasha had been trying for ages to get her brother to suggest friends for me, but I didn't want that pressure. I didn't trust my own opinions about life decisions, never mind Mark's.

Me: Please don't. This is not the time for that.

Sasha: Come on. Just thirty seconds of flirting will do you good.

Me: OK, I will consider it if you promise to be chill.

Sasha: I promise nothing.

Me: LOL

I went back out front, keeping my coffee low and stashing it on the shelf beneath the register. Since it was definitely safe here, I'd brought in a favorite blue and white mug that had belonged to Nan.

Tristan was polishing some of the high chandeliers, and I had to tear my eyes from the way he was stretched out so casually at the top of a ladder in that perfect suit.

Taking my ever present dust cloth down an aisle, I found myself sashaying slightly to the soft orchestral music. It wasn't a Christmas tune, but I enjoyed it.

With Tristan safely on the other side of the store, my dancing became a bit more animated as I lifted small lamps to wipe underneath them, then swiveled my hips in time to the music as I moved along the row. At the end of the shelf, I glanced back to make sure I hadn't missed any, then turned to step squarely into a wide chest.

I gasped as Tristan's hand snaked around my hip to grab me so I couldn't fall. "Sorry," he murmured. He released me, but didn't step back.

Looking up into his deep eyes, it felt like a switch had been flipped. I'd been trying so hard to see him as my boss, not a sexy, gorgeous man that I was drawn to. But now, staring up at his strong jawline and tempting, perfect lips, it was impossible.

I wanted him. From the way his breath sounded slightly uneven, I dared to hope he felt the same way.

We leaned toward each other, then he stepped back, dropping his hand. "Sorry to have startled you," he said gently.

"It's my fault. I'm a bit jumpy."

I followed him to the front so that we could both sip our hidden coffees. His rule about having our mugs out of sight kept the mugs warmer in the little shelf nook.

"Do you have any exciting holiday plans?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "My friend Sasha's party tonight will be just the right amount of excitement."

He nodded, glancing at the stream of cars leaving the loading zone of the big box store beside us. Some of them drove unnervingly close to the corner of the front window. "Is that Sasha Jones?" he asked with a smile.

"No. Sasha Michaels."

"I see. This holiday party is the highlight of the season for you?"

I began pulling a few drooping leaves from the flower arrangement just to have something to do with my hands, and to keep me from staring at his breathtaking profile.

"Yes – it's tradition. Sasha's parents have a huge old farmhouse. Everyone brings a dish, so it's a gigantic potluck."

I looked up to see Tristan studying me. "Tradition is important," he said. "The passing of things from generation to generation, it makes things feel...proper, somehow."

The lump in my throat threatened to choke me. Nothing would be proper this year, without seeing Nan for dinner on Christmas Day.

“What are you bringing to the party?” He seemed genuinely curious. “Do you bake cookies?”

My next blink sent tears cascading down my face. I turned and dashed to the back room, both shocked and embarrassed. Looking around, I grabbed a tissue and tried to dry my eyes, but I couldn't stop crying.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to pull myself together. I couldn't let Tristan think of me as some silly little girl.

“I'm sorry.” His voice right behind me made me jump. “I didn't mean to pry,” he said gently. “I know the holidays bring up all kinds of things, Kelly. If you need a hug, just turn around.”

I didn't care that it was inappropriate. I needed to be grounded, before my emotions went haywire.

The second I spun, thick arms circled me, pulling me into his chest. A strong hand began to stroke my hair as he murmured, “Just let it out. Do you want to tell me what it is?”

It was too late to stop now. “This is the first Christmas without my grandmother. She's the only family member I was ever truly close to, who ever tried to understand me.”

“Oh, Kelly. I'm so sorry.” His arms tightened around me as I breathed him in.

“Christmas *isn't* really Christmas unless it's done properly,” he murmured. It felt like his lips were drifting over the top of my hair as I nestled my head against his shoulder. “Tell me something that your grandmother used to do at Christmas.”

A laugh burst through my tears. “Nan's boozy trifle.”

“I'm sorry?”

I sniffled, still half laughing. “Nan always made a classic English trifle. You know that dessert with the layers of cake and pudding, with whipped cream and walnuts on top?”

“I think I've seen it, yes.”

“You’re supposed to drizzle a bit of sherry into the cake and jam layer. Nan got heavier handed with it every year, until we swore that a serving of her trifle would get you drunk.”

“That’s adorable,” he chuckled. “Tell me more.”

Describing the jam mixed with fresh raspberries, the banana pudding, and the raspberries on top distracted me until the tears stopped. I realized we were holding each other far too closely. It wasn’t just for comfort anymore.

Tristan’s hand skimmed along the back of my hair as he turned my face up to his. He glided his thumb gently under my eye to dry the tears. “I’m sorry that I upset you,” he whispered. “I didn’t mean to.”

“I know.” My fingers inadvertently stroked the back of his neck as I reached up. “I swear, I don’t usually fall apart at work.”

His lips looked so inviting. My breath sputtered as his chest pressed against me. For three heart-stopping seconds, I was positive he was about to kiss me. Then the bell tinkled over the door out front.

An innocent whisper of a kiss drifted across my forehead, sending shivers down my spine. “I’ll handle it. You sit for a few minutes. Okay?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

When he left, I instantly missed his warmth. It was shocking how tender he was. His carefully polished, almost stoic demeanor disappeared the second I needed him to stop being my boss and be...more.

This intense tangle of feelings needed to be combed out. Tristan was a good, stable, responsible man. But that had nothing to do with the wave of raw lust that came over me every time he was near. His sexy confidence that came from being a bit older added to my desire. It was as if our bodies craved each other, and circumstances be damned.

I couldn’t be sure he felt the same way. He might be incredibly sweet, or would just do anything to stop a woman from crying.

Since he undoubtedly had more experience in this, all I could do was wait for a sign. If Tristan gave a hint that he was interested in me, then I would let myself hope.

Until then, I was not going to trust my own judgment, no matter what.

Holding Kelly in my arms even for a moment had told me everything I needed to know.

For the past several years I'd insisted that I was too busy growing my business to think about women. I'd been lying to myself. The truth was that I'd never felt a genuine spark before.

Kelly and I, however, definitely sparked. The way her eyes had glowed, her breath catching when I'd nearly kissed her...

Yet we'd both backed off, as if we weren't sure.

Well, I was going to show her that I could soften my edges, and be an expressive, loving man for her.

I'd never been so grateful for my fussy systems. I had a habit of going through all of my old contacts on social media three times a year, and sending people messages inquiring about their lives. It wasn't just gentle promo for the store. It was to continue a feeling of connection with people so that we didn't completely fall out of touch.

In mid-November I had started a conversation with Mark Michaels, a guy I used to play softball with. Our online messages had moved from gossip about our former coach, to our current jobs, to how we hadn't played darts in ages.

Two weeks ago we'd gone out for a beer and made fools of ourselves at a friendly dart tournament. We'd had enough fun that when I called him the next day during an afternoon break, he immediately invited me to his Christmas party tonight.

Kelly was such a wonderful worker that I was able to leave just ten minutes after closing. “Do you need a ride anywhere?” I asked.

“No, thanks. I have to pop by the grocery store on the way home.”

I smiled. “For your big potluck tonight?”

She giggled sweetly. “Yes. I don’t cook, so I’m in charge of cheese and crackers, thank goodness.”

“Sneaky. I like it.”

“See you tomorrow!” she called out as she left.

I set the alarms and locked up, waiting until Kelly was out of sight across the parking lot before jumping into my car and speeding away.

The next few hours were a whirlwind, and by the time I pulled up to Sasha and Mark’s parents’ house, I had to sit in the car for a moment to take a breath.

I’d never done anything like this before. It felt like a grand gesture. It might be too big for the occasion. On the other hand, it might be nothing, and would barely elicit a smile.

For my part, I was about to publicly declare to anyone around that I wanted to be with Kelly. Wanted her to feel that same flutter I felt every time I looked at her.

Grabbing my contribution to the potluck, I walked up the driveway past a dozen other cars. The party was in full swing, so I didn’t bother knocking, walking straight to the kitchen.

I recognized Sasha from Mark’s online photos, so I headed over to introduce myself. As she turned, I saw Kelly standing right behind her. She was a vision in a dark green dress, her hair done in slight waves around her shoulders.

Kelly and Sasha were wearing matching glittery snowflake hair clips, and laughing about something as they pointed to an enormous cheese platter.

As Kelly turned to look at me, her mouth fell open in shock. “What...”

“Mark invited me,” I said, addressing her friend first. “I’m Tristan from the lighting store. You must be Sasha.”

She laughed brightly, tossing her short blond hair. “Yes. Welcome! I should warn you, we’re judging all of the guys on what they’ve brought to the potluck.”

I set down an enormous glass serving bowl, then peeled the tinfoil from the top. “This is my attempt at what I believe is called Kelly’s Nan’s Boozy Trifle.”

Kelly’s smile dropped as her mouth became a perfect O. She stared down at the dessert, decorated with raspberries and walnuts on top of the whipped cream.

She was motionless for a long time, then her shoulders began to shake before she spun and darted from the room just as Mark walked in. “Hey, Tris, thanks for coming. What’s wrong with Kelly?”

Sasha shook her head. “I think Tristan broke her.” Her hand patted my arm. “This was lovely of you. Go get her.”

I took off after Kelly, shouldering through the crowd in the dining room to the patio out back. She was clutching the wooden railing, her shoulders trembling.

“I’m so sorry,” I said gently, resting my hand on her arm. “I thought it would make you smile.”

Her lovely pixie face turned up toward me as I saw she was smiling through a mist of tears. “I don’t normally cry this much, I swear. It’s just that nobody has ever...done anything like this for me,” she sputtered.

Then she stared at me in surprise. Since it was a casual party, I had switched my suit for nice jeans and a button down shirt. “Less stuffy,” I said. “Better?”

She nodded. “Why did you...I mean, trifle’s a lot of trouble...”

The second I held out my arms she snuggled into my chest. “I’m not good with romance,” I confessed. “I had no idea how to announce that I care about you, but I feel like we’re supposed to be together.”

“That is a heck of a way to make a statement.” Kelly looked up at me, her damp eyes shining. “What if I’m not the exact right kind of girl that you’re—”

I cut her off with a gentle, slow kiss. Her lips were soft as she cuddled against me. Her fingers at the back of my neck sent my pulse surging. My hands pressed against her lower back, holding her close.

Her fluttering breath and trembling delicate body made me think she was as overwhelmed as I was. Her softness awakened my dormant libido, sending a wave of lust crashing through my veins. The electricity between us was unreal. I could feel it in the way our kiss deepened, the way her feet shifted to press more of her body against me.

Kelly was just as hungry for me as I was for her.

And I was going to make sure that my lovely girl got everything she wanted this holiday season.

As I melted into Tristan's arms, my head was spinning. His lips against mine felt perfect. Even though it was chilly outside, his warmth kept me cozy as we snuggled together.

I would have thought that the step from boss/employee relationship to something more would have been a gradual process. This was instant. Tristan was already behaving like my boyfriend.

Our kisses became deeper, hungrier, then he pulled away and examined my eyes. "I'm sorry if I shocked you with the trifle," he said. "Maybe I should have said something ahead of time."

I laughed, blinking the dampness from my eyelashes. "To be honest, I thought I was going to pass out when you took off the tinfoil. Most men wouldn't make a trifle for somebody they'd just met."

His thumb skimmed along my cheekbone, then past my ear and down the side of my neck, making me shiver. "You're obviously not just somebody, Kelly. You're the sweetest, most beautiful girl I've ever seen. And besides, we've already agreed that the holidays have to be done properly. So I couldn't very well have the missing dessert floating around in the back of your mind, right?"

I nodded, as he dipped his head to kiss me again. "Of course, I have no idea if I did a good job," he said. "So let's

get you inside before you freeze, and you can sample it and let me know.”

“Okay.”

When we reached the kitchen, Sasha had the trifle artfully arranged in front of a poinsettia and a couple of candles, with her phone out. “Just finished a photo shoot,” she laughed. “I knew you’d want pics.”

“Thanks.”

Mark found a bunch of small bowls and a huge serving spoon, holding it out to me.

“No way – the chef serves the trifle,” I said.

It was interesting to see Tristan looking slightly unsure. “Wait. If I just scoop into it, how do I keep from making a mess?”

“You don’t. That’s the thing with trifle – it looks incredible, then it turns into a bowl or plate of layered glop.”

He shrugged, then carefully scooped out a portion, setting it into a bowl as he handed it to me along with a dessert spoon. As I sampled it, he quickly doled out servings to Sasha and Mark, and a steady stream of people coming in and out of the kitchen area.

The flavors blended together perfectly as I savored several bites, fighting not to tear up again. Tristan was watching my every move. “Is it all right?” he asked anxiously.

“It’s amazing. Especially for a first try. Seriously.”

He exhaled. “Good. I was worried, especially about the sherry.”

I smiled as he finally scooped himself a serving. “It’s just a pinch too much sherry. In a good way. Nan would have approved.”

He tasted it, then nodded. “I see what you mean. It needs that bite to balance all of the fruit and pudding.”

I picked off a walnut, eating it separately.

“You don’t want the crunch in with the whipped cream?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. I’m particular about textures.”

His deep chuckle was so sexy. Seeing him out of a suit made him look far more masculine. Tristan led us out of the kitchen into a corner of the massive dining room. Serving dishes of food were scattered all over the table.

“Look at us, eating dessert first,” I laughed. “Terribly improper.”

Tristan set down our empty bowls, then he slipped an arm around me. “Anything that makes you smile like that is proper.” Then he paused. “Look, I know some people would be put off by the whole boss and employee thing. But you have another job. This is a temporary gig. So I assume that doesn’t matter?”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“Good,” he muttered, as his lips claimed mine again.

I didn’t even care about the people around us. Didn’t care that Sasha’s squeal of delight from the doorway was probably directed our way. I just knew that it felt like Tristan and I were meant to be together. We were very different, but we felt right.

Every time he touched me I felt a spark that lit me up from the inside. I wanted so desperately for this to be real.

He seemed incredibly driven, and already owned three stores. I’d just moved out on my own, wasn’t close to the rest of my family, and didn’t have any clear direction yet, since I was a fair bit younger. Would that bother him?

Even though I had so many questions, I couldn’t stop as his lips grazed mine over and over, holding me close.

He pulled away slightly. “I’ve wanted you from the split second I saw you, Kelly. May I please drive you home after the party?”

As I stared up into those gorgeous smoky blue eyes, it felt like I was falling under a spell. “Yes, of course.”

His mouth hovered near my ear as he whispered, “I’ve never had feelings like this before, Kelly. Keeping my hands off you at work was killing me. Not telling you that you’re the most gorgeous, sweet, precious girl I’ve ever seen was like having a lump of words stuck in my throat for days.”

I turned to press my lips to his before whispering back, “I was thinking all the same things.”

“Good,” he said with an adorable grin. “Now, let’s get some real food into you before you get a sugar high.”

Tristan was very precise as he helped me fill our plates with samples of almost every dish. It was sweet the way he cared for me so much already.

As we walked to the last two empty chairs in the living room, he always managed to keep his hand on my lower back, brush my shoulder, or touch my elbow. He seemed to love watching me eat, listening intently to my opinions on the flavors as if he were taking mental notes.

His knee brushed against mine as if he didn’t care who saw us together. It was as if he couldn’t stop himself.

And for me, I hoped that he wouldn’t stop. Ever.

The evening had gone even better than I had hoped. I wasn't much of a party person, but I was cautiously optimistic it had allowed Kelly to see the real me.

It was nice to hang out with friends, as well as catch up with Mark a bit more. The simple act of chatting about everything and at the same time nothing with a group was relaxing.

My goal was to expand the business to ten stores. I'd spoken at length to a franchising expert, who gave me a breakdown of how much and how quickly I should plan to expand to look attractive to future potential franchisees.

But the consultant was only willing to work with me long term if I hit the first few sales targets bang on, and I needed to shake off that stress. It was looking relatively good to hit those targets by year end, then start off the new year with a clean slate. Plus, hopefully, with a gorgeous new girlfriend.

After a few hours of circulating and sneaking kisses in dark corners, I noticed that my girl was looking a bit tired.

It thrilled me that she already felt like *my girl*.

We said our goodbyes, and as I drove Kelly home, we had a delightful chat about everything under the sun. I reached over now and then to lightly hold her hand for a moment, which made her smile.

She was so easy-going that it was relaxing just to talk with her. But Kelly herself had gone through quite a bit in the past

year. Not just losing her grandmother, but moving to a new city, and getting a new job. She wasn't close with her family, so she didn't have anyone to rely on other than her friend Sasha.

I couldn't imagine what life had been like for her to have made the decision to move all on her own.

When we reached Kelly's apartment building, my arm instinctively went around her as I escorted her up in the elevator, then down the hall to her door.

As she dug out her keys, Kelly's pretty little face smiled up at me. "Is it too soon to invite you in?"

Her adorable grin sent sparks through me. She wanted me.

Kissing her gently, I whispered, "Oh, I don't think so, not if I promise that my clothing will stay on, and I won't stay very long."

Kelly let us into her apartment, and I glanced around at the bright wall hangings, the large shelf supplemented by two tall stacks of books on the floor beside it, and her quaint collection of china in a glass cabinet by the dining area.

We kicked off our shoes, and I took her hand as we moved to the couch.

I sat with Kelly in my lap as she leaned against my shoulder. My hand slid along her back and her hip, holding her close. The more I touched her, the more my lust for her grew. Her delicate softness made me feel protective of her. I wished there was some way to express that properly.

Kelly's fingers toyed with the buttons of my shirt. "I've never kissed anyone at a party like that. Were we making a spectacle of ourselves?"

"Maybe a little." My lips pressed to her forehead. "I'll try to be more discreet in the future, but I can't promise. I feel..." I stopped myself, not precisely sure of the words. "It's difficult to hold back."

Her chin tipped up as her eyes locked with mine. "Then don't." Her delicate fingers slipped into the back of my hair as

I leaned in. Now that we were alone, our kiss took on a life of its own. Her soft lips parted, allowing me to taste her more deeply.

A soft moan escaped her throat as we gripped each other tightly, wanting and needing more. My hand moved up her ribs to the open neck of her dress. I paused as my fingertips slid under the fabric. "Yes?"

She nodded, her sweet mouth opening wider as my hand slipped into her bra to caress her silky breasts. Everything about Kelly was so soft. Like a delicate flower petal. I wanted to be the one to care for her, and protect her.

It felt right. It felt...correct. We needed each other. Kelly's energy was exactly what I'd been missing. Simple as that.

Her soft sigh as my thumb skimmed across her nipple made me hard as rock. Yet as my shaft swelled against her thigh, I vowed to control myself tonight. Caring for Kelly was the only thing that mattered.

I squeezed her breast gently, and she moaned against my lips, then murmured again as I retracted my hand, took hold of her knee, and parted her legs slightly to tease her inner thigh.

Every sigh, every tiny sound she made, flowed straight into my heart. Her lips parted as I kissed her gently, then deeper until we were both practically gasping for air. The feverish heat between us was absolutely wild. I'd never felt such intensity. Perhaps because no other woman had ever felt so perfect in my arms.

My fingers slipped higher as her legs parted, clearly encouraging me. As I dragged my index finger slowly, teasingly across the center of her panties, Kelly moaned as we both felt how wet she was. A deep shudder ran through me.

Every time our mouths met, it felt like the air around us was sizzling. My hand rose to the top of her panties, then paused, waiting for her breathless nod before plunging in.

I groaned at the electrifying feeling of her tender skin beneath my touch. As I gently explored and caressed her sweet

pussy, Kelly gripped the back of my shoulders, moaning against my lips.

My heart pounded in my chest as my hand molded to her body and my thumb found the spot that made her shiver from head to toe.

As my middle finger swept gently up and down past her entrance, I suddenly wondered if I was the very first man to touch Kelly in that way.

Until this moment, I hadn't known that I was possessive. I'd never wanted to be someone's first. Yet there it was. I wanted to be the one she always turned to.

We kissed desperately, making it hard to breathe. I backed off so she didn't feel smothered. "Relax, baby," I whispered, surprised that the tender words came out so effortlessly.

Kelly took a deep breath, then settled against me, her breathing becoming deep yet choppy as I felt different parts of her body beginning to tense up as I stroked her.

My thumb slipped in slow circles around her clit as I pressed my middle finger inside just enough to tease. She gasped, the ragged inhale telling me how close she was already.

"You're so sexy," I muttered, kissing along her cheekbone.

Her mouth fell open as she began to shake, her luscious breasts quivering as my hand moved a bit faster. Her pale cheeks deepened in color as a flush of pink moved across the top of her chest.

"I've never felt sexy before," Kelly breathed, clearly right on the edge. Her wetness was increasing even more as I rubbed back and forth over her skin.

"I love how wet you are for me."

Kelly whimpered, then her head fell back as my thumb pressed more firmly against her clit, sliding in quick circles. "Tristan," she gasped. "I—"

Her beautiful eyes fell squeezed shut as she began to climax right there in my arms. As she squirmed and moaned

helplessly, it triggered every possessive animal urge I'd ever had.

My cock was steel as it pulsed beneath her. Kelly's eyes flew open again, her mouth pressing to mine as she shook in an irregular rhythm, clenching against me.

Feeling my sexy girl utterly lost in the throes of passion was exhilarating. I felt like she was really mine now. Like we belonged together. I'd already suspected that we would be a great couple, but this was incredible.

When she stopped twitching, I retracted my hand, unable to resist licking my fingers clean and tasting her fresh, warm juices. Pulling her clothing back into place, I kissed her gently, then moved her off my lap and onto the couch beside me.

"I'd better go," I said, tracing her bottom lip with my tongue before kissing her deeply again.

"Oh. Um. Okay," she said softly.

Kelly seemed slightly disappointed, which I took as a good sign. "Don't think for one second that I don't want more, gorgeous. I just don't want to rush things."

She nodded, smiling sweetly as she walked me to the door. "You're probably right."

Lifting her in my arms, I pressed her back against the wall for one more slow, intoxicating kiss. "I won't be able to touch you at work tomorrow, but I'll be thinking about it real hard all day long."

That made her grin with a naughty gleam in her eyes.

Setting her down, I left quickly, trying to walk normally while my erection slowly dissipated.

When I got to the car, I pulled out my phone.

Me: Sweet dreams, beautiful.

Kelly: Sweet dreams to you too. Thank you for a wonderful night, and the incredible trifle.

I felt like I was supposed to send heart emojis, or kisses, but those sorts of things just weren't me.

Me: Good night, baby.

I was sure that she would know what I meant by that.

As I drove home, I made two important vows to myself. I was going to work on being more communicative, and telling Kelly about my feelings for her.

I was *also* going to keep my hands to myself while at work. 100%. Not just to maintain professionalism in the workplace, but to keep my focus.

To hit those end of the year sales targets, I was going to have to hustle, while learning from Kelly's effortless sales techniques.

Somehow I would have to keep my professional admiration separate from adoring Kelly more every single moment we spent together.

I was very glad that the store was only open until four-thirty on Sundays, since I was already completely beat by four.

With such an enormous array of stock, it was tricky to remember where everything was, and I walked endless laps of the huge space searching for things.

Plus, the bigger stores on either side were frantic, and if people dropped in to browse with us, they took their time once they saw our great selection of products and calmer atmosphere. More people made purchases than I would have expected. I liked that.

I was already thinking of Foster's Lighting and Decor as "our" store. Since Tristan and I had been the only employees for the past few days, it felt like our own private little world. Well, his world that I was visiting. Yet whenever I was dealing with customers, he was happy to stand back and simply observe my style.

It felt like a sixth sense to me, knowing when a person was genuinely just browsing for ideas instead of simply passing the time.

Sometimes people were on a mission to buy a particular item, and they were quickly in and out. But then there were those who were definitely looking for *something*, but they might not be sure what, and even if they were, they didn't want to make the decision to buy it today.

Those were my people. I understood completely that when making a large purchase, you might want to come back a few

times. Or snap a picture and think about it while standing in the living room where the lamp would be placed.

Perhaps it was because I understood them that customers seemed to trust me. I wasn't pushing for the sale, I was simply helping them brainstorm, which inadvertently led to a whole bunch of sales. Once people were comfortable chatting, they would ask more questions, remember that they were also looking for this and that...and the next thing I knew I would be ringing up a bunch of decorative glass bowls as well, or sculptural knickknacks.

"You didn't mention this superpower on your résumé," Tristan said, just after I rang up another large sale.

"It's not a superpower," I said, grinning up at him. "It's a quiet whisper in the back of my mind."

"Like those little old ladies who can always predict precisely when it's going to rain, or the sex of a pregnant woman's child?"

"Just like that."

As we laughed together, Tristan's hand skimmed along my hip, lower than the counter so the customers couldn't see. I loved that he was lightening up around me. That we were comfortable together.

He still hadn't said a word about whether or not this was a relationship that was going to go anywhere, though. Publicly making out at a holiday party could have been a case of too much punch as much as an announcement that we were officially together.

Nan's words rang in my ears every time I thought about it: *"Honey, if a man doesn't tell you that he cares about you every single day, either there's a problem, or a problem is coming soon."*

Brushing past Tristan, I trailed my hand along his fingers, almost entwining in them for a second before I passed by to speak to a couple who were browsing in the holiday ornaments section.

I'd just gotten them settled with the perfect ornaments for their adult children, when the music volume dipped for a moment.

"The store will be closing in ten minutes," Tristan called out.

I left him to ring up the couple so that I could rush around and assist anyone else still making a decision. By the time Tristan locked the doors, I had made two more sales.

"You're magic," Tristan said, as I looked up into his deep eyes. There was a steadiness there that was something that I'd always yearned for.

"Do you have plans for tonight, or could I drive you home?" he asked.

"I might meet up with some friends later, but that's not until eight or nine. A ride would be great, thanks."

On the way, we chatted about our favorite crosswords, and some nature documentaries we both liked. It was startling how much we had in common, especially since he was at least ten years older than I was. I loved that he was more established and stable, but didn't once talk down to me.

As we approached my apartment, I caught him giving me a sideways glance.

"Would you like to come in for a bit?" I asked as he parked.

His smile made my stomach tighten. "I was hoping you'd ask."

We were barely in the door when his energy completely changed. As soon as we'd kicked off our shoes and he'd removed his jacket and tie, Tristan took hold of me, pressing me against the wall and kissing me hungrily.

His tongue lightly played with mine as I sighed against him, his hand slipping down to firmly cup my ass.

"I'm going to find a balance, but not being able to touch you all day today was hell," he smiled, picking me up and carrying me to the couch before setting me in his lap.

“Professionalism first,” I laughed, then he cut me off with another searing kiss.

It was as if our caution had disappeared. He was no longer tentative as he slipped off my sweater, leaving me in a thin tank top over my bra.

“So beautiful,” he murmured, staring at the outline of my breasts through the semi-sheer pinkish fabric.

I loved the way his fingers trailed gently around the curves of my skin. The way he took control of my body, as if he already knew precisely what I needed. Last night he had transported me into an entirely new realm. I couldn’t believe how good it had felt and how easily I responded to him.

Even though it was just one day later, I wanted more this time. Much more. Not just to feel all of these incredible new sensations, but to bond us together. It felt like the more we touched, the more we explored, the closer we got.

It felt like we belonged together. Like we were meant to be. I just needed some sort of proof.

When his eyes locked with mine, I felt a tremor. He wanted me. This fire between us was real.

“I could just kiss you goodnight and go, if you like,” he said softly, as his palm skimmed over my bra. “Or we could stay here. Or, I assume you have a bedroom?”

Maybe it was too soon, but I didn’t want to play by anyone else’s rules. I wanted to yield to this brand new passion that flooded my entire body every time our eyes met for a long, deep glance.

“Bedroom,” I said, trying not to let my voice quake from nerves. We stood up and he took my hand as I led him to the small green and white room.

“Very nice,” Tristan murmured, standing behind me as he unfastened my bra. He pulled that and the tank top off at once, then ran his hands along my bare spine.

I shivered, looking over my shoulder, then turning to face him as I pressed my breasts against his shirt. His hand slipped

up my stomach, along my ribs, to gently caress my skin, running a thumb along my nipple.

I loved the feeling of shivering breathlessly against him. It felt like I was surrendering my body to his touch.

“I’ve never wanted anyone like this,” he said softly, kissing me as he laid me down in the center of my bed.

I reached up to unbutton his shirt, but he stopped me from pulling it off completely. Yet it was still an incredible view of his lightly tanned skin, the planes of muscle stretched firmly over his frame.

His fingers unfastened my pants clumsily. Was he as nervous as I was?

Tristan paused, looking into my eyes and waiting for me to nod before pulling the rest of my clothing slowly down my legs. Everything came off at once, even my socks, leaving me completely naked.

He froze, his gaze lingering over every inch of my skin. “Beautiful,” he murmured, as if he were admiring a piece of art. “Just incredible.”

I felt myself blushing, even with the slight chill of being nude on top of the blankets. Tristan’s large body covered mine as he lay over me, kissing me hard and deep as his hands caressed my skin everywhere he could reach. I gripped his shoulders, feeling my center becoming hot and damp, my pulse pounding with lust.

I’d never felt this way before, and the exhilaration pumping through me made me crave so much more.

He slowly kissed down my throat, across my stomach, then he pressed my thighs apart. His warm breath across my skin felt so intimate. I couldn’t believe how easily he knew just what I needed, carefully dragging his fingertips along every fold of skin before replacing them with his tongue.

Tristan was a very meticulous man, but I hadn’t thought about how that would translate to moments like this. His precision in reading my every gasp and quiver, the way he

adjusted the pressure and speed until he had determined exactly what I craved... It was amazing.

As his tongue swirled slowly and evenly yet firmly around my clit, it felt like an entirely new dimension of pleasure was opening up to me. I had no idea anything could possibly feel so incredible.

His stormy eyes were smiling as he looked up at me. The middle finger of his right hand slipped inside just a bit, and I gasped at how drenched I was. His left palm stretched across my hip bone and stomach to hold me in place, and I realized I'd been squirming a little.

My fingers threaded into his thick hair as I tried to stay still, until the heat flooding me was too much to bear.

Tiny cries escaped my lips as I hovered, floating...then I screamed weakly as the climax washed over me. Tristan moaned right along with me, lapping and sucking at my juices as he grinned up at me.

When I finally stopped shaking, I pulled at him, encouraging him to lie over me. His slow, sensual kiss tasted like me, and I knew he wanted more. He wanted everything. He managed to convey it with his eyes and his hands, not with words.

For a brief second, I wondered if I should ask what this was between us. I wanted him physically, but I wanted a real relationship as well.

Then his hand grazed my breast as his hips pressed to mine and the arousal made me feel weightless. Senseless. I couldn't think of a single thing outside of us in this small bed.

My hand reached down to tug at the waistband of his pants.

“Do you want me, baby?”

I truly did. Every other detail could be straightened out later. Right now, I had to feel him. Feel us. Feel everything.

“Yes.”

The feeling of Kelly giving herself to me was the most beautiful thing I'd ever experienced. I had to wonder if her slight shyness was because she was completely inexperienced.

Since I was older, I felt I should guide her, but be careful every single step along the way.

It was delicious to overwhelm Kelly with pleasure. But now I hoped that she would let us feel that together.

As we kissed, our mouths moved against each other perfectly. An indescribable hum moved through us, sending me into almost a hypnotic trance. I hoped that she could feel it as strongly as I did.

We belonged together. It was the most sure I'd ever felt about anything in my life.

I hardly realized that I was awkwardly slipping off my clothing, not wanting to break the kiss for anything. Yet I had to remember attention to detail at a time like this.

"Kelly, baby, do you want me?"

Her thighs were parting as my hot, hard length pressed against her skin, and I froze in place, waiting for her answer.

Her expressive brown eyes were shining as she nodded quickly. "Yes."

"I'm not in a hurry," I said, running my thumb along her cheekbone as I kept looking at her. "I just feel like...we need

each other.”

She nodded again. “Yes. I’m sure.”

Just as my hips began to move, I froze again. “Do I need a condom?”

“Oh. Um, no. I’m on the pill.”

I peppered kisses across her face. “Thank you. I’m not really in the mood for a sudden trip to the drugstore right now.”

She laughed sweetly, then her hand ran along the back of my shoulder in an encouraging caress. I reached down to take hold of my length, brushing it through her wetness over and over until she gasped.

The urge to plunge deeply inside her was strong, but I fought it down. I had to be gentle.

The seriousness of our connection swept over me as the tip of my cock eased inside her. Kelly clutched me almost desperately, and as I sank a bit deeper, I had to ask.

“Baby,” I murmured, gently squeezing her nipples as her lips parted with a soft gasp, “is this your first time?”

Her dewy pale skin turned pink at the high points of her cheeks. “Yes.”

“And you’re sure that—”

“Yes. Very sure.” Her hand slipped down to grab my ass, giving a squeeze as if trying to pull me deeper.

I gave her exactly what she wanted, sinking inside just a bit before gliding out again. Taking tiny, tentative strokes, I hitched her right leg up over my hip so that she could cling to me.

Each slow, careful thrust felt better than the last, as she became wetter, opening more for me. Her blinking became lazy as her head fell back with a whimper.

Reaching down, I placed my thumb on her clit, massaging gently until her pussy finally opened enough to take my full length. I sighed with pleasure. She was fairly small boned, and

my shaft was quite thick. The pressure was incredible, but eventually I was able to move smoothly.

Kelly looked up at me with fire in her eyes. “I had no idea,” she whispered.

“Nothing has ever felt this good,” I murmured, pulling out my entire length before gliding in again.

We shook together, staring into each other’s eyes as we found our rhythm. Kelly’s hips and core shifted slightly as her thighs squeezed me, learning the right position, the best amount of pressure.

I loved that every moment was a new experience for her. I’d never thought about the rush of being someone’s first, and it hit me more strongly than I would’ve liked to admit.

Yet I wasn’t just thinking of being her first. I wanted to be her only. I already knew that I wanted Kelly forever, and that she was my girl.

Each stroke, each tender caress and soft sigh, sent us higher and higher.

“Tristan.” The desperation in her voice nearly drove me crazy.

“What is it, baby?”

“I...”

Her breathing was uneven, as I felt her pussy tighten around me, squeezing as her hips shifted.

“Come for me, beautiful,” I whispered, leaning down to suck on her nipple for just a few seconds, not wanting to miss her expression.

I took advantage of her open lips, kissing her deeply, filling her with my tongue and my cock at the same time as the orgasm blossomed through her. Her hands gripped my skin and my hair as she shook, moaning into my mouth.

I pulled away so that she could breathe while she cried out, my thumb moving more quickly against her clit. Her pleasure seemed to roll on and on, her shoulders curling forward as she

gripped me tighter. My balls tightened, knowing that as soon as her climax finished, I could let go.

Then finally her eyes and mouth flew wide at the same time. “Tristan...oh my...”

I couldn't stop, plunging deeper as she squirmed against my length. Her moaning was so erotic that I shuddered, everything seeming to freeze in place as I stared at her beautiful expression while completely surrendering to the moment.

I exploded, balls deep in her, plunging hard and fast and groaning deeply, forcing myself not to roar for fear of frightening her.

The release was complete. All tension, all stress, all gone. Kelly was mine now, and somehow that was going to make everything all right.

After coming so hard I felt transformed, and I leaned in to nibble at her bottom lip. She giggled softly, then we dissolved into a light, teasing kiss as our hands continued caressing each other softly.

After a few moments I rolled over to lie on my side, stretching out my arm for her to use as a pillow.

As we snuggled together, I felt like I should say something, but I didn't know what. All of the things I wanted to say were either far too huge, or too tiny and trivial.

That was the best sex I've ever had in my life... No. That would remind her that I'd had sex with other women years ago.

I love the way you look, all glowy and dreamy, when you're freshly fucked... No. Too dirty.

Of all the lighting stores in all the cities...? No! God, no. Too cheesy.

I love you.

That was the thought I couldn't stop from rattling around in my mind.

It was the truth. Would I scare her by saying something so serious so soon? It felt like that was too heavy to actually say out loud to someone I'd only met mere days ago.

But I definitely would keep thinking it over and over until the time was right to say it out loud.

I didn't know whether Tristan would want to stay over or not. Although I loved the thought of sleeping curled up against him, that felt very...*relationshipy*. Were we there yet? I couldn't tell.

My lack of experience with this sort of thing was starting to make me anxious. I hoped that he didn't assume I knew what the heck was going on. Tristan was obvious about his affection for me at the party, but it was still super fast.

My phone beeped from my purse, which I'd dropped on the floor on the way in. Tristan went and grabbed it, holding it out with an adorable smile. "Expecting any important messages?"

"I was supposed to meet up with the girls tonight," I said, checking my texts.

Sasha: Meet us at Midge's Kitchen at 8. We need full details.

I sighed, making Tristan look up from his own phone. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just not sure if I feel like going out anymore."

Train looked at the screen in his hand again and frowned, distracted. He ran a hand through his hair, then sent a few quick texts before looking up. "You should go. I have to go over some of the accounting at the store, anyway."

"On a Sunday night?"

He chuckled, already pulling on his pants. “Yeah, my accountant is one of those night owls whose office hours are two pm til midnight. But she’s the best. My entire family uses her.”

I got dressed, throwing on comfortable jeans with a cute silver and indigo top that made Tristan’s eyes light up. “You said you’re going out with the girls, right?”

I’m not sure why his twinge of jealousy, however slight, filled me with relief, but it did. “Yes. Sasha and Kate.”

“Great. I’ll drive you.”

Tristan was so different when he was away from the store, but he seemed to be falling back into work mode as we drove. “It’s going to be tricky to keep my hands off you tomorrow,” he said with a grin. “You’ll have to help me behave.”

“We’ll see,” I said saucily, before he gave me one more quick kiss and walked me to the door of the quaint little bar.

I was the first to arrive, and I claimed a corner table near the big poster of a fireplace that served as ambiance in lieu of the real thing.

When Kate and Sasha arrived, there was a flurry of hugs, then a huge debate over the correct pre-Christmas cocktail. Once we each had a chocolate cinnamon martini in hand, we were regaled with tales of Kate’s perfect tree, and Sasha’s successful party.

I was still getting to know Kate, but because she was a close friend of Sasha’s, she felt like a close friend of mine already by proxy.

“So, that guy you were making out with seemed super into you,” she observed with a grin.

I felt my cheeks burning.

“Yeah. He’s...technically...my boss,” I said. I quickly explained the temp position, which made it fine in my books and his for us to date.

“You’re officially dating?” she asked. “Boyfriend and girlfriend, just in time for the holidays? Amazing! Are you

meeting his family over Christmas?”

“Oh.” I felt deflated. “We haven’t talked about that.”

Sasha looked at me carefully. “Did you discuss what would happen when you’re back at your regular job?”

“No.” My awkwardness rose up into my throat. “We’ve been moving so fast. And he’s always fixated on work. Those can be conversations for next week, right?”

The way Sasha and Kate looked at each other made me very uncomfortable.

Sasha turned to Kate as if I wasn’t there. “Kelly is a bit shy about a lot of things. She’s afraid to make decisions because her mother made so many terrible ones, and now she doesn’t trust herself. It’s a whole thing. So she needs us to boss her around at times like this.”

My mouth fell open in shock at having my internal glitches thrown out into the open so casually.

Kate nodded, reaching out to pat my hand. “I get it. We all have issues. I’m not allowed to go on a third date with a guy unless Sasha is there to check him out, because she’s sick of me ending up with total losers.”

Smiling and nodding, I stared into my martini. “Thanks.”

“Maybe you should start a running text conversation with him,” Sasha said gently. “You know, just chatting about everything day to day. That way it’s easier to ask random questions.”

“Plus you’ll always be on his mind when he looks at his phone,” Kate grinned as she sipped her drink.

I managed to change the subject, and we chatted merrily for several hours, even getting up to dance when a favorite old song came on. After we called it a night, we waited out front for a taxi.

“You don’t think Tristan thinks of me as a fling, do you?” I suddenly asked them, the two martinis making me more outspoken than usual.

“If you haven’t talked about the future, it’s a possibility,” Kate said. “With hot guys, it’s *always* a possibility. But if he’s sweet, just ride it out.”

“No way,” Sasha said, shaking her head firmly. “He made you a *trifle*, for heaven’s sake. Do you have any idea how much work that is?! That is a statement of real feelings right there. He could have bought cookies if he just wanted a good time.”

She had a point there. Tristan always paid attention to the details. He must have known what a statement like that would say to me.

The three of us piled in the cab, and Kate pointed to my purse. “Quick – text him. Let him know you’re thinking about him. Just say a cute goodnight.”

It felt rather forward, but I did it anyway, holding out the message for the girls’ seal of approval.

Me: Hey, hope you’re having a great night and that the accounting is going well. Chocolate martinis would have been the perfect drink to go with your trifle. Let’s have those next time.

“That’s perfect,” Sasha said, nodding. “Mention future plans casually, and often. Keep it light.”

“Yeah, some guys are super touchy about that,” Kate agreed. “They don’t want to feel that they’re being railroaded into a relationship. You need to make it clear that’s what you want.”

I hit send.

We reached Kate’s house first, and after hugs and goodbyes, my phone beeped just as Sasha and I pulled away.

Tristan: Don’t come to work tomorrow.

For several seconds it felt like my heart stopped beating.

“Dammit,” Sasha muttered. “You said that he was fussy. But that’s over the top.”

I couldn't believe it. Everything about us had felt so right. Then we were apart for a few hours and...*he fired me?* It felt like ice water was pumping through my veins.

"Well, at least you know sooner rather than later," Sacha said quietly, reaching out to squeeze my hand. "Or it's just a mistake. I think he's super into you."

"Apparently not," I muttered sadly.

She gave me a quick hug as I left the cab, trudging into my apartment with my head spinning.

I'd heard of men getting cold feet as soon as a relationship seemed remotely serious. We had felt serious, but in a good way. Or at least, that's what I thought.

Darn it. My lack of experience was showing; I didn't even know whether I should respond to his text or not. Since I had less than zero idea what to say, it was probably safest to keep my mouth shut and my fingers away from the phone screen.

By the time I crawled into bed, my mind was made up. Tomorrow I would go into work as if I hadn't received the text. If he wanted to fire me, he could do it to my face. I had to pick up my blue and white coffee mug, at the very least.

I understood that he was very busy. But if there wasn't room in his life outside of work to make time for a girlfriend, then we were finished before we even started.

I couldn't quite believe that Tristan had been only after one thing. Our bond had seemed too intense for that.

Love was a strangely intense, amorphous emotion, and I'd never felt it for a man before. It was already swimming around my heart, sinking into my mind. I didn't want this warmth, this connection to be over. Ever.

Yet we were so different. If he wasn't in that place, and I was, I was definitely going to be hurt. Badly. I could already sense it.

I already had enough grief to deal with this holiday season. Tomorrow morning, if Tristan didn't give me that special

smile when I arrived, I was going to have to close the door on him.

Even if it was breaking my own heart, I had to protect myself.

TRISTAN

It was supposed to be the best season ever. Unexpectedly, Kelly-the-temp was helping me with a last sales push that was going to get me to my annual numbers and hit that target.

And yet for the first time, I wasn't thinking purely of the business itself, and the expansion to more locations. Wasn't just focussed on having the best franchise consultant guide me to dozens of new stores.

I was also hoping to keep Kelly employed for several more weeks, then convince her to become a manager.

Or if she didn't feel right about leaving her full-time job, maybe I could persuade her to work the odd weekend. I couldn't imagine the store now without her unbelievable energy and incredible work ethic.

With some things, she was as fussy as I was, which I admired. She understood the details were important. That was rare and precious to me.

Not to mention her natural rapport with the customers. I wanted her to teach that to the rest of my staff.

Now that dream was over.

One twist of fate, and everything was literally smashed to smithereens.

At least for a while.

Looking around at the shards of glass, I had no idea how long it would take to rebuild and set things right. Not knowing these important details made my shoulders lock up, my jaw already tense.

It was going to be an extremely long, lonely night. My only bright thought was that Kelly was safely away from it all, having fun with her friends.

She couldn't see this. Pulling off my work gloves, I grabbed my phone.

Me: Don't come to work tomorrow.

I would explain properly in the morning, but for now, I didn't want my precious girl near any of this mess. Not just because I didn't want her to be hurt, but my stupid male ego didn't want her to see me in a state of distress.

She needed her to only see the best side of me until I'd won her over completely. Kelly deserved perfection. A man who was in control and took care of things.

More importantly, she needed a man who could actually tell her how he felt about her. The knowledge that I hadn't yet shared my true feelings was stuck in the back of my mind, poking away like a painful splinter. What was holding me back?

I knew that I could be better. I just had to make it over that mental hurdle. There was no perfect way to tell her. Yet she needed to hear the words, even if they came tumbling out in a mess.

In a few days, I would do my very best to give her that. Until then, I set my phone on silent and pulled on my work gloves again.

It was going to be one hell of a night.

After tossing and turning all night, I was left feeling hollow. I'd thought that Tristan was falling in love with me. I knew that I was falling in love with him. Every time I pictured his face, the longing that coursed through me was too intense to bear.

There were definitely two sides of him. There was the store owner wearing a crisp suit, who was detail-oriented and particular. Then there was the version of him in a casual shirt, or even better, shirtless, who was a wonderful man who knew exactly what I needed.

That didn't mean he needed me, though.

He was a man. I'd heard the stories – the good, the bad, and the horrific. I should have known that things were too good to be true. I was likely just an ego boost, or a holiday diversion.

I didn't truly believe that, but couldn't think of any other reason that Tristan would simply fire me to keep me away from him and his precious store.

I took an early bus so that I could arrive twenty minutes before the store opened. I wanted to get the awkward conversation out of the way before there were any customers around.

Trudging across the parking lot, I was drowning in sorrow. Everything was weighing me down, as if my body had been dipped in concrete.

I didn't want it to be over between us. Everything about Tristan had felt so right. No wonder I didn't trust my own feelings. Maybe I could find out what was wrong and fix it? My shoulders slumped. Whatever had made him send such a cold text was definitely more serious than I was equipped to deal with—

I stopped. Blinked. I couldn't believe the mess in front of me.

The left corner of Foster's Lighting and Decor was just... gone. Piles of glass shards had been swept up against the store to clear the sidewalk. The beautiful front window was boarded up. As I reached the door I could see the two piles, one undamaged merchandise that had been salvaged, the other a giant mound of shattered products.

The bell tinkled as I entered carefully, watching every step.

"I just put the coffee on, Dennis," Tristan called from the back. His head bobbed as he hurried down an aisle toward the front. "We can measure the—"

The second he saw me, he stopped so fast that his coffee nearly sloshed out of his mug.

My mouth fell open as I stared at him. In a blue plaid work shirt, faded jeans and boots, Tristan's ruffled hair was unbelievably sexy. A completely different, rugged side of him that I couldn't help but admire, even surrounded by all this wreckage.

"Kelly, you shouldn't be here," he said, setting his coffee down in the center of the cash desk, probably for the first time ever.

He ushered me out of the store without quite touching me. "Didn't you get my text?"

My head was swimming. "I thought you were firing me."

"What—?" Tristan's beautiful eyes grew huge. "No. Kelly, I..." He started to reach for me, then jumped back. "Sorry, I'm covered in glass shards. That's why I told you to stay away. I couldn't stand the thought of you being cut. I also didn't want..."

For the first time ever, Tristan looked unsure. Hesitant.

He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Baby, I’m a mess. A car hit the front window last night. It shook the building, the alarms went nuts. I haven’t slept.”

I’d never seen Tristan so distraught as he whispered, “We aren’t going to hit our yearly sales target now. I didn’t want you to see me falling apart.”

Of all the potential reasons that Tristan wouldn’t want to see me, I couldn’t have imagined it would be because of his pride.

“I don’t know what to say,” I whispered.

He wiped his index finger off very carefully on his shirt, then held it out so I could clasp it with mine. “Kelly, I would never fire you. I was hoping to talk you into staying here, actually. I can’t stand that you would think I would do something like that through a text.”

My bottom lip trembled as I took a slow breath. “I’m sorry,” I finally admitted. “It’s just... Everything’s been going so well. Part of me expected something awful to happen.”

“No, baby,” he said softly. “*I’m* sorry. I should have told you how much I care about you when we were together yesterday. I’ll admit it – I chickened out. And I can’t tell you now, because I just...” He shook his head. “I’m a zombie. I feel like anything I say is going to come out sideways.”

“What can I do to help,” I said, squeezing his finger with mine. “Can I go get you some breakfast?”

Tristan sighed loudly with relief. “You’re an angel.” He handed me a debit card. “Dennis and his son are arriving any minute to replace the window. So if you could grab three breakfasts that look good, that would be amazing.”

His eyes were so warm when he smiled. “You look really pretty today, baby.”

My heart fluttered every single time he called me that. The relief flooding through me from knowing that we were still together gave me more of a buzz than last night’s martinis.

“And you look sexy as hell in your work clothes,” I said with a wink.

Blowing him a kiss, I dashed down the street to a local diner, picking up breakfast burritos, muffins, and orange juice for three. By the time I came back, Tristan and two other men were intently measuring the space where the new pane of glass would go.

I snuck into the store, and found some dirty dusting cloths to wipe off the counter so there was one clean surface where they could eat. Then I found some large pieces of paper and markers.

I already knew what Tristan wanted to tell me, at least, I hoped.

I loved him. The relief that flooded me when I saw how much he longed to hold me was something that would keep me warm for years.

I understood that Tristan’s chain of stores was not just his business, it was part of his identity. I also was beginning to understand that it had nothing to do with money. It was simply his project. His life’s work.

Well, if it meant that much to the man I loved, I was going to do everything in my power to help him.

TRISTAN

Adrenaline could only keep me going for so long, then exhaustion kicked in. By the time Dennis and Dalton got the new window installed, and I had the broken fixtures photographed, cataloged, and taken out to the trash, it was noon and my vision was beginning to swim.

It took me a moment to read the charming hand-lettered sign on the door: “Closed for the day. Please visit us again tomorrow.”

I seriously doubted that we’d be open tomorrow, but it was a nice thought. Even though I had told Kelly several times to go home, she insisted on cleaning and dusting everything in the relatively unscathed zone. I completely forbade her, however, to go near the front corner that was still littered with glass.

Luckily she understood that my slightly bossy tone came from a good place. Come to think of it, no matter what I said, Kelly always knew what I meant.

I could be myself around her. She didn’t care in the slightest when I was an imperfect mess.

After the workmen left, she placed a large glass of water in my hand. “Drink that, then I want you to go home to bed.”

Chugging the water, I set the empty glass down, then stopped myself from running a gloved hand through my hair. “I still have to clean up.”

Kelly shook her head, giving me an adorable smile. “I’ve already called a cleaning specialist that works on straightening up crime scenes and other weird scenarios. Here’s their quote.”

She held up her phone to show me, and it was a very reasonable total. “I can stay here while they work, you can go home and sleep, and we can open tomorrow at the regular time.”

I glanced at the repaired front corner window. The masonry on the outside would be fixed tomorrow afternoon. The inside needed to be repainted around that section. It wasn’t perfect.

For the first time in my life, I wasn’t certain that mattered.

The second I opened my mouth to protest, Kelly reached out to close it with her finger. “You’re the boss, except when you are dealing with stress whiplash. I don’t even know whether you should drive home.”

“I’m good. Promise. Home, shower, nap.” Leaning closer, I brushed my lips against hers. “Thank you, baby.”

Her smile sent warmth pulsing through my veins, making me feel like maybe everything really would be all right.

“Call me in the morning,” she said. “Now move it.” Her small hands actually began shoving me out the door, which made me laugh loudly, shaking off the tired fog enough for me to get home safely.

After a searing hot shower and a four-hour nap, I snapped awake. Since Kelly seemed to like it when I wasn’t in a suit, I slipped on a clean pair of worn jeans, and a dark blue button down shirt. As I practically ran to the car, I felt rejuvenated. Kelly’s feelings for me were just as strong as mine.

With a quick stop on the way to the shop, I walked in the door to see Kelly running some purchases through the register for two ladies wearing cleaners’ jumpsuits.

I held the door for them, and as soon as we were alone, Kelly said, “The cleaners did an amazing job, so I assume that a fifteen percent discount on some last minute gifts was appropriate?”

My sweet girl was so kind to think of that. “Great idea.”

Looking around, I was in awe. The store was completely spotless. Someone had even set a few decorative wooden chests in front of the chipped wall. Other than the empty corner, the shop looked fairly presentable already.

I held out a small bouquet of flowers and was rewarded with an incredible smile. Her chocolate brown eyes glowed as she smiled up at me. “Thank you.”

“I’m going to be better,” I said quietly, sneaking a glance around to make sure that we were alone. “I’ve never been a boyfriend before. You deserve the best, and I’m going to learn how to be less fussy, and not obsess over every trifling detail.”

“I don’t mind that you’re detail oriented,” she said. “I admire that. I just wish that you would enjoy the day-to-day moments a bit more, and learn to relax.”

I set the flowers on the counter then wrapped my arms around her. “How about you teach me that?”

Tipping her chin up with my finger, I stared deeply into her eyes. “I was going to take you out to dinner and romance you, but I might as well tell you right here, since this is the exact spot.”

“What spot?” she grinned, looking around at where we stood behind the counter.

“The spot where you made a holiday boutonniere for a customer, and I realized how thoughtful and kind and creative you are. I think that’s the moment I fell in love with you, baby.”

Kelly’s breath caught and she stared up at me for several seconds, unblinking. When she was finally able to breathe, she whispered, “I love you too.”

Leaning down, I kissed her gently, slowly, holding back my feverish need to show her how much she meant to me.

We were going to have all the time in the world for that. Now was the moment to simply let everything sink in.

Every beautiful, blissful detail.

Although Tristan wanted to take me out for dinner, I used the excuse of him being tired and stressed to pick up takeout and go to his house instead. I wanted to be alone with him so that we could express ourselves in every possible way.

His words were still ringing in my ears. Tristan loved me.

As we curled up on the large mocha couch in his earth-toned living room, eating our way through a Chinese food feast, Tristan kept shooting me strange, almost seductive glances.

When we finished eating, he put away the leftovers, then returned to sit and take my hands in his. “I know that I’m fussy,” he said slowly. “My family always said if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.”

I nodded, squeezing his fingers gently.

“But my father went beyond that,” he explained. “He was extremely meticulous with every word he spoke. Everything was thought through very carefully.” Tristan chuckled. “I guess you could say I come from a line of verbally anal-retentive men.”

I smiled at the way his eyes shone now that he was opening up. “I don’t mind that you’re particular, Tristan. Or quiet. It’s just that Nan always told me that you can only trust a man who spoke what he felt.”

“I love you,” he said simply, leaning in to press his lips to mine.

I murmured back, “I love you, too.” Even though the sound was lost in our kiss, he felt my message.

I could certainly feel his, as his hands gripped me tightly. It felt like he wanted to possess me. I don’t know why that felt so perfect, but I wanted nothing else.

“I feel greedy for wanting you this much,” he said softly, lifting me in the air. “But I do.”

“I like it.”

He kissed my cheek, shifting me in his arms. “Bedroom?”

I nodded quickly, winding my hands around the back of his neck.

He carried me down the hall to the large bedroom where everything was done in tones of auburn and charcoal. A very masculine room, even if the bed was all ruffled, which didn’t seem like him.

As Tristan set me on the corner of the messy bed, he burst out laughing. “I can’t think of the last time I’ve not made the bed before I left. But I was in such a rush to see you. I’m sorry, baby.”

Reaching out, I straightened one corner of the duvet. “Close enough.”

I released a long, low, happy sigh as he began slipping off my clothing. I’d always thought that the actual mechanics of sex would be awkward and embarrassing. But with Tristan, everything felt completely natural.

Unbuttoning his shirt, I said, “There are very few men who can look equally good in formal and casual wear.”

“You can dress me up like a doll if it makes you smile like that,” he grinned.

I stepped out of my skirt, now completely naked. He sucked in a breath, staring at my breasts while he unbuttoned his jeans.

“I’m definitely going to be dressing you up like a doll, gorgeous. After the holiday season calms down, I’m taking you shopping, picking you out something glamorous, and we’re going to have a very special dinner. I don’t know why, but the thought of buying you dresses turns me on.”

Judging from the thickness of his erection, it really did. More importantly, he was talking about us in the future. That made me feel reassured, and even more excited.

His eyes darkened with lust as he backed us across the bed, crawling over me. As soon as my head hit the pillow, Tristan’s lips trailed down my throat, touching every inch of my sensitive skin.

Working his way down, he began licking and sucking at my nipples, squeezing my breasts lightly in his large palms. It felt like there was a connection between the tops of my thighs and my breasts, and I fought the urge to whine from need.

His lips met mine again, possessing me completely as his hand reached down between my legs. “I skipped my fortune cookie. May I have you for dessert?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

He kissed his way down my belly, then parted my flesh, rubbing his thumb up and down along my swollen nub and open lips.

“So beautiful,” he murmured. He looked up with a wicked gleam in his eye. “And all mine.”

“Yes,” I practically sobbed as his tongue connected with my clit. He began licking hard, steady, driving me to the edge in seconds.

Just when I thought I was about to explode, he plunged two fingers inside me. “I love that you’re so wet for me,” he growled, surprising me with his passion. “Come for me, baby. Come on my tongue.”

I had no idea that his fingers could reach so far, touching me deeply as I moaned, helpless and twitching beneath his touch. His quick tongue, his thick fingers, and the fiery look in his eyes all combined to send me over the edge.

My vision blurred as I cried out, gripping his hair tightly as the orgasm ripped strange new sounds from my throat. I trembled, trying not to thrash too hard under him.

When my body stilled, Tristan lapped at my juices, grinning wildly. “You’re delicious. And those sounds... Damn, Kelly, I think I’m going to need you to make those noises every single day.”

It was time for me to be brave and flat out ask. “So, that means that you want to see me every single day?”

Tristan’s eyes blazed as he lay over me, his thick erection already nestling into my folds. His perfectly sculpted shoulders and wide chest enveloped me with his heat.

“Baby, I love you. Of course I want to see you every single day. Or if you’re out of town, I’ll need a video call.”

His mouth dipped to kiss a path under my ear, then along my collarbone as he began easing his thickness inside. “I’m yours, Kelly. You’re mine. This is real. Right?”

“Right.”

I was about to thank him for clarifying that we were officially a couple when instead I gasped, spine arching, breasts pressing against his chest as he slowly thrust deep into my wetness.

Even if our verbal communication came in fits and starts, there was never any doubt of how Tristan felt for me.

I guess actions truly spoke louder than words.

Kelly's beauty was dazzling as she lay stretched across my bed, her limbs winding around my body.

"You're gorgeous," I said, kissing along her cheeks as I pressed carefully deeper into her lush, wet softness. "You're like an angelic little doll—" I shook my head. "Sorry, that didn't come out right."

Her palm caressed my cheek. "I don't care when things don't come out exactly right. Just keep saying them. Please."

For her, I had to find the words, so that I could bond with her in this moment.

"You're more than just beautiful," I murmured as her body opened for mine, allowing me to sink deeper. "You're the sweetest woman I've ever met."

My right palm squeezed her soft breast gently as the fingers of my left hand traced her cheekbone. "You're kind, and creative, and everything I've ever wanted in a woman."

The more I spoke, the more Kelly lit up, moving against me, moving with me.

"You're so soft, baby. You feel so perfect around me," I said as I moved deeper and deeper until I tapped against the very end of her tunnel. The satisfaction of filling her completely made us both shudder.

My hand slipped down to pull her thigh over my hip, I withdrew a little, then plunged in again.

“Yes,” she gasped weakly.

Pushing myself up, I looked down to watch the incredible sight of my shaft disappearing into her soft body. It was crude, and magical, and made me feel utterly complete, all at once.

“You’re mine,” I said without thinking, hoping that she could hear the emotion I packed into two small words.

Kelly nodded, lifting her head to kiss me. The hunger in her lips made my heart race. As her fingers dug into the back of my shoulders, it felt like she was holding onto me for dear life.

“I love the way you quiver around me,” I groaned against her lips.

“I love the way...” She hesitated for only a second. “You fill me perfectly.”

My chuckle was a rough noise that contrasted the soft sounds of our bodies moving together. I couldn’t hold back my moan as she lifted her other leg to squeeze me between her thighs.

Flesh pulsing against flesh, fingers digging into skin... it was as if we wanted to draw each other in and become one person.

I brought my thumb up to Kelly’s sweet lips, and she caught it in her mouth. “Lick it.”

Her eyes danced as she obeyed, dragging her tongue around my thumb until I pulled it away.

I brought it down to her swollen button, brushing against it gently, then faster. My hips took over, thrusting fast and deep, unable to stop.

“You’re heaven,” I moaned shamelessly against her throat. “Come for me, baby.”

Lifting my head, I caught her eyes. Her hands caressed the back of my fevered shoulders, clutching at me as her body began to ripple under mine. Her orgasm came in waves as her nipples scraped against my chest, her hips undulated against mine, and her pussy clenched me tighter.

Kelly's eyes glazed over as her mouth opened, soft cries falling from her lips as she climaxed.

Watching my lovely girl lose herself drove me to the edge. I couldn't stop thrusting, pounding, my body shuddering almost violently as I exploded deep inside her.

"You're mine," I gasped. "But that also means I'm yours, baby."

Even as she was shuddering through the tail end of her orgasm, Kelly grinned. "Every time you call me baby, my heart jumps."

"Then I'm going to say it over and over...*baby*."

Gripping under the perfect curve of her ass, I squeezed as I buried myself in her completely, relishing every single last stroke. She shivered again, then held herself as tightly against me as possible.

Long moments passed as we pressed our foreheads together, simply breathing each other in. Finally I rolled beside her, cuddling her delicate feminine body against me.

"I like it here in your arms," she said as I rocked her gently.

"Good. Hey, do you like this bed?"

Kelly looked at me strangely. "Sure. It's a lot bigger than mine. The mattress is nicer, too."

"Good. So you'll have no problem staying here for the night whenever you like?"

She laughed as soon as she realized where I was going. "If that's an invitation, my answer is a resounding yes."

My arms squeezed her gently as her head tucked into a nook in my shoulder. "It is. So you'll stay tonight?"

"Yes."

"And then...as often as you like for the foreseeable future?"

Her delighted grin nearly knocked the air from my chest as she nodded. “Yes.”

I pulled the blanket over us. As we drifted off, I listened to the sound of my sweet angel breathing.

I was going to love her, protect her, and make her happy for our entire lives. But for now, I was going to find a way to make her holiday season as perfect as possible.

The morning after Tristan told me he loved me, I woke up in his arms, wondering whether he would be the version of himself that felt completely connected to me, or whether he would snap right into work mode.

I was happy that he began kissing me even before he reached to turn off the alarm.

For the past several nights, we'd stayed at his house. Every day when we left work, I expected him to drive me home and drop me off, yet he only wanted to stop long enough for me to grab some more clothes before we went back to his place.

I was finally able to relax. He wanted me permanently. We were real.

Even better, my slightly uptight boss was no longer afraid to be affectionate at the store.

Of course we would never make out in front of the customers, or be otherwise unprofessional. But every brush of his hand against mine, every time he placed his hand in the center of my back when he passed by me in an aisle, every time he gave me a whisper of a kiss when we were alone... It added up quickly.

Tristan was telling me that he was completely in love with me.

And I was in love with him. My meticulous, sweet man was going to be with me forever. I could already feel it, even though it was far too soon to make any sort of grand gesture.

After work, I quickly changed into a dark green dress with golden swirls around the neckline. Since Tristan wouldn't tell me where we were going, I had to be ready for anything. I fixed my hair, refreshed my makeup, then went back out to the front to see that he had changed his tie and combed his hair.

As we drove away, I asked, "Are you going to tell me where we're going yet?"

I had an inkling it was some sort of holiday party, but it was odd that he wouldn't share the details.

"I'll tell you in fifteen minutes."

I stuck out my bottom lip and pretended to pout, but I loved that he had a surprise for me.

He drove up to a lovely cream-coloured house in a quiet neighborhood, and parked in the driveway behind several other cars. Then Tristan turned toward me and took my hands in his. "Baby, the reason I didn't tell you in advance was because I knew that you'd be nervous about it."

"Okay..." My mind was already spinning.

"I want you to meet my family," he said softly. "It's just my parents, my younger sister, and my grandmother. Very casual. But I want them to get to know the incredible woman in my life."

It took a moment and a lot of effort before I could pull in oxygen. "I didn't bring anything," I whispered. "I can't... I mean, you've told me hardly anything about them."

He smiled warmly, leaning in to kiss my forehead. Then he reached into the back seat and pulled out a large gift bag. "My family decided years ago that we already had everything we needed, so for the holidays we only give food and drink as gifts. These are bottles of wine: one for my sister, one for my parents, and one for my grandma. The cards I wrote from both of us. I hope that's okay."

"It's perfect." I looked down to see my fingers twitching nervously, and I shook out my hands and did a few neck rolls. "Okay. Let's go."

As soon as we stepped into the house, all of my nerves disappeared. Tristan's mother Rita and father Walter were thrilled to meet me, and I loved how happy and proud they looked as their son introduced me.

His sister Heather was equally lovely, practically hugging the daylight out of me.

Tristan took my hand and led me to the kitchen. "Grandma, I'd like you to meet my beautiful girlfriend Kelly."

As his fingers squeezed mine, I realized it was the first time he'd called me that.

The tiny, elderly lady in the brightly patterned red dress turned around, taking something out of the fridge. She set it down and squished me in a hug, her white curls bouncing. "So good to meet you, sweetie," she said.

Then she pushed me away a few inches to look me up and down. "Gorgeous," she said to Tristan. "And she puts up with your fussy attitude at the lamp store?"

"Yes," he chuckled.

"Oh, well, you'd better keep her then," she laughed, turning to me. "Just call me Elaine, sweetie. Oh, and Tristan said that you had a favorite holiday dessert."

She stepped aside to gesture to the huge English trifle she had just put on the counter, in a beautiful glass bowl. "I haven't made one of these in years, but my goodness it's a classic."

Tristan slipped his arm around me, giving me a squeeze as my eyes welled up.

"Now, I know I'm not your Nan and never will be," Elaine said. "But if you need extra hugs and an extra boozy trifle, I'll be right here, sweetie. I love any excuse to buy a bottle of sherry."

My mind short circuited for several seconds. He had his grandmother make my favorite dessert? Tristan's grand gestures more than made up for any awkwardness with words

in the beginning. He truly loved me, and wanted his family to know. It was overwhelming.

“Thank you,” I whispered around the lump in my throat. “That’s lovely of you.”

She grinned, her eyes sparkling. “‘Tis the season for all of the happy memories.”

Heather bounced into the room, handing Elaine and I glasses of champagne, which thankfully gave me a few seconds to blink away the tears as we took a few sips.

As soon as he had the chance, Tristan twirled me into the hall where we could be alone for a moment. He set my glass down, pulling me against his chest. I loved that he could sense I needed a quiet moment to breathe.

“She said it already: my grandmother is no substitute for yours,” he said softly, stroking my back gently. “But you’re in my life now, Kelly. My family is your family. You’re here for good.”

My chin tipped up as I smiled at my incredible man. This time, there were no tears from being overwhelmed. There was no trembling. I felt completely secure with him.

“Thank you, *boyfriend*,” I said slowly, tipping up to kiss his perfect lips. “I love you.”

“And I love you, baby.”

Both Tristan’s actions and his words told me clear as day that he loved me.

We were forever.

EPILOGUE ONE

One Year Later

I've always been extremely particular. Some might even say anal retentive, but I didn't mind, as long as everything fell into place, and the job got done.

After a year, Kelly and I were closer than ever, our love growing every single day. I adored discovering new details about my beautiful girl, especially now that we were living together. She had moved in in July, finally making my house a home.

She was the only person who politely pushed my perfectionism out of the way and sweetly demanded that I try new things. I loved that she was a force to be reckoned with, and always tried to show her how much she meant to me through endless tiny gestures.

Throughout the opening of new stores this year, including the fifth Foster's Lighting and Decor in a nearby town, Kelly kept me calm. She helped me enjoy the process of expansion. Enjoy my success. Well, our success, since she was now the manager at the flagship store.

She was also the unofficial head of marketing, although I had decided to make that official with a special dinner after our minimal holiday festivities were over. My reconnecting with old friends, and meeting hers, had created an extended social circle of wonderful people.

Tonight was our second year attending Sasha's party, but the first time we were officially going together.

Kelly had been treating it like a big deal. She kept shooting me sideways glances as she fluttered around the bedroom, choosing the little crystal earrings I had bought her last spring, and flat boots in case we ended up dancing.

The only lie I'd ever told her was when I said I picked up a cake from a bakery this afternoon.

Even though I had cleaned up every trace of evidence when she had been out with her girlfriends last night, she knew I was likely going to make Nan's Boozy Trifle for her again.

After we put our coats on at the front door, I asked, "Do we have everything?"

Kelly smiled, giving me a pointed look. "Don't forget the...*cake*."

I laughed. "I guess it's pretty obvious?"

She nodded. "Yeah. It's okay. I was hoping."

We went back to the kitchen, and I pulled the box from the fridge, glad that she hadn't peeked. Setting it on the counter, I began to lift the lid. "Do you want to do a quality check and see if there are enough walnuts and raspberries and such?"

"Sure."

Kelly looked inside the box, then jumped back and gasped as I set it on the counter for her to examine.

I'd bought a larger, more elaborate glass serving bowl this year. On top of the trifle, in the middle of the walnuts and raspberries, was a second glass bowl barely large enough to hold the sparkling diamond ring nestled inside.

Kelly's fingers fluttered in front of her face as I picked up the ring, kneeling down as I took her hand.

"I love you so much, Kelly," I said quietly. "You're the light of my life, and I cannot imagine spending a single day without you. Will you marry me?"

Even though I was positive she would say yes, for one silent, motionless second, it felt like Kelly held my happiness

in her hands.

“Yes.” The word was a tiny choked sob. She cleared her throat and tried again, louder and stronger. “Yes.”

As I slipped the ring on her finger, she flinched, then giggled. “It’s cold from the fridge.”

We laughed together as I stood up to pull her close. “I’ll always warm you up, gorgeous.”

Although I’d kissed Kelly countless times over the past year, there was something different as our mouths melted together this time. Knowing that we belonged together over the past year was incredibly satisfying. Knowing that we were forever was powerful.

Every one of my finicky little boxes was now checked off.

EPILOGUE TWO

Six Years Later

One would have thought that running around the front of the shop with her pink fluffy duster would have worn her out, but I was learning that four-year-olds had infinite energy.

We only allowed Tamara in the store about once a month. Customers always seemed delighted to have her dust their shoes, or help them decide between the lamp on the left or the right. Strangely, she had incredibly good taste already, usually picking the simplest, most minimal design.

I scooped her away so that she didn't start dusting a customer's purse, and sat her firmly in the highchair at my elbow at the cash desk. As I rang people's sales through, Tamara would hand out a mini candy cane to each customer.

"What a lovely helper," a tall, blonde woman said as she picked up her gift bag. "Thank you, sweetie."

"I've always loved this store," the next woman said as she set down a box of fairy lights. "But it's always the best for the holidays."

"Daddy has more stores than this one," Tamara announced. She held out her hands, spreading her fingers and flashing them twice. "Next month he's going to have this many – twenny!"

The woman smiled at my adorable daughter, then at me. "That's lovely, dear."

“Happy holidays,” I said, as I lowered her bag so that Tamara could drop in the candy cane before handing it to the woman.

After she left, Tamara looked around. “Where’s Daddy?”

“Back in the office, probably.”

She looked at me very seriously. “Do I get to help at Daddy’s new store?”

“Probably not, honey. It’s a four hour drive away, in a different town.”

“Oh.”

She stared at the bowl of candy, then nodded to herself. “I’ll put extra candy canes in his car so when he has to drive he’ll have snacks.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you. Why don’t we put them in a special gift bag for him this time, and set it on the front seat so that he knows where it is?”

“Okay.”

The last time she’d left “snacks” in the car they had melted in the sun, leaving a slight stain on the back seat. Surprisingly, Tristan didn’t even care. He was just happy that his baby girl was always thinking about him.

He was no longer the detail-obsessed man I had first met. He’d actually learned to go with the flow, to some extent.

“How are my girls?” We both turned toward his voice as Tristan snuck up behind us, hugging each of us with one arm.

“Mommy is selling everything,” Tamara announced with pride. “And I dusted.”

He kissed the top of our heads, not even caring that he was displaying affection right there in front of customers. He’d come so far over the past few years, with franchises opening gradually and steadily.

He’d actually had me work with the managers at each store to discuss the difference between selling, helping, and staying

the heck out of the way of people who were just browsing. The online reviews of our “above and beyond” service were stellar.

“Mommy has sold a lot this week,” Tristan said, kissing the top of Tamara’s hair. “We’re going to have to order extra next month.”

He shot me a wink as his arm tightened around me. “Sweetie, since Mommy sold so much this week, maybe we should go out to dinner tonight so that we don’t have to cook. What do you think?”

“McGee’s!!!” she squealed with delight. It was the best kid-friendly restaurant around, that happened to have food we all loved. Win-win situation.

Tristan’s lips brushed slowly around the shell of my ear. “And later, I’m going to show my appreciation for my very best salesperson privately.”

I wanted to make a joke about how he never seemed to do that for Jared, who managed the second largest store downtown, but my husband’s mouth had already claimed mine in a brief, smoldering kiss.

“Whatever you like,” I gasped, holding back a moan.

I reflected for the thousandth time how lucky I was. With Tristan, every day felt like Christmas.



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2

EXCERPT

Sierra and I snuck away as quickly as possible, and drove to Nora's. It was a classic restaurant that had a bit of everything on the menu, and was fairly quiet. Hopefully it was just romantic enough, without being intimidating.

I just loved the way Sierra seemed so thoughtful as she went through every single item, noting both classic dishes and interesting combinations of food. She was analytical, which I'd always admired.

After we ordered, I pulled our chairs closer together and turned to hold Sierra's hand again. "Has anyone ever told you that you have a really good energy?"

She shook her head.

"Sorry if that sounds bizarre, but it's true. I just feel amazing when you're beside me."

"Your mom seemed really surprised when she saw me," she said softly.

"That's because I've never brought a girl to meet the family before."

"Really?" Her eyes narrowed as if she didn't believe me.

"It's true. There's something about you, Sierra. I don't know how to say it without sounding cheesy..." I might be making an ass of myself, but had to go for broke. "Like I didn't know I was missing a piece until I saw your eyes."

"Wow," she whispered.

“So, am I allowed to kiss you before I go crazy?”

Her pretty little face froze, her softly curving lips parting slightly in surprise. Then she looked around furtively to make sure that nobody was watching before nodding.

As she leaned in, I slipped my fingers into the back of her satin hair with one hand, cupping her delicate cheek with the other. Our lips met gently, sending what felt like shockwaves through every inch of me.

She wasn't just beautiful and sweet.

She wasn't just thoughtful and interesting.

Sierra was the one.

Even though she just moved here, and even though I had to go home in just a few weeks. There wasn't much time to convince her to find a way to be with me.

Yet leaving without her was simply not an option.



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ALSO BY HALEY TRAVIS

Her New Bodyguard: Jackson

It was supposed to be a simple personal security job. But Ashley was so sexy and innocent that my need to care for her was far more than professional.

She was sunshine and warmth and everything I truly desired. She felt like... home.

Our chemistry was scorching hot. Ashley used any excuse for us to be closer, and I couldn't keep my distance. I'd never crossed a line with a client before, but keeping Ashley close was the best way to keep her safe and calm.

Never Date The Boss

Ashley was talked into one little "business date" with her boss, and everything changed in a heartbeat. Or rather, a flutter of them.

Diablo: Dirty Sinners

Can this devil atone for his many sins?

A filthy rich man with an even filthier reputation had no right to even touch an angel like Avery, much less claim her. But if she needed protection, she would get everything I had.

Daddy's Billionaire Boss

When Emily discovers her Dad's boss is the improbable man her aunt predicted she'd fall for, can she fit into his world?

Mr. Right... As Rain

A gorgeous man saved me on the way to an interview. Maybe it was the good luck kiss from a stranger, but isn't falling in love so fast just a fantasy?

Fake Summer Boyfriend

I'm terrified of giant men. But when Leif volunteered to scare off my stalker by pretending to be my boyfriend, I knew the gorgeous hulking security tech was the perfect man for the job.



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