

Mr Grumpy's *Christmas* Date



BETTING ON
Christmas



CAT JOHNSON

NY TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MR. GRUMPY'S
CHRISTMAS DATE



CAT JOHNSON

Mr. Grumpy's
Christmas
Date



CAT JOHNSON
NY TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Mr. Grumpy's Christmas Date

He's a grinch. She's full of cheer. Can fake dating turn into something sincere?

He's her rich and grinchy boss. She's one of his merriest and most annoying employees. They couldn't be more opposite. But when he needs a plus-one for a friend's yuletide wedding, he's betting on Christmas to lure her into being his last-minute date.

What he doesn't count on is her demanding his quid-pro-quo performance as her fake boyfriend for her matchmaking family over the holidays. Or them both enjoying fake dating so much.



PROLOGUE



The weather had turned prematurely warm, bringing forth the familiar melodious smells of summertime in Manhattan even though it was technically only spring.

Gone were the winter scents of the burnt pretzels and nuts and dirty-water hot dogs that street vendors supplied to the influx of holiday tourists. Those smells now took a backseat to the overwhelming aroma of bagged garbage baking in the sun with an undercurrent of urine that tinged the sultry and pungent city air.

Not that it mattered. No odors, and barely any street noise, made it up to the Paragon Agency's air-conditioned Seventh Avenue top floor offices.

At the buzzing of the cell phone he'd left on his desk, Xander turned away from the window and hit the button on his Bluetooth earbud to answer the call. "Alexander Barrington."

"That's a very formal greeting for your dearest friend."

He smiled at the sound of his friend Rex's voice. "Don't push it. That friend bar isn't set too high."

"You wound me," Rex joked. "So, I have news."

"Do tell." Xander sat and woke up his computer, figuring he'd weed through his inbox during the call.

"I proposed to Chelsea..."

His attention no longer on his email, Xander leaned back in his chair and absorbed that bombshell news. "You're getting married?"

Rex was the first of his friends to fall off the marital cliff. He knew it would happen eventually. He just thought it wouldn't be for a while.

“We are. I proposed on Valentine’s Day. Sorry I took so long to call and tell you. Things have been crazy around here.”

That was something he could understand. “No worries. Work has been crazy for me too.”

“So the other reason I’m calling is that I’m hoping you’ll agree to stand up with me as one of my groomsmen.”

“Uh... Yes. Yeah. Of course, I will.”

Rex had been his friend since school. How could he say no?

Seriously, how *could* he say no? He wished he knew. He loved Rex. It was forced formal social interactions he hated.

If he could come up with a plan to get out of this thing without insulting and losing one of his best—and only—close friends, he would.

As of now, no viable strategy presented itself.

“What time of year are you thinking for the wedding?” he asked, wondering when he’d have to interrupt his life for the festivities.

“Christmas. At the Plaza, so it’ll be local for you. Don’t worry.”

“Next year?” he asked hopefully.

Ideally he could push this whole thing out of his mind for the next year and a half and concentrate on landing this new client he’d been working on.

“This year,” Rex corrected.

“Like actually on Christmas Day?” Xander asked, as he searched to find the calendar app built into his computer.

Christmas Eve was a Sunday this year. Christmas Day, a Monday. His curious side idly wondered if the cost of renting

the Grand Ballroom at the Plaza would be lower or higher given it was Christmas Day but also a Monday.

Christmas, jeez.

Not that Xander had any personal experience with proposals or planning a wedding, but from what he'd observed in his thirty something years, people were supposed to get engaged at Christmas, or on Valentine's Day, but get married in June.

"No. The wedding is on Christmas Eve-eve, technically," Rex supplied. "Saturday the twenty-third. With a rehearsal dinner on Friday the twenty-second. I'll email you all the details after we get off the phone."

"Uh, thanks, but I think we have plenty of time." December was half a year away.

"Not really. Not for all the events leading up to the wedding."

"Like what kind of events?" Xander asked, hoping Rex didn't hear the shadow of dread in his tone.

"Well, we're having an engagement party, of course."

"Of course," Xander echoed as he rolled his eyes at all the unnecessary marital trappings society still clung to.

"That'll be upstate in Holly Creek in July."

Xander stifled a groan at the prospect of having to travel all the way to the boonies for this party.

Unaware that he'd just ruined Xander's day, Rex continued, "Once we pick the style of tuxedo for the groomsmen, there will be fittings. Oh, and there's the bridal shower—"

"Wait. Shower?" Xander frowned. "That's for the women only, right?"

"Chelsea wants a Jack and Jill shower."

He'd never heard that particular term before but he had a bad feeling it meant he'd be attending a bridal shower.

Lovely. Add that to the list of things he never thought he'd have to do in his lifetime. Although maybe there'd be a hot bridesmaid or two to distract him.

“All right. Yeah, email me that list. But listen, I hate to cut this short, but I gotta get to a meeting.”

“Oh, sure. I know you're at work. I just wanted to share the good news and nail you down as a groomsman.”

Feeling the guilt that he wasn't as excited by the *good news* as he should be, Xander drew in a breath. “Thanks. I'm honored to be included. Really. And congratulations. Seriously. To both you and Chelsea. Tell her for me.”

“Will do. And we'll get together soon. I'll definitely see you at the engagement party, if not before.”

“Yup. See you soon,” Xander feigned as much excitement as he could muster for that last statement then disconnected the call and slumped back in his chair.

He hadn't lied, he did have a meeting to get to like now. He just had to get his head back into work mode and off freaking Jack and Jill bridal showers.

There was no doubt in his mind he was going to search online after this meeting and confirm if it was a real thing or if Chelsea was pulling the wool over Rex's eyes. Making it up just to torture the men in the wedding party.

Standing, he grabbed his cell and headed for the conference room.

The bad news was this meeting was probably going to be unnecessary and a complete waste of time, as were most meetings. The good news was that there would be food and beverages provided.

As he slipped through the doorway of the conference room, he realized that thanks to the phone call he was the last to arrive. He wasn't late but he didn't love being last in the door either.

Acting as if he'd been busy closing deals and making money right up until meeting time, he didn't rush. It was all in

the attitude. He sauntered over to the side table and the buffet set out there and took his time perusing the offerings.

With it being morning the selection included breakfast items—fruit, pastries and coffee, tea and juice. He grabbed himself what looked like a cranberry nut muffin and an orange juice and sat in the nearest empty chair.

“All right. Let’s get started,” senior partner Alonso Pereira began. “First, I wanted you all to know the Marketing and PR department is working hard to expand Paragon’s social media footprint. They’ve hired a full-time social media coordinator.” He referred to the paper in front of him. “Her name’s Mariah Clark and she’ll be starting Monday so make sure to say hello and make her feel welcome.”

“Social Media Coordinator. Jesus. That’s a real job?” he mumbled as Alonso asked the head of the marketing department to go into more depth about what this new hire would be doing.

As a partner, one who shared in the company’s annual profits, he wondered exactly how much this person was going to cost the company to sit around and scroll social media feeds all day.

Evan Klein, seated next to him, leaned closer. “Don’t complain. I saw her coming in to meet with HR. She’s cute.”

Xander turned to shoot Evan a glare. “Cute’s not quite what I’m looking for. Not in a romantic partner or in a new employee.”

“We all can’t marry models,” Evan shot back.

Marry? He might go on the occasional date with Hilary, the model to which Evan had snarkily referred, but that was as far as it went.

Xander let out a snort. “Believe me. I’m not marrying anyone anytime soon.”

He didn’t have time for love in his life. Or a family.

And he certainly didn’t have time to sit through meetings about every low-level employee the company hired—let alone

take time to welcome them personally.

He hoped this bullshit wrapped up soon. He had work to do and right now, work was all that mattered.

CHAPTER 1



SIX MONTHS LATER

“*Y*ou have our price,” Xander said as his long legs ate up the space between the walls of his office.

Having reached the door, he pivoted and paced back to the window that afforded a bird’s eye view of the Big Apple, glistening uncharacteristically bright white thanks to the snow flurries falling from the clouds.

The office was warm as hot air pumped from the vent, but when he stood closely enough to the window he could feel the chill from outside radiating through the glass.

Staring out over the tops of the buildings he continued, “You don’t get Bailey Knowles for less than ten thousand a post. So if you want your new lipstick on her lips in front of her ten million followers it’s going to cost you ten grand. I suggest you make the deal before she hits eleven million followers. Then the price goes up to eleven K. Call me when you’re ready to sign.”

Without giving them time to say anything more, he disconnected the call, sat and leaned back in his desk chair.

Steepling his fingers, he waited. He expected it might take them a few minutes to call back, but they would. He had no doubt.

“Well *that’s* an evil grin.”

Xander glanced up to see Evan standing in the open doorway.

“Is it?” he asked while feeling the grin grow wider.

“Yes. Like you’ve got the Grinch beat right now with that grin. Who’d you screw now?” Evan asked, taking a step farther inside the room and looking excited to hear.

“You mean what potential client partner did I provide a priceless opportunity to? They’re a small beauty brand with delusions they could negotiate with me and get the price down for Bailey.”

Evan laughed. “The newest jewel in our crown. Yeah, that’s not gonna happen. Alexander Barrington does not negotiate.”

Xander nodded. “Correct. They tried playing the woman-owned and minority-owned business cards.”

He wasn’t in the business of playing cards. As one of the top entertainment lawyers in New York, he was in the business of making his clients—and in turn the company and himself—money. The more the better, for everyone.

A shadow fell across the smooth clean surface of his desk. Through the windows of his corner office he could see the late afternoon sun had dipped behind the office building across the street.

The concrete canyons of Manhattan grew cold and dark early this time of year. It would be full dark in—he glanced at his smart watch—forty-five minutes or so.

The adrenaline of the negotiation had begun to wane but his day wasn’t nearly done yet.

He felt down to his bones the fact that he was entering the eighth hour at his desk for today. He’d been on the phone early this morning with London. And the west coast would only just be getting back from lunch now.

It was time for a trip to the break room’s espresso machine.

Launching out of his chair with a squeak of leather and the roll of ball bearings, he stood and grabbed his phone to carry it with him.

Taking a step toward Evan, he said, “Coffee?”

Evan grinned. “Always.”

Xander led the way across the carpeted office and to the door of the break room—where he smashed head-on into a short but fast moving, jingling, multicolored blur jogging so fast she bounced off him, spinning him around before she blurted a pseudo apology and kept going.

He frowned after her, watching her go before asking, “*What* was that?”

“The new marketing department hire.”

Xander was aware of *who* she was. He’d been in the meeting when Alonso had announced they had a social media coordinator in house. That hadn’t been what he was asking.

“I meant, what in the world was she wearing?”

“I’d say it’s a Christmas sweater, judging by Rudolph’s red jingle bell nose.”

“Is she a little...off?” Xander asked, perfectly seriously.

Evan laughed. “I think she just enjoys holidays. A lot. She wore Halloween-themed clothing all October—I particularly liked the skull leggings. And then there was the turkey cardigan Thanksgiving week. Looks like she’s moved on to Christmas.”

He dismissed the jolly blur as she took a seat at one of the desks in the open communal work area that some expert had thought was a good idea. Team building and all that. Thank God his position warranted an actual office with walls and a door.

Moving to stand in front of the coffee machine, Xander scoffed. “A little early for Christmas-themed attire, don’t you think?”

It looked like Christmas had vomited all over the front of her.

He never had gotten the whole *ugly sweater* cultural fad. When it got cold he broke out his Burberry scarf and his London Fog coat. Enough said.

“I like it. And I’m Jewish, so what’s your problem with a little holiday cheer?” Evan asked.

“What’s my problem?” Xander cocked up a brow. “My problem is that it’s still November.”

Glancing up, he caught Evan’s confused frown as his co-worker said, “Xander, you do know it’s December, right?”

“No, it’s not. It can’t be.” Xander shook his head before glancing at the calendar someone had hung on the wall of the break room. The picture of a snow-covered mountain with the big bold black letters that spelled out December had his eyes widening. “Fuck. Is it really?”

“Yes. December first. It comes every year after November thirtieth,” Evan joked, but Xander was past listening to him.

“Shit.” He glanced at his watch again. It was after four. He had a tuxedo fitting at five across town. “Shitshitshitshit.”

He continued the mantra as he tossed the still empty paper coffee cup he’d never gotten a chance to fill in the trash and spun for the door.

“What’s wrong?” Evan stepped after him.

Not taking the time to stop and turn, Xander called over his shoulder, “I gotta go!”

“Go where?” Evan’s question remained unanswered as it followed his mad dash.

It seemed he and Miss Christmas had something in common. They both needed to get somewhere fast.

CHAPTER 2



“Excuse me! So sorry. Sorry,” Merry called out the apology as she skirted around two desks, one chair and two people walking into the break room in her mad dash to her desk after she heard her desk phone ringing.

Of course one of the men she’d barreled into had been the hottest guy and the top earner in the whole company.

A partner in the firm, so technically her boss, Alexander Barrington was also known as the client whisperer. He could not only woo some of the biggest names around to sign exclusive contracts to be represented by Paragon, but he was also just as adept at convincing companies to pay tens of thousands of dollars to have those celebrities pimp their products.

Any other day she would have hung around in the break room when he walked in. Mostly to get a look at his tight buns in those even tighter dress pants. And admire that strong chin and the dimple that appeared when he smiled—not that he’d ever smiled at her, of course. She’d mostly only seen him smile when he was announcing a big new conquest.

But today she and her immediate boss, the head of the marketing department who was currently out of the office and having trouble letting go of being a complete control freak, had been playing phone tag all day.

Merry had already missed one call while she’d been in the bathroom and had to call her back, only to get sent to voicemail.

Now, after waiting by a silent phone all afternoon, when she'd dared to go to the break room to refill her environmentally friendly reusable water bottle or die of thirst, wouldn't you know it? The phone rang.

Like a pro football player diving on a loose ball in the end zone during the final seconds of a tied game, she leapt across her desk for the phone, praying she'd made it in time before it went to voice mail.

Rudolph's jingle bell nose pressed painfully into her breastbone as she stretched out, belly down, across her desk, and grabbed the receiver, juggling it as she almost dropped it during the one-handed maneuver.

Her ass in the air and her feet no longer touching the floor, she pressed the handset to her ear and said in her best professional work voice, "Mariah Clark speaking. How can I help you?"

"Let's see. What could you do to help me?" her smart-ass older sister Beth began. "You could answer your cell phone when I call. You could return a text once in a while. You could return the sweater of mine you borrowed Thanksgiving when you were home for those three whole days. The first time you've come home over the past six months since taking that job..."

While her sister ranted, Merry righted herself, daring to glance at those seated at the desks around her to see if she'd been as big a spectacle as she thought she was.

"Okay. I get it. Sorry. I've been busy. I'm still new here. I want to make a good impression."

Not to mention, the workload was insane. Business in New York City moved at a different pace than in Cooperstown, New York. No surprise, there.

"Please tell me you're still coming home for the weekend," Beth said with an attitude in her tone that made it seem like she fully expected Merry to say no.

"Of course, I am. I wouldn't miss the taking of the annual Clark family Christmas photo. It's tradition."

“You’d better be here,” Beth warned, obviously still not trusting her.

“I said I will be. Jeez.” She’d even driven into the office today so she could head upstate directly after work this afternoon.

It meant she’d be driving in the dark and would have to fight the Friday commuter traffic, but that was preferable to losing half of Saturday on the road. It was a short visit. She could only stay until Sunday since she had to be back to work here in the city by Monday morning.

“You know if you miss it I’m so gonna do a bad Photoshop job to add you in...and have you wearing the ugliest of ugly sweaters too, just to punish you,” Beth warned.

Merry smiled at the idle threat. “First of all, I love all ugly sweaters so that’s not really an issue. Second, you know Mom would never allow you to mess with her cards.”

“You’re probably right,” Beth grumbled.

Grinning wider at Beth’s defeat, Merry glanced at the time in the corner of her computer. Her heart and spirit leapt with excitement at the hour displayed.

She’d gotten in early. She had no more pressing work that needed to get done today. Did she really have to stay here manning the phone like a teenage girl waiting for a call after her first date? If she forwarded her office calls to her cell phone number, she wouldn’t miss her boss if she got back to her today, which was looking doubtful as the time crept closer to five p.m. on a Friday night.

“Look. If you let me get off the phone, and get on the road, I’ll get home sooner,” Merry said as she shut down her computer and reached for her bag.

“You’re coming tonight?” That news had Beth actually dropping her bad attitude and sounding excited.

“That’s the plan,” Merry said as she reached for her red puffy jacket hanging on the back of her chair.

“Yay! See you soon.”

“See you soon. And save me some dinner,” Merry said a second before Beth disconnected the call.

She sighed, not having much faith there’d be a hot meal still waiting for her when she finally did arrive sometime between eight and nine p.m. tonight. She’d have to grab some nourishment while on the road. It was probably going to be fast food or gas station fare, but getting home tonight would be worth the sacrifice.

After a quick redirect of any work calls to her cell, she looped her bag over one shoulder and grabbed her water bottle.

As she passed one of the partner’s offices and got a glimpse outside, she smiled. It was snowing. A fact she’d been completely unaware of because of her windowless existence in the bull pen.

Cheered by even the lightest of flurries, she found herself humming the chorus of “White Christmas” all the way to the elevator.

The elevator was there, its doors open when usually she stood for an eternity waiting for it to work its way to her floor.

And, low and behold, look who was her fellow passenger. It seemed she’d get to share the ride with Alexander Barrington himself.

Taking that as a sign she’d have good luck for her drive home, she stepped inside and smiled at him but he was too busy staring at his phone to notice.

She turned, confirmed the button for the lobby was lit and waited for the doors to close.

“Shit!” He took a step forward, thrusting his arm out so the doors crashed into it then opened again.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, concerned.

“Forgot my coat.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll hold the elevator for you—”

He shook his head, stepping out. “I’ll get the next one.”

“Really, it’s no problem to hold it. I’m happy to help. It could take a while for it to come back up—”

His blue eyes meeting hers for possibly the first time ever, he shot her a glare. “I said I don’t need your help, thanks.”

It took her a second to recover from his attitude. Finally, she said, “All right. Have a good weekend—”

The closing of the doors cut off the tail end of her sentence. Not that it mattered. He was already striding down the hall. She’d been dismissed.

“City people,” she mumbled to herself.

They were always in a hurry. But she was getting away from the city, if only for a couple of days. And if her good luck so far held, she’d be home before she knew it...

The elevator stopped on the floor below and two more people piled in. Then it stopped again. And again.

Just as they were pretty much at capacity, someone yelled, “Hold it, please!”

“Sure thing,” the suited man nearest the door offered and did just that, for what had to be a full minute, maybe more.

Crushed against the back of the overheated elevator while getting a lung full of someone’s over enthusiastic use of body spray and with another’s mohair scarf tickling her nose, Merry had to think that maybe this wasn’t her lucky day after all.

CHAPTER 3



*F*ailing a cab—or attempting to—with his left arm while shoving his right into the sleeve of his coat, Xander wished for a third arm so he could call the tuxedo shop at the same time. Tell them he was still coming. That he'd just be a few minutes late...*if* he could ever get a taxi.

He stood teetering on the curb, reaching his arm high in hopes of attracting an available cab, as a car sped by to catch the light. He heard the splash of tires in the puddle before he felt the cold water drenching his pant leg.

Biting out a cuss, he took a step back and crashed backward into a sidewalk Santa. “Uh. Shit. Sorry.”

Whether he was apologizing for his foul language or for almost taking out the big guy in red he wasn't sure. But he moved farther down the block hoping for more luck there.

Manhattan was always crazy during the holidays, but this seemed more insane than usual.

The sidewalks teemed with crowds and not the usual demographic of suit-clad harried businesspeople trying to get somewhere fast.

This crowd was different. They most definitely felt like tourists. They moved like them too, completely blocking the sidewalk as they meandered in pairs or larger groups.

When they weren't staring at their phones to take a picture, they were gazing up at the decorations that had appeared sometime over the past couple of weeks when he hadn't been paying attention.

And the traffic... The gridlock was worse than he'd seen on any other day of the year except for Thanksgiving Day for the parade, or the weekend before Christmas, when the crowds really descended upon the city.

Another cab crawled by him with its light off. But just as he was about to give up and start walking, the taxi pulled along the curb. The back door opened, a man, woman and a toddler piled out and the taxi's rooftop light illuminated.

Thank God.

Dodging around the family, Xander rushed for the open door, only to be cut off by a guy in a suit who was just a bit faster and who hadn't been blocked by the teetering toddler, who no way should be allowed to walk on his own in this environment.

"Hey! That was my cab," he yelled to the guy sliding across the back seat.

"Sorry, bud," the occupant said before slamming the door.

"Shit." He stomped his foot in frustration and felt the soft mass beneath the sole of his shoe.

He groaned, recognizing that sensation but hoping he was wrong.

"No. No way." He dared to glance down as he lifted his foot and saw the thick brown disgusting and now squashed mass coating the bottom of his Italian leather soles. "Are you kidding me? Does no one pick up after their dog anymore?" he shouted to no one in particular.

"Problem?"

He turned to face the voice. A rounded mass of crimson greeted him. It was the woman from the office, and more recently, the elevator.

She was dressed for the outdoor elements—overwhelmingly so. She was swathed in red from head to toe. His gaze swept her from top to bottom. From the pom-pom bedecked fire engine red wool hat covering and clashing with the frizzy carrot-colored curls the hat didn't manage to

contain, down to the puffy coat left unbuttoned to reveal none other than Rudolph and his red bell nose on her sweater, to the clunky, also red, fur-lined boots on her feet.

What was her name? Something with an M, he thought, but remembering was pretty low on his list at the moment.

“A few problems, actually.” He pointed to his foot.

She glanced down and cringed when she saw his shoe. “Ah. You got caught in the urban minefield.”

“Yes, and I’d feel bad about carrying this mess inside a taxi *if* there were any taxis to be had. Which there aren’t. Of course, because why would there be when I have an appointment to get to? What the hell is going on anyway? Is the president in town or something?”

She glanced around at the bustling crowd with interest but also with a distinct lack of the hostility he felt. “They’re installing the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree this weekend. It got trucked into the city from upstate this morning. It gets lit next week. That probably brought in some extra tourists.”

That was why the city was in chaos? Why he was going to be even later for this appointment? A Christmas tree. Who had the time to track the progress of the tree so they could predict for extra traffic?

This woman did apparently, he thought, answering his own question.

“The tree.” He blew out a breath. “Humbug.”

Her face lit with a smile. “Did you just say *humbug*?”

“I might have,” he admitted reluctantly, scraping his shoe along the sidewalk in an attempt to clean it.

Her lips still twitching with a smile, she asked, “Where do you have to go for your appointment?”

“Mohan’s. It’s a tuxedo shop on Madison.”

She nodded. “I’ll take you.”

He shook his head. “No need. It’s probably faster to walk considering this traffic.”

As he said it the skies opened up. The temperature must have crept up just enough that the snow had turned to rain. Hard, biting, pelting and oh so cold rain. And of course, he didn't have an umbrella.

“Come on before you get soaked. I've got my car in the lot.” She turned and was already trotting down the side street toward the parking lot on the next block when he made up his mind.

He could only take so much of the outdoors on a good day. Never mind in this kind of weather.

It was time to get inside a vehicle, even if it was with the crazy Christmas-lover whose name he didn't remember.

He scurried behind her, using all of the long length of his legs to keep up with her much shorter ones until they reached the covered lot.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked, glancing down to see if the sprint had cleaned off his leather sole. “I've got—you know—shit on my shoe.”

She shot him a sideways glance as she stopped in front of the lot's office. “There's been shit in my car before. Believe me.” She turned back to the attendant inside the glass booth. “Mariah Clark. I called to have my car brought down.”

Mariah. At least now he had a name as he wondered about her comment about previous shit in her car.

Maybe she owned a dog. Selfish bastard that he was, instead of being grateful for the ride he couldn't help cringing at the thought of getting out of her car with his wool coat and black slacks covered in dog hair.

Key in her hand she turned to him. “All set. It's over there.” She tipped her head toward a row of vehicles which included a large off-white Land Rover.

He salivated as he gazed at his dream car. Not that he owned any car at all right now, but if he did, it would be that one.

It was too impractical to keep a car in the city. Although Mariah didn't seem to think so. He wondered which of the smaller cars parked next to the Land Rover was hers. Probably the little hybrid if he had to guess. She, with her refillable water bottle, seemed like a hybrid kind of girl.

As she clicked the remote in her hand to unlock the doors, the lights flashed on the Land Rover.

His eyes widened. The new hire, who if he wasn't mistaken didn't make much more than an assistant, drove his dream car?

He followed her to the vehicle, climbed inside and glanced around.

As she punched the name of the tux shop into the built-in GPS in the dash, he took inventory.

Camel-colored leather interior. Wood-appointed dashboard. State of the art sound system. Not a dog hair in sight. And as his butt began to warm—Yes! It had heated seats.

For a man used to riding in taxis, this was heaven.

She must have gotten a good deal on a lease from the dealership... And now he felt really bad about the mess on his shoe, which was becoming more aromatic as the heater warmed it.

He glanced sideways at Mariah.

It would have been easier to pretend she was a cab driver and ignore her. Even easier if he were sitting in the backseat. He'd bet this car had amazing leg room back there. He gave a wistful glance over his shoulder.

But she was not a cab driver and he was not in the backseat. And considering the soggy, shitty situation from which she'd rescued him, he supposed he should make an effort.

He had to talk to her.

"I hope I'm not taking you too far out of your way," he said in an attempt to make conversation with the woman he

had absolutely nothing in common with except for an appreciation for British luxury vehicles.

“No problem. I actually think I’m going to run inside the tux place with you.”

That odd comment had his head on a swivel as he glanced over at her. “Um. All right.”

Shit! Did she think this was a date? Was he in some sort of a stalker situation?

“They should sell bowties and stuff there, right?” she continued, her hands on the wheel at ten and two, when she wasn’t using one to flick on her blinker at all the appropriate times like a law-abiding citizen and not like an insane stalker. Although Kathy Bates’ character in *Misery* seemed like she’d be a rule follower too.

The images of potential front-page headlines careened through his brain. *Merry Mauler Mutilates Man. Seasonal Sweater Stalker Strikes!*

He shot her another sideways glance, evaluating her psychopath potential as he answered her question with, “Bowties? Um, I believe so, yes.”

She smiled at that. “Good. I can get some shopping done when I drop you off. Win-win.”

He let out a breath in relief. Not a serial killer. Just a serial shopper apparently since he’d seen some wrapped packages in a shopping bag on the floor of the back seat.

“More Christmas shopping?” he asked.

He’d have to get around to that himself too. Eventually. It might be nice to get it done before Christmas Eve. Since he now knew that it was December, it wouldn’t be ridiculous to start soon.

As she navigated traffic like a native New Yorker, which boggled the mind because she certainly didn’t look like one, she shook her head. “No. I finished Christmas shopping in October. But I have a grandpa, father and brother who I think need matching bowties for this year’s Christmas photo. That’s

where I'm heading after I drop you off. Upstate to see the fam."

"Oh."

Okay. That made him feel moderately better.

She was dressed like a Santa groupie and hauling around Christmas gifts on December first because she was going to visit family. And what sounded like a big family, at that, judging by how she'd rattled off the gifts she planned to buy.

Crazed stalkers and maniacal kidnappers were loners, he assumed.

"So you really get into Christmas, huh?" He eyeballed the pine tree air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror.

He'd seen pine tree air fresheners before, of course. But this one looked as if she'd decorated it to look like a Christmas tree with multicolored crystals.

He envisioned her dog, if she did have one, wearing a Christmas sweater that matched hers as she bedazzled a bunch of air fresheners for *the fam*.

"I like all holidays. But Christmas is the best," she answered with enthusiasm before turning her glance briefly to him. "Why? Don't you?"

He didn't know her enough to bother lying so he said, "Honestly? I couldn't care less. In fact, I kind of hate it."

She hadn't blinked an eye when he'd tramped dog shit into her hundred-thousand-dollar Land Rover but she looked at him now as if he were the serial killer. "You hate Christmas?"

Fearing she might crash in her distress over his hatred of what was her favorite holiday, he backpedaled a bit and said, "Um. Yeah, I do. Sorry."

She let out a snort of a laugh as she shook her head. "Don't apologize to me. I'm sorry for you. You don't know what you're missing."

He countered her completely false statement with the truth. "Trust me. I know exactly what I'm missing. And I'm not

missing a thing.”

“Agree to disagree,” she said.

“Agreed.” He nodded.

They drove the rest of the way in the comfortable silence of two people who didn't know each other enough or care enough to make uncomfortable small talk. It was the most relaxing part of his afternoon.

CHAPTER 4



Xander had to avoid eye contact with no fewer than four bell-ringing, kettle-bearing sidewalk Santas between the tux shop and his home.

A person could go broke in this city if they were to donate to every one of the officially sanctioned holly-jolly panhandlers located on every block throughout the month of December. But they were easy enough to ignore, in spite of their pointedly bellowed “ho-ho-ho” in his direction as he strode by.

He just employed the same no-eye-contact policy he used for everyone he passed on the city streets.

Eventually, the holiday season would end and all the seasonal hires would pack up their Santa suits until next year. They’d go back to whatever crevice they’d crawled out from, leaving only the regular year-round sidewalk annoyances—such as dog poop.

He lamented once more as he pulled off his shoe. During his fitting, the tailor at the tuxedo shop had sent an underling out with his shoes to find one of the few remaining shoeshine stands left in the city.

The shoe was now clean and all parties involved received a nice gratuity for their part in the Herculean efforts that had resolved the pungent issue. But the annoyance over the event remained, like an itch on his brain reminding him it needed to be scratched.

At least he'd accomplished what he had to for this wedding he'd agreed to be a part of.

He'd made it to his tuxedo fitting today, only a few minutes late thanks to Mariah, the whacky woman in the Christmas sweater. And, weirdly, she did indeed come inside with him, as she said she might.

She'd whizzed through the tux shop like a holiday hurricane. She selected three matching red and green plaid bowties, had them gift wrapped, wished him, the shop clerk and the security guard at the door all a cheerful *Merry Christmas*—even though it was only December first—and off she went, jingling all the way.

But that groomsman task, as well as his official workday, were now done.

It was unofficially the weekend. He was off until Monday morning... although maybe he'd head to the office for a few hours tomorrow. And of course he'd answer the call when that start-up decided to hire Bailey. But other than that and checking emails he didn't have any plans.

What should he do tonight?

He tugged open the refrigerator door. A line-up of this week's take-out containers greeted him, flanked by assorted condiments of indeterminate age.

What to do? He could stay in. Or he could go out. Answering that question was waylaid when his cell phone rang.

He smiled. The start-up had finally come to their senses.

Riding the adrenaline high of closing a deal, he pulled the cell from his suit pocket, then saw from the name on the display that this wasn't a work call at all.

"Rex," he said in greeting to his friend.

Rex Buchanan. The groom-to-be. The man whose fault it was he'd had that tux fitting today.

"Xander," Rex replied in his familiar deep, cultured voice that always contained just a shade of a smart-ass undercurrent.

“Before you ask, yes, I remembered the tuxedo fitting. It’s all taken care of,” Xander said, cutting off the expected question before Rex had a chance to ask it.

“Good to hear, but I wasn’t worried. If there’s one thing you care about, it’s what your clothes look like.”

Xander frowned, considering if that had been a compliment or an insult.

Rex continued, “That’s not what I’m calling about. I need your RSVP for the wedding. Did you mail it yet?”

“Uh…” His gaze cut to the chaotic mess on his desk where he dumped the mail daily but only reviewed it once or twice a month—if he remembered.

Why did he get so much mail when he did all of his important business—banking, bills, investments—online?

Among that messy pile he assumed would be the response card to Rex’s wedding, which he definitely had not sent back yet.

“Um, no?” He rushed to add, “But you know I’m coming. I’m in the wedding party.”

“Yes, but my mother is a wedding tyrant. Everything has to be done by the book. And I’m tired of her calling me every day asking about your RSVP. So, for the sake of my sanity, you send in the card and for now I’ll put you down as attending plus one?”

“Um. Yeah. Sure. That’s fine.” He hadn’t exactly secured his plus one as yet but he had time.

“Great. What’s your date’s name?”

“Her name? Why do you need that?”

Rex let out an annoyed-sounding huff. “Xander, seating charts are being created as we speak. There’s a team of calligraphers on call waiting for the final guest list so they can write out the place cards.”

That seemed a bit over the top. “Computers can do calligraphy, you know. Can’t you just print out—”

“No, we can’t. According to *momzilla* no self-respecting bride would be caught dead with computer printed place cards. Hand calligraphy only.”

“You’re joking, right?”

Seriously, who cared? More than that, who’d even be able to tell?

“No, I’m not kidding. I don’t think you’re grasping what I’m dealing with here. It’s like having General Patton as the wedding coordinator. The seating chart is set up like a battlefield map in the dining room, which looks and operates like a war room. So please, Xan, just give me your date’s name.”

The stress and exasperation in Rex’s rant was palpable. Xander didn’t understand it himself. It was just a wedding and Rex wasn’t even in charge of planning it. By the sound of it, that was all being handled by his mother.

But to ease his friend’s mind, he said, “Fine. Put down Hilary Massini as my date.”

He’d just call the on again/off again girlfriend he’d been seeing for the past few months. She’d say yes.

“The model?” Rex choked out.

“You’ve heard of her?” Xander asked, surprised.

“Uh, yes. She’s huge on TikTok.”

“Really? Huh.” That was news to him.

He knew Hilary modeled but he didn’t know much more past that.

And who the hell had time for TikTok? His assistant emailed him all the important stats and analytics on their current influencer clients, plus any hot up and comers he needed to check out, but he didn’t waste time scrolling the app himself. Apparently, Rex did.

“I have to admit, I’m impressed,” Rex said.

Was that a shade of envy in his friend’s tone? The competitive side of Xander enjoyed that idea.

“Impressed enough I don’t have to dig up that RSVP card and mail it back?” he asked.

“Xander...” The audible weary sigh that accompanied that response from his friend, in combination with the entire wedding conversation they’d been having, had Xander vowing that if he ever did marry, he was going to elope. And his bride would be an orphan.

His own mother wouldn’t care what he did about the wedding but his non-existent future bride’s mother might and he had no desire for a momzilla-in-law.

“I’ll look for the damn card,” he offered.

“Thank you,” Rex said on a deep exhale.

“You’re welcome.” He glanced again at the mess on his desk.

It looked like he had his weekend planned. He’d just consider the sacrifice part of his groomsmen duties. But that was for later. He had a date to secure.

He and Rex exchanged a few more words then both disconnected. Then Xander scrolled through his recent calls.

When he didn’t immediately see Hilary’s number there, he gave up and navigated to his contacts list.

He was confident she’d say yes. She never missed an opportunity to get dressed up and go out. And a wedding would be great fodder for her constant selfies and social media posting.

Although he still had better lock her down for the date now. The wedding was on Christmas weekend. Just because he didn’t have plans with family for Christmas didn’t mean that she wouldn’t.

It was too much to text, so he tapped on her number and waited for her to answer the call.

“Xander,” she answered in an oddly flat tone. “It’s been a long time,” she continued.

“Has it?” he asked, surprised.

“Yes,” she said, her tone still indecipherable.

He’d seen her recently. Hadn’t he?

Yes. He most definitely had. He even remembered the conversation. She’d been talking about her plans for Thanksgiving.

Admittedly, he hadn’t spoken to her since then. He’d been busy at work. But it hadn’t been all *that* long.

“Then let’s make up for lost time and catch up. How about dinner tonight?” he asked.

That plan would solve multiple issues. He could get something to eat that wasn’t leftovers from his fridge and secure his wedding date.

And maybe Hilary would spend the night since now that he thought about it, it did seem like quite a while since he’d scratched that particular itch. And bonus, in addition to the sex, with her here he’d have a good reason to put off the chore of sorting through the mail.

“Tonight?” she asked. “It’s after eight.”

“And? This is Manhattan. It’s perfectly acceptable to eat dinner at ten p.m.. It’s not like we’re in—I don’t know—Poughkeepsie or something.” He let out a snort.

“Why did you say it like that?”

“Say what?” he asked, confused.

“Poughkeepsie,” she repeated.

“I—I don’t know. I guess because it’s the most ridiculous place I could come up with.”

“I’m from Poughkeepsie,” she said.

“Are you? Did I know that?” He frowned, pawing through his memory.

She must have mentioned it in the past. That had to be why, of all upstate towns, that was the one that came to mind when he needed an example of the farthest place from

Manhattan he could think of, both in culture and distance. Although Holly Creek would have qualified too.

Still, she seemed insulted by the innocent comparison in his off-the-cuff comment. “It was just an example, Hilary. You live here now, so what does it matter?”

“So *now* I’m acceptable because I have a New York City zip code?”

He sighed. A deep exhale filled with resignation. He was going to have to eat crow for dinner to get her to calm down.

“I’m sorry. Seriously, Hilary, I apologize. I meant nothing by it. It was just a joke. A bad one. It’s just been a long day.”

“It’s always a long day with you.”

He waited to see if there was more to her statement. When none came he repeated, “So, tonight?”

“Sure. I’ll meet you tonight, Xander. No problem,” she said with renewed vigor and an intensity—and volume—that he hoped meant all was back to normal between them.

“Great. The steakhouse in let’s say twenty minutes?” That would give them both time to grab a cab and get there from their respective homes.

“Sure. Can’t wait,” she said in the same strange fiery tone.



Xander understood the strange end to the phone conversation with Hilary the moment she sat down opposite him, without taking off her coat, and said, “I think it’s time we face that this, us, isn’t working.”

“Wait. What?” His eyes widened. “You’re breaking up with me?”

She let out a laugh, the tinkling sound drawing the attention of nearby diners just as her model strut from the front door to the table had.

“Were we even actually dating? I haven’t seen or heard from you in weeks. Not even a text.”

“That can’t be true.”

When she cocked up one perfectly shaped dark eyebrow he realized he needed cold hard evidence to dispute her claim. He reached to pick up his phone from the restaurant’s table. “I’ll show you.”

He scrolled through his recent texts, then through his not so recent texts until he found the text chain with her.

“There. See. I texted you on November twenty-fourth.”

“Yes. You replied one word, *thanks*, to my Happy Thanksgiving text to you. When was the last one before that?”

He scrolled further and saw the back and forth between them on November tenth as they coordinated their dinner plans. That was the last time he’d seen her until tonight.

Okay, maybe that was kind of a long time. But still, nothing to break up over.

“I’ve just been busy. I’m not seeing anyone else, if that’s what you’re thinking,” he said in his own defense. “Are you?” he asked as a thought struck him.

She was gorgeous. Tall. Beautiful on any day but especially today, her brown skin radiant against the winter white of her long, tailored wool coat.

Hilary shook her head. “No, I’m not seeing anyone and I didn’t think you were. I know my competition for your time has always been your career.”

And having a good job and working hard was a bad thing? He tempered his opinion on that in an effort to make peace. “I’ll try to—”

“Don’t, please. Don’t try on my account. It’s okay. Really.” She stood. “I know you and your career will be very happy together. Enjoy your dinner, Xander.”

Alone at the table, he watched her walk away as the waiter appeared.

“Can I get you a cocktail?”

“Yes, please.” After that strange encounter, he could use one. “Macallan, neat. Side of water.”

“Yes, sir. And will your dining companion be returning?”

“No. No, she will not.” He had to wonder why he wasn’t more upset about that.

CHAPTER 5



It was full dark, as it had been for her entire drive, by the time Merry got to Cooperstown. But waking up in her own bed and eating breakfast with her family tomorrow morning would make fighting Friday night traffic worth it.

Even without the sunlight she'd been able to see the landscape changing with every mile the Land Rover ate up between Manhattan and Cooperstown.

The Catskills had gotten snow instead of the rain she'd left in the city. Unlike the brown landscape she'd found when she was last home over Thanksgiving, tonight nature was dressed in a pristine coat of white.

Even the blacktop of the roadways seemed to be decked out.

They bore a sprinkling of white, as if they'd been dusted with powdered sugar. Although she knew it was actually remnants of the highway department's salting efforts. It combined with the finest of freshly fallen flakes that remained airborne in the cold night air, swirling along the ground. Caught by the Land Rover's headlights, they became an ethereal earthbound cloud that parted for her and led the way.

After she exited the highway and took the route that would bring her home, she saw the roads, sidewalks and driveways had long ago been plowed. But cold temperatures kept a thick blanket of the white stuff firmly in place everywhere else.

This was the time of year she loved upstate the best. When bright white snow covered the grass and dirt here in a stark

contrast to the dull browns and grays she was surrounded by downstate.

Slowing, she turned into the driveway. Already decorated for the season, Fernleigh rose stately and proud before her as she pulled up to the house.

She'd realized young that not everyone grew up in a house that had a name. She had long since stopped calling it anything but *home* or *my family's house*, especially to anyone at her new job. But it didn't matter what it was called, it still caused a flutter of warmth and excitement within her every time she returned after being away.

The dogs greeted her first. Fenimore and Cooper were like two brown and white spotted hair-missiles targeting her as she swung open the driver's side door.

The spaniels were well trained. They'd have sat and quieted if she commanded it. She didn't.

Merry allowed them to maul her, delivering excited kisses she returned until her sister followed them out.

One short, sharp whistle from Beth had both dogs sitting in picture perfect formation at her feet, like the Staffordshire porcelain dogs on the living room mantle.

She mouthed, "Sorry," to the dogs. An apology for their merriment being curtailed by the authoritative human.

"Mom doesn't want them jumping," Beth said when she was close enough.

In spite of the censure, Merry said, "Mom's not out here to see."

Rather than argue, Beth broke into a smile. "I can't believe you're actually here. A day early."

"I told you I would be," Merry said as they hugged.

As Beth pulled back she shot Merry a glare. "What you say and what you do are two different things since you got *that job*."

Her sister said *that job* as if the words tasted bitter in her mouth.

“You know why I took the job and like I’ve said before, it’s not a life sentence. It’s temporary. A couple of years max ___”

“You said one year.” Beth cocked up one blonde brow.

“We’ll see,” she dismissed the topic as quickly as possible before it became a big discussion she didn’t want to have.

The temperature was below freezing but the cold felt different upstate than it did in the city. Almost gentler without the wind whipping through the concrete canyons of the buildings.

Even so, Merry said, “Help me grab the bags so we can get inside.”

Beth had run out without a jacket and Merry had taken her coat off for the drive. It was time to move things indoors.

Entering the house through the side kitchen door, it was like Merry had never left.

The sounds and smells of Christmas at Fernleigh hit her just inside the doorway where she set down the bags. She put her jacket on the sole remaining empty peg and hung her key on one of the smaller already key laden hooks.

Something that smelled amazing was in the oven while soft music filled the air. Strains of classical Christmas tunes performed by an orchestra streamed throughout the kitchen from an old radio.

Eyeing the radio that was nearing the age to be officially declared *vintage*, Merry said, “Gramps still isn’t using the Alexa I gave him, I see.”

Beth snorted. “Apparently Alexa didn’t immediately understand when he told her to put on NPR and that was it. He gave up on her forever.”

Merry hid a smile as she imagined that conversation between her elderly grandfather and the A.I. smart speaker. “We can program her to do that.”

“I told him that. No go. I put the device in the workout room so I can rock out to some jamming tunes while I’m on the treadmill.” Beth did a weird little dance to demonstrate her *rocking out*.

Hearing that from the mouth of her classically trained pianist sister was like the lead tenor of the Metropolitan Opera releasing a rap album.

Merry cringed. “Please never say or do any of that again.”

Beth wrinkled her nose like she did when she was seven and Merry was five.

They were as different as they were similar. Beth was blonde, quiet and a musical prodigy while Merry was red-headed, outspoken—according to some—and built for business. But they both loved dogs and horses, this town, their family—even their annoying older brother Edward—and they both loved Christmas.

Speaking of...

“I bought the boys matching plaid bowties for the Christmas photo,” Merry announced.

“Oh my God. Eddie’s going to hate that,” Beth said with a grin that Merry matched with one of her own.

“I know, right? I can’t wait.” Torturing their brother as payback for all the times he’d tortured them as children because he was the oldest by one year was a lifelong goal for both sisters. His marrying and moving out didn’t change anything.

“What smells so good?” Merry asked as her stomach gave a rumble.

“Mom’s apple pie.”

She’d been hoping for real dinner but pie would do.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Beth said, cutting off that thought. “You can’t have any pie. It’s for tomorrow. But when you called and said you were getting close, good sister that I am, I popped a pot pie in the oven for you.”

Merry's eyes widened. "Yum."

Her mother lived and died by the Barefoot Contessa's cookbook.

She loved to cook for the family or friends, and her homemade individual chicken and vegetable pot pies were amazing. Like she could sell them and be famous for them kind of amazing.

But still, the untouchable apple pie was uppermost in Merry's mind since that was the overwhelming aroma that filled the warm kitchen air, teasing her.

"Wait. Why do we need a pie for tomorrow? Is something happening I don't know about?"

Her brother and sister-in-law coming over for pictures didn't seem pie worthy. At least the annual taking of the family photo had never been a pie-inclusive event before.

Beth's expression had Merry frowning and asking, "What?"

"Mom invited someone over."

"Someone like who?" Merry asked.

Given her parents' standing in the community, the possibilities were endless.

It could be just about anyone. The mayor of Cooperstown, in which case they'd all have to be on their best behavior. The Board of Directors from the Clark Foundation, also meaning they'd have to be good.

Hell, it could be the governor of the state or Derek Jeter from the Yankees, for all she knew. Her mother's contact list reached far and wide.

"All I want to do is drink lots of eggnog, spiked of course, and watch Christmas movies. Why do we have to have company?" Merry continued on a whine.

She knew she was pouting but as her relaxing weekend plans unraveled before her eyes, she didn't care. Even pie wasn't going to make up for this interruption to her plans.

“We can still do all that, but Jeff will be here doing it with us.” Beth cringed after dropping that announcement.

“Jeff? Jeff, who?”

Did her sister’s fiancé Brian have a brother she’d never heard about? Or maybe a best buddy? That might not be so bad. Brian was sweet enough. Anyone he brought over would no doubt be too.

Wrapping her head around the idea, she began to calm down.

Merry bent low and peeked into the oven to see if the pot pie crust was brown yet so she could dig in as Beth said, “Jeff, the boy you dated in high school.”

As the burst of hot oven air hit her in the face causing her eyes to water, Merry swiveled her head to glare at Beth. “Jeff.”

“He’s back in town,” Beth continued.

Merry straightened and closed the oven door again. “And? So? That doesn’t mean we have to be his welcome committee.”

“I think Mom has hopes of fixing you two up,” Beth blurted out in a rush.

“Why is she suddenly playing matchmaker? Doesn’t she have enough on her plate already?”

She was perfectly happy being single and concentrating solely on her career for now.

If she were feeling the lack of romance in her life, she’d just turn on one of the hundred and fifty Christmas Rom Coms released on every streaming channel between October and the New Year and get it out of her system.

Beth shrugged. “Think about it. Eddie is married. I’m engaged. It’s your turn now.”

“I don’t want it to be.”

“You don’t want what to be, sweetheart?” Their mother breezed into the kitchen.

With her short, blonde hair, sensible shoes, low-key but quality designer slacks and sweater, she could be Martha Stewart's doppelgänger. And their mom could cook just as well as television's famous kitchen maven.

What she could not—*should not*—do was try her hand at matchmaking.

But Merry knew her mother well enough to know no one told Susan Clark she couldn't do something or she'd make it her business to prove that person wrong.

Merry had no intention of her love life becoming her mother's singular focus, so she said, "I don't want the pie to be for tomorrow. It smells so good I want to eat it right now."

Beth's brows rose high at the lie but she didn't expose it.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. But there's Christmas cookies in the tin on the counter. And I can make us hot cocoa," she dangled that compromise as she bent and took the pot pie as well as the apple pie out of the oven.

Having moved them safely away from the dangerous topic of visiting ex-boyfriends and matchmaking mothers, Merry settled into a chair at the kitchen table.

She was about to happily devour some home-cooked comfort food for the first time since her last visit, when her mother said, "Oh, by the way. I invited your old boyfriend Jeff to stop by tomorrow. He was always such a nice boy."

Beth shot her an *I told you so* glance, while all Merry could think was *crap*.

CHAPTER 6



*M*onday morning, Xander strode into his office and tossed his wool trench coat onto the hook on the back of the door.

Another workweek had begun. Not that it mattered what day of the week it was. He'd worked from home most of the weekend.

He'd closed that deal for Bailey and then, in between fielding calls and checking email, he'd done a deep dive into the murky trenches of the internet.

Not for fun, of course. For research.

He concentrated on what was trending. Which celebrities were being talked about. He wanted those who were up and coming. New and hungry. Ones in which his young assistant saw potential. He'd grab them now and secure their loyalty—and their signature on a contract—before they hit it big and had other options.

They'd act like they'd won the lottery when he contacted them and sign anything he wanted.

Hell, he didn't think half of them even read the contract, they were so excited to get an offer. Any offer.

Besides negotiations this—uncovering undiscovered gems—was his favorite part of his job.

But before he could contact his new discoveries this morning, he had something else to do.

Something far less exciting or satisfying.

He had to call Rex.

Xander tossed the RSVP card for the wedding on his desk. He'd found it quickly enough amid his mess of mail at home.

But as it turned out, it was a good thing he hadn't scribbled Hilary's name on it and popped it in the mail slot on his way to their dinner together. Or more accurately, his dinner alone after she'd dumped him and walked out of the restaurant.

The small, embossed card mocked him, reminding him of her irrational behavior.

Now he had to call Rex and admit he was dateless for this wedding. Would he have to face the wrath of Rex's mother if that team of calligraphers had already finished the place cards?

Considering all the problems in the world today, place cards and plus-ones seemed ridiculously miniscule. But judging by Friday's conversation with the stressed-out groom, he had a feeling Rex and momzilla wouldn't agree.

He navigated to Rex's number in his cell and braced for the conversation.

Finally, he heard the inevitable, "Hey, Xander," when his friend answered.

"Hey. So change of plans," he began, purposefully sounding upbeat, like this was a good thing.

Seriously though, wasn't it? The Plaza must charge an arm and a leg per head for an event like this. He was saving them money by not bringing a date.

Hopefully, Rex would agree and be happy about it, even if it did mean tossing Hilary's place card in the trash.

"All right," Rex said, sounding less upbeat.

"Hilary can't make it and I won't have a plus one, after all."

"What? Xander, no. You have to get a date."

Xander drew back at the intensity of Rex's reaction. "Why? I don't understand. What's the problem?"

Rex blew out a breath. “Weren’t you paying attention at the engagement party? That big discussion with my mother about everyone having to have dates. The groomsmen betting the bridesmaids the guys would all get dates and the girls wouldn’t. Me betting my mother if we all didn’t get dates she could plan whatever she wanted for our next big event.”

“In my defense, we were at a brewery and I was drinking heavily to survive being upstate.”

Rex sighed again. “My mother wants this to be the social event of the season and that means everything has to be perfect. I mean everything. That includes the photos of the wedding party with their dates. And the numbers on each side of the dais being equal.”

“And that’s important?”

“Yes. I told you about the battle plan in the war room. If I go in there and pluck one of her color coordinated sticky notes off that seating chart, there’s going to be an explosion.”

“That’s ridiculous—“

“Maybe, but it’s true. But that’s not the worst part. It’s open season on eligible men, Xander, and you’d be a prime trophy.”

Xander sniffed. “You’re mixing your metaphors. Is this wedding a hunt or a battle?”

“Ha-ha. Joke all you want, Xander, but in addition to the bet, my mother is threatening to set up any single bridesmaids or groomsmen who plan on coming alone with a date of her choosing.”

“Come on...”

“I’m serious.” Rex’s tone told Xander he was indeed serious.

He’d been multitasking until now, trying to check email while talking to Rex on speakerphone. Deciding this situation might warrant his full attention, he leaned away from his computer screen.

“How could she do that? Does she have a list of single and available women ready, willing and able to attend a wedding at the last minute?”

Like an escort service. The image of Rex’s mother as a madame made her suddenly much more interesting.

“Yes! She has a list. Women and men. The daughters and sons of her friends, and friends of friends. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. It’s like a real-life production of *Hello, Dolly* around here.”

“Hello, what? Who?” Xander frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“Are you kidding me? You never saw *Hello, Dolly*? The movie? Starring Barbra Streisand?”

The surprise here shouldn’t have been that Xander hadn’t seen it, but that Rex had.

“Sorry. Must have missed that one.” Rapidly losing interest in this conversation again, he leaned forward and scanned the open email on the screen.

“It doesn’t matter. The point is, Dolly is a socialite turned matchmaker. That’s what this wedding has turned momzilla into. Her clients are every mother with a single son or daughter of marriage age in the tri-state area.”

Xander shook his head. “You can say that as many times as you want but that doesn’t make it any more feasible, logistically. No woman is going to agree to be set up on a blind date for a wedding.”

“You don’t understand. In her circle of friends, the mothers of single children are relentless. And they’re powerful. There’s a whole network of them working behind the scenes, like the Illuminati.”

Xander barked out a laugh at the comparison.

“I’m not kidding,” Rex continued. “Their sole goal is to get their single offspring married and procure grandchildren. They don’t care if their kids are on board with it or not. Matchmaking is going to happen. And if you think momzilla is

not going to take advantage of a rich, single, good-looking man like you being up for grabs, you're nuts, my friend."

"Aw, Rex. You think I'm good looking? Thanks," Xander joked.

"You don't believe me?" Rex asked.

"It just sounds so... *dramatic*. Even for you."

"Trust me. It's happening. She can and she will do it. I've seen the list. She has them sorted by height so she can match them with an appropriately tall date for the photos."

"That's... unreal." But it was starting to sound more real. "So what if you leave me as coming with a date, but I just arrive alone? I'll cover the plate cost for the extra meal. No problem."

Whatever the price, it would be worth it to not have to deal with a date for this thing. And a blind date, at that.

God only knew what the women on this list were like. He had to think they were single for good reason.

"And have her embarrassed because it looks like someone didn't show up to the society event of the year? She'd rather die than have an empty seat at the wedding. Or even the rehearsal dinner."

Uh, oh. "Rehearsal dinner?" Was he supposed to have a date for that too?

"You didn't read the invitation or the RSVP at all, did you?" Rex accused.

Shit. Busted. "I, uh, skimmed it."

"When you're in the wedding party, which you are, the invitation and the RSVP are for both the rehearsal dinner and the wedding. If you come to the rehearsal without a date, I guarantee you that you're going to arrive at the wedding to find you have one. And she'll have a place card for the seat right next to yours for the reception. So if you don't want my mother to *Dolly* you, I suggest you wrangle yourself a date and fast."

Xander let out a sigh. At some point even he tired of negotiations. “Fine. I’ll come up with someone.”

“You’d better hurry. You don’t have much time.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Overly confident, as usual.”

“No. Just the right amount of confident,” Xander lobbed back at the insult. “In fact, I’ll bet you a bottle of Macallan that I’ll have a date before the week is up.”

“Okay. You’re on. I’m leaving you with a plus one, for your own safety. But you’d better come up with a date or it’ll be my neck on the line for lying for you and that bottle you’ll owe me won’t be enough to ease my pain.”

“I’ll find a date,” Xander repeated.

“You’d better,” Rex warned.

“I will. Now I gotta go. Bye.”

“Get me your new date’s name ASAP!” Rex rushed to add.

“Good-bye,” Xander repeated before tapping the screen to disconnect the call.

The wedding was just shy of three weeks away. That was more than enough time to come up with a date. No problem.



An hour later, Xander realized he might have a problem.

He’d tracked down pretty much every woman he’d ever dated, or even knew casually, and asked if they’d like to attend a wedding Christmas weekend.

Shockingly, he’d received a *no* from everyone. Well, everyone except for the woman who’d hung up on him rather than giving him an answer. Apparently they’d parted on bad terms.

What was the problem? He was a good-looking guy. He’d always thought he was popular.

But when it came to securing a wedding date, he was batting zero and there were no more innings left in this game.

He'd called every woman in his cell's contact list. Messaged every female acquaintance he was connected to on social media. He was out of options.

The cold hard realization hit him. He was going to have to call Rex and tell him the plus one was a plus zero and accept the consequences that came with that.

Possibly worse was that he'd be known by the rest of the groomsmen as the guy who couldn't get himself a date. The one who had to get fixed up.

Burying his face in his hands, Xander let out a groan.

"What's up?" Evan leaned on the doorframe, looking concerned.

Xander was going to have to remember to start closing his door. It would have helped avoid this embarrassing confession.

"Nothing. At least nothing work related." Drawing in a breath, he decided to just tell the truth otherwise Evan would keep hounding him for an explanation. "I need a date for a wedding Christmas weekend and nobody's available."

There. That was a good explanation.

It wasn't him. It was the holiday. *That* was why he couldn't get a date. Christmas.

Some people actually liked their relatives and did things with them.

That was his story and he was sticking to it. Sitting up straighter he felt his wounded pride already beginning to heal.

"Did you ask any of the women here at the office?" Evan asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Have you been living in a cave the past few years that you missed #metoo?" Xander scowled.

Evan rolled his eyes. “You’re not planning to molest them, right? Or even date them. You basically just need a seat filler. It’s no different than when the company buys a table for an event and we start picking who from the staff to invite.”

“I guess. I don’t know. Who would I even invite?” Xander began going through the company roster in his head.

He mentally ticked off the options. Married. Married. Visibly pregnant. Old enough to be his mother. Almost young enough to be his daughter.

“You said it’s Christmas weekend?” Evan asked.

Xander sighed. “Yeah.”

“Then how about Ms. Christmas over there?” Evan tipped his head toward the desks in the open concept communal work area.

Even from where he sat Xander could see whom Evan meant.

A small desktop Christmas tree sat on one side of her computer flanked by a large bloom-laden poinsettia on the other side. She had actual twinkle lights strung on her desk. And just like on Friday, she was sporting a wildly patterned sweater the colors of which clashed horrendously with her carrot-hued curls.

He didn’t need to see her face to know who it was.

“You mean Mariah,” he said. His ride to the tux shop. Land Rover owner. Lover of Christmas and plaid bowties.

Evan’s brows flew high as he pinned Xander with a stare. “You know her name.”

“You should too. She’s part of our company,” Xander chastised, not mentioning he hadn’t known her name either until three days ago.

He didn’t need Evan getting any misconceptions about why he knew the name of the Christmas-crazed woman. Rumors spread like wildfire around this place.

“I did know her name, smart ass. And now I’m going to use it when I ask her if she’s busy Christmas weekend.”

“What? Wait. Evan, no!”

Evan was out the door and striding toward Mariah’s desk before Xander could stop him.

Launching out of the wheeled desk chair, Xander caught his foot on the rollers and almost took a header onto the floor before he righted himself, skirted around the desk and made it to his doorway.

By then, Evan was already at Mariah’s desk, talking animatedly to her—no doubt about *him* and his lack of a date—and all he could do was watch in horror.

CHAPTER 7



“*M*ariah? Hey. Can I interrupt you for sec?”

The male voice addressing her by name startled her. She hadn’t heard anyone approach.

She’d been too immersed in the horrifying discovery that her high school boyfriend had private messaged her to say how he was looking forward to seeing her when she was home again this weekend.

And that wasn’t even all. He’d also liked every one of her Instagram photos for the past five years.

She was definitely in trouble there. The question was, was she also in trouble here at work?

Slapping her cell face down on the desk, she spun to face Evan Klein. He wasn’t her direct boss but he was definitely on a higher level than she was as a newbie in this company.

He was like executive washroom level and she was still surprised when anyone knew her name.

“Um, hi. Yeah. Sure,” she blathered, hoping he’d forget her being so engrossed in her cell phone she hadn’t noticed him standing there until he’d said her name.

He smiled, flashing perfect white teeth at her.

In fact, all of him was pretty much perfect in a generic Ken Doll kind of way.

A young thirty-something. Blond hair, perfectly cut. Navy blue suit that fit like it was custom, which it might well be

knowing how much some of these guys earned in a year. It all blended together to make him look like ninety percent of the other men who worked here.

And speaking of the other men who worked here... Alexander Barrington had skidded to a stop right behind where Evan leaned his shapely behind on the edge of her desk, arms crossed.

“So, uh, what are we talking about?” Alexander asked, breathless.

She’d seen him annoyed, like when he’d stepped in dog shit and couldn’t get a cab. She’d seen him obtuse here in the office when he’d stare right through her like she didn’t exist. But she’d never seen him panicked—visibly flustered—like he was now.

“I’m not sure,” she answered, leaning back in her chair and crossing her own arms to mimic Evan’s pose. “Evan, what are we talking about?”

“Your availability for Christmas weekend,” he grinned.

“And why are we discussing my Christmas plans?” she asked, suspicious.

Alexander finally stepped forward. “Because Evan doesn’t know when to mind his own business.”

Now she was really intrigued. Whatever this was about, it had Alexander completely off-kilter.

Interesting...

Unlike his Ken Doll friend, Alexander Barrington was not a cookie cutter Manhattan businessman.

He had a mop of dark wavy hair that usually was just a tad unruly and longer than customary for the other males in the company.

His eyes were a piercing blue that stood out in stark contrast against his almost black hair.

He didn’t smile often. In fact he was more likely to frown when he showed any expression at all. He never flirted with

any of the women here that she could see, unlike Evan. And there was a very intriguing tiny white scar on his upper lip that made her wonder about the story behind it.

Alexander Barrington was by no means perfect. But he was intriguing.

He was a legend around here, having closed the most and biggest deals in the company.

He stood out from the crowd with an air of confidence that bordered on hubris. He'd frightened her when she'd first started until she realized his blank stare didn't mean he was angry, just oblivious.

And after the shit on the shoe incident, she had proof he was as human and fallible as the rest of them. She'd never fear him again. But she couldn't help but continue to be intrigued.

"So what are you doing?" Evan asked, ignoring Alexander.

"For Christmas? I'll be upstate with my family," she answered, still not knowing why it mattered.

"It's not actually on Christmas, right? What day is your thing?" Evan twisted toward Alexander, who look pained.

"Don't you have somewhere you need to be?" Alexander asked the other man.

"Nope." Evan grinned.

"What's going on?" she asked, eyes narrowed as her gaze ping-ponged between the two executives visiting her lowly work area.

"Our mutual friend here needs a date for a wedding Christmas weekend."

"Evan..." Alexander grit out between clenched teeth.

"Seriously, dude. Just tell her what day the wedding is. Maybe she can come." Evan turned back to her. "You'd go right? It should be nice. Where is it?" Evan pivoted again to address Alexander.

"The Plaza," he mumbled.

Evan let out a long low whistle. “The Plaza at Christmas. That’s going to be gorgeous. Imagine the decorations. You like Christmas decorations, right?” He reached out pointedly and touched one ornament on her mini desk tree.

“I do,” she answered, playing along as a plan began to form. It took her barely ten seconds to make up her mind. “What day?” she asked.

Both men turned to stare at her.

“The wedding. What’s the date?” she elaborated.

Alexander swallowed visibly, then said, “Saturday, December twenty-third. And apparently there’s a rehearsal dinner Friday as well that I’m supposed to have a date for.”

“He’s a groomsman,” Evan supplied hooking a thumb in his friend’s direction.

“Hence our trip to the tuxedo shop,” she guessed, putting the pieces together.

He nodded while Evan’s brows shot up with interest. “What trip is this?”

“Nothing,” Alexander said.

She’d been planning on leaving right from work Friday the twenty-second. She’d taken the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day off, as had most of the rest of the company, so she wouldn’t have to return to the city until January first.

But in light of what was waiting for her—namely Jeff and her mom pushing them together—those ten days at home looked less and less enticing.

It would feel like an eternity. Her favorite time of the year and her first vacation from work since starting and it was all going to be ruined by Jeff showing up and following her around like a lovesick puppy if she didn’t do something.

But, if she went to this wedding with Alexander, then maybe she could get him to agree to do something for her. Such as come home with her this weekend and scare off her much too friendly high school ex-boyfriend.

Her actually dating someone else might be the only thing to combat her mother's matchmaking and Jeff's sudden and unexplained enthusiasm for her a decade after they'd broken up.

"I can make that work," she blurted.

"What?" Alexander's eyes flew wide.

"Great!" Evan grinned, speaking over his friend.

"If you do something for me," she added.

Evan's brows rose over hazel eyes that sparked with interest. "That sounds intriguing."

"Why are you still here?" Alexander glared at him, before turning back to her. "What did you have in mind? And remember, I don't control promotions or raises."

She waved that away. "It's not work related. It's personal."

"I like the sound of that."

This time they both turned to glare at Evan for that comment.

"Sorry," he mumbled but didn't leave.

"What are you doing this weekend?" she asked Alexander.

He looked understandably cautious as he said, "Uh, nothing, I guess. Why?"

Things were looking promising. Her lips twitched with a smile. "How would you feel about a little road trip?"

CHAPTER 8



Xander stepped toward the curb. “I’ll get us a cab. Where are we going?” he asked glancing at his brightly colored cohort.

Mariah shrugged. “Your place or mine?”

Coming from anyone else at any other time that would have sounded like a proposition.

But since Xander and Mariah had entered into an agreement and this post-work meeting was only to discuss the details away from work and Evan’s prying ears, it was all business. Definitely no pleasure.

“I’m on the Upper East Side. Seventy-third,” he offered.

“I’m on the Upper West Side. Central Park West,” she supplied in return.

He felt his brows rise before he schooled his features. *Central Park West?* Now he was curious.

“Your place,” he said, without a moment’s hesitation.

What was a low-level new hire doing living on the park?

It was probably her parents’ place.

Of course, he thought as he reasoned it out. A twenty-something living in Manhattan, just starting out in her career would still be living off Mom and Dad. That had to be it.

“All right. This way.” She spun on the sidewalk and started to walk.

“Wait. We’re walking?”

She paused and turned back. “I usually do. It’s only about a twenty-five minute—” Watching his expression, she said, “Never mind. We can grab a cab.”

“Yes, please,” he said, raising one arm.

As a yellow car pulled to the curb, he opened the door, let her in first then slid in after her.

After she’d given her address to the cab driver, he asked, “Where’s the Land Rover?”

“Parked at the apartment. I only bring it to work when I’m heading upstate straight from the office. The other days, I walk.”

He’d never even considered walking home and he wasn’t about to start now.

Sure, he tried to get to the gym at least three times a week but walking to work? Nope.

“What about when it rains? Or snows?” he asked.

“I have an umbrella and a raincoat and boots,” she said as if he was the crazy one here.

She was obviously an environmental nut as well as coo-coo for Christmas. Duly noted.

He nodded, pretending to be supportive since he needed this woman for the wedding. “Good for you. Save the environment. Reduce your carbon footprint and all that.”

“Yes, but I do it because I enjoy the walk. And it’s healthy. Keeps me in shape. I’d rather do that than go to a gym and run nowhere on a treadmill while staring at a wall. Ugh.”

Since that was exactly what he did, he made a noncommittal sound as the cab pulled up to the curb and stopped.

He’d been planning to pay for the cab since it had been his insistence they take one, but when he glanced up and realized where they were, he lost all train of thought.

“You live here?” He turned and saw Mariah already had her money out.

“I do.” She waited expectantly and he realized the driver had been paid and they were both waiting for him to open the door and get out.

In a shocked daze, he scrambled to do exactly that.

“This is the Dakota,” he said, like some sort of tourist, rather than a born and bred New Yorker.

“It is,” she said, beginning to look amused at his reaction. “Come on.”

“Good evening, Miss Clark,” the doorman greeted as they neared. He swung the elaborate front door open.

“Charles, how’s the new grand baby doing?”

“Wonderful, Miss Clark. Thank you for asking.”

“Please tell your daughter there’s a little something in the mail for both of them.”

“Thank you, Miss. You’re too kind.”

She waved away the compliment. “No such thing, Charles.”

They moved across the lobby, Xander trailing behind her, again like he was the tourist and she the tour guide.

She waved to the woman at the concierge desk. “Hello, Brenda.”

“Miss Clark, I put a package in your foyer.”

“You’re the best. Thank you.”

“Always my pleasure, Miss.”

Judging by the staff and their white glove treatment of Mariah—aka Miss Clark—the Dakota deserved every bit of its reputation for being one of the most prestigious and exclusive addresses in New York City.

A small seed of envy settled in his gut and took root, beginning to grow.

He already lived in his dream house. A brownstone on the Upper East Side. So why was he jealous? Maybe because no one greeted him when he arrived home except for the neighborhood stray cat.

“Alexander, you coming?”

He glanced up and realized she was in the elevator holding the door open for him as he gawked at the lobby. “Sorry. And call me Xander. That’s what my friend’s call me.”

“Xander, it is then.” She smiled. “And you can call me Merry.”

That was a little too on the nose for someone dressed in a Santa Claus sweater.

“Merry. Really?” He frowned as the doors whooshed shut.

“That’s what my family calls me. Why?”

“It’s just... never mind. Merry, it is.”

She was so confident. So at ease. So unaware that a woman so overtly into Christmas using the name Merry might invite jests.

But he supposed that shouldn’t surprise him. A person had to have an elevated level of confidence—or insanity—to so boldly wear what she did without giving a single thought to how she looked.

Inside the ornate elevator, he watched her press the button for the top floor. He braced himself for another bout of envy.

After the doors finally swept open she led him across a wide hallway and to a tall set of double paneled wood doors, which she unlocked proving they’d arrived.

This was her place.

He stepped inside, his head automatically tipping back to take in what had to be twelve-foot ceilings.

The windows were almost as tall and had a view of—dammit, now he was really jealous—Central Park.

He turned to face her. “You live here... alone?”

“For now.” She nodded.

For now? What did that mean. Was she subletting? Was that even allowed? The Dakota had gone co-op a few decades ago. He went back to his original opinion that this must belong to her family. Maybe a wealthy grandfather now living in a nursing home. That made sense.

Feeling better with that theory, he took in more of the architecture. The gorgeous mantle surrounding the fireplace. The wood paneling that went half-way up the walls of what looked like a living room.

“This is a great place,” he said. “How many bedrooms?”

It was a normal question for city dwellers. Where suburbanites counted their success in acreage, here it was all about the bedrooms.

But she didn't seem to want to answer as she said, “Uh, a few.”

Her hesitation was interesting.

“How many is a few?” he pushed.

She finally met his gaze. “Um. Seven. Can I get you a glass of wine?”

“Seven? Jesus.” He ran a hand over his mouth. “And yeah. Wine would be good.” He needed a drink after that revelation.

Who the hell had seven bedrooms in Manhattan? And lived alone!

He flashed back to the building's employees calling her Miss Clark.

The name didn't ring a bell. Given her living circumstances he would have expected it to be Rockefeller or Kennedy.

As she disappeared through a doorway into what he assumed was the kitchen to get them wine, he looked around the room big enough the grand piano didn't even make a dent in the space. He wanted to see more. But he couldn't blatantly

ask for a tour. He'd already embarrassed himself with his apartment envy.

They should probably get down to business anyway. That business being her strange proposition.

“So, Merry, what are your demands?” He took the glass of red she handed him.

“My demands?” Her eyebrows rose as she sat on the loveseat.

He lowered himself onto the sofa opposite and said, “Sorry. I spent the weekend in negotiations.”

They'd only briefly discussed the *quid pro quo* at the office. Now he needed to know exactly what he'd be on the hook for in this deal they'd entered into.

“What do you want from me in exchange for attending the rehearsal dinner and the wedding?” he asked, before taking a sip of the wine.

It was good. Smooth. Dry. Rich. Bold.

He took another sip just as she said, “I want you to be my boyfriend.”

CHAPTER 9



“Oh my gosh. Are you all right?” Setting down her own glass, she jumped up from her seat and rushed to Xander as he choked.

She grabbed his wine glass and put it down on the cocktail table as, red faced, he continued to cough.

“Can I get you some water?” she asked, feeling helpless.

He was choking on wine. It wasn’t as if she could administer the Heimlich for that.

Xander shook his head, wheezing out, “N—no. I’m—fine.”

Eyes watering and his face still not returned to its normal color, he didn’t look fine but at least he’d stopped gasping and was now down to just a residual sporadic hack.

Finally he wiped his eyes then drew in a short breath that he blew out, all without coughing.

“Better?” she asked, relieved.

At least she wouldn’t have to call for an ambulance to administer life saving measures to her first non-family guest to visit her apartment in the six months she’d lived there.

He nodded, blew out another longer slower breath then leveled his gaze on hers. “So, what did you say?”

“When?” she asked, still flustered.

“Before I almost choked to death. Something about my being your...boyfriend.”

“Oh, yeah. My mother suddenly fancies herself a matchmaker—”

“God, not another one,” he mumbled.

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“Never mind. Go on.”

“I was home last week and all of a sudden my high school boyfriend showed up and started acting like we’re going to get back together or something. Now he’s messaging me talking about seeing me again this weekend and how great it’s going to be when I’m home for that week between Christmas and New Year—”

“Wait. You’re taking that whole week off?”

She paused. “Yes. Why? I was told the company basically shuts down for that week. I put in an official request and got approval from my department manager. I know I’m new but —”

He held up one hand. “I’m sure it’s fine. I just—I’d lose my mind if I were to take off a whole week. Especially to spend it with family. And for the holidays.” He cringed.

A few words flew through her mind as she watched him say the words family and holidays like they’d left a bad taste in his mouth.

Workaholic. Grump. Grinch. And those were just the polite ones.

The two of them couldn’t be more different. But somehow she was going to have to convince everyone—Jeff and her mother especially, that she and Xander were the perfect couple.

She’d worry about all the details later. For now, she had to make sure he was onboard.

“Anyway, because of Jeff’s delusion that we’re getting back together and my mother’s unrelenting efforts, now I’m dreading going home to be with my family for the holidays.”

“And you love the holidays,” he added, his gaze dropping to her sweater before moving to the mantle, already hung with brocade stockings and adorned with greens.

“Yes,” she nodded. “And I love my family. And being home. So I have to do something. I thought if I showed up this weekend with my *new boyfriend*—you—my mother and Jeff would have to back off.”

“So it would all be pretend?” he asked.

“Yes. Of course.” She frowned. “Did you think I thought it would be real?”

“No. No. Just making sure.” He was silent for a moment, as if considering it. “So I’d have to spend the weekend with you in your hometown?”

“Yes.”

“Where would we stay?”

“At the house.”

Was that what he was worried about? Sleeping arrangements?

“I’ll be in my bedroom. And there’s a spare guestroom for you,” she added.

“Since you have seven bedrooms here, I didn’t doubt it.” He glanced around them at the living room.

She knew this place was spectacular, even if she’d grown up playing here as a child at her grandfather’s feet. The hallway by the elevator was a particularly good place for her, Eddie and Beth to play ball and ride tricycles when they were little.

“Would we be taking the Land Rover?” he asked.

“Yes. Why?”

He shrugged. “No reason. Just wondering the transportation situation. When?”

“Friday after work.”

He reacted to that. “That’s soon.”

“You said you didn’t have other plans this weekend.”

“It’s fine. I don’t. I’m just thinking, there isn’t much time for you to build up the story about how we’ve been dating long enough to get serious.”

Relieved he seemed to realize this plan was perfect for their mutual benefit and preservation and was on board, she moved to the desk and grabbed her laptop. “That’s where social media comes in.”

He lifted his brows. “Of course, as social media coordinator, you’d say that. In what way?”

“First, I change my status on Facebook from *single* to *in a relationship*.”

“You’re still on Facebook?” He frowned.

She shot him a glare. “My parents and even my grandfather are, so yes, I’m on Facebook. Besides, I run the social for some organizations my family is involved in. And believe it or not, the whole world hasn’t abandoned all other platforms for TikTok.”

“Touché.” He lifted his wine glass to her in a toast and swallowed a small sip, without choking this time. “What next?”

“A series of selfies of the two of us. We’ll take one every day this week so we’re in different outfits. At a few locations. Inside your office. In front of the building. At the coffee shop. Here in my place. Drinking wine.” She perched next to him, glass in one hand and the cell in the other and said, “Smile.”

He did, flashing a smile she’d rarely seen around the office. That was a shame. Xander’s smile took him from just good looking to devastatingly, heartbreakingly gorgeous. Like a romance novel rogue who looked as if he was bound to break your heart, but he’d make sure you enjoyed it as he did.

That smile disappeared the moment the cell camera clicked, then he angled his head to glance at her, leaning back just a bit since they were way too close. “So we’re really going to do this? Fake a whole relationship publicly?”

“Not all that publicly. My personal Facebook profile and my Instagram are both private. Only friends and family can see what I post. Don’t worry. I doubt we have any cross over in the friends department. This won’t put a damper on your robust playboy dating life.” She stood and moved back to her own seat.

He let out a snort. “Less robust than you’d think.”

That was an interesting comment if she chose to believe him, which she wasn’t sure she did.

Although, he had said he hadn’t been able to get a date for the wedding. But that could just be the timing. Christmas weekend. People made plans with family. Tourists filled the city streets while residents fled, heading for parts far and wide. All his model girlfriends were probably flying to Turks and Caicos or the Seychelles.

While she considered why anyone would want to spend Christmas on a beach, he said, “So, it’s settled then. A few selfies at the office this week, a trip upstate Friday. You come to the rehearsal dinner and wedding with me. Then we’re square. Good plan.” He downed the last of his wine and stood.

“Wait. We’re not done.”

He shifted his gaze from her collection of nutcrackers that adorned the grand piano to her. “What more is there?”

“We have to get our stories straight. How did we meet? Although, I guess that answer would be work. But like how long have we been dating? Where are you from? Where did you go to school? Do you have any brothers and sisters—”

He held up a hand to stop the list. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but won’t we have hours in the car together on the drive upstate?”

“Yes.”

“Good. We’ll cover it then. Thanks for the wine.” He moved toward the door where he took a moment to stare at the elf sitting inside the wreath hanging there.

He shook his head before he turned the handle and pulled the door wide.

“See you in the morning,” he said. Then he was gone.

She was going to have her work cut out for her making anyone believe she and Alexander Barrington were made for each other.

CHAPTER 10



Xander glanced at Merry behind the wheel. “Where are we going again?”

He had been enjoying the heated leather seats in the Land Rover immensely. But his pleasure was greatly diminished by the continuous Christmas carols streaming from the vehicle’s satellite radio.

Three hours into this road trip and he was ready to get out, even if this was his dream vehicle. As it was, the three different renditions of the *Twelve Days of Christmas* he’d heard were going to haunt his dreams.

“Cooperstown,” Merry answered.

“And how much farther is it?” he asked.

She laughed. “You sound like I used to during trips to the city with my parents. Of course, I was riding on the hump in the backseat and my brother would hit me whenever no one was looking. Meanwhile, my sister completely ignored me the whole drive. So that’s *my* excuse.”

Merry left that sentence hanging, as if waiting for *his* excuse.

“Are you insinuating I sound like a child?” He cocked up a brow and shot her a side-eyed glare, insulted even if it might be accurate. He was bordering on whining.

“Take it as you’d like. Meanwhile, we’re here.” She flipped on the blinker and slowed the vehicle to a crawl.

They'd exited the highway a while ago when she'd turned on to a country road. Thinking the trip was almost at an end he'd gotten excited.

He'd been wrong.

After what felt like forever they were still driving, hence his prior albeit childish *are we there yet* inquiry.

"We're here meaning at your house?" He wanted to clarify before getting his hopes up again.

"My family's house, yes," she confirmed and he sat up a little straighter in the seat.

It had been dark for most of their trip.

He'd long since lost interest in alternating between staring out the window at the black winter nothingness and perusing apps on his cell phone, when he had signal, which was rare.

The scenery had gone from shades of black and brown near the city, to a wonderland of white the farther north and west they drove. But sadly, childlike excitement over seeing snow could only last for so long before that too was mind numbingly boring.

But as the headlights illuminated the stone wall and columns flanking the ornate iron gates left open to allow access to the driveway his interest returned.

Although *house* seemed a less accurate description than *manor* or *mansion* or even *museum*.

He realized his mouth was hanging open and made the conscious effort to shut it. "Home, sweet home," he mumbled.

If she'd heard his smart-ass comment, it didn't seem to affect her. She cut the engine and glanced in his direction. "Time to meet the fam."

"This should be interesting," he said mostly to himself as he opened the door.

He'd ditched his suit jacket when they'd gotten into the car, so he shoved his cell phone into the back pocket of his trousers and stepped down from the high vehicle... And

immediately felt himself careening backward when his feet went out from under him on the slick surface.

Before he knew what was happening, he found himself flat on his back, staring up at the night sky until Merry's face appeared.

"Oh, my God. Are you all right?" She hovered above him as he took inventory of all the body parts that hurt.

"That has yet to be determined," he admitted, not moving.

"I should have warned you how slippery the cobblestones in the courtyard get this time of year."

Cobblestone courtyard. Was he suddenly in Dickensian England?

"Sure. Slippery this time of year. That's understandable," he agreed, trying to sit up, only to be knocked back down by two balls of fur with tongues.

"Fenimore, Cooper, stop! Sit." When the dogs—of course she had dogs—actually obeyed, she said, "I'm sorry about them."

"No problem," he said wondering what else could happen to him given the first minute since their arrival had already been packed full.

Merry offered him a hand. Pride long gone, he accepted her help as he noticed her footwear. Rubber-soled boots that looked waterproof and practical and not nearly as likely to slip as his Italian leather shoes.

He grunted as he got to his feet and tried not to fall again.

"Beth! Is there a bag of rock salt by the door? This is dangerous out here," Merry called out to some unseen person while he wondered which would be worse, falling or having his shoes ruined by salt.

It was a toss-up.

"I'm fine. Really." Although he was more than ready to be inside the house.

“Hold on to me. I’ll come out and get the bags later.” She looped her arm through his and pulled him close.

“I can carry my own bag.” He might be a city dweller but he was still a man. Being led inside like an invalid was bad enough but he’d be damned if he’d let her haul in his luggage too.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Not in those shoes.”

“We’ll see.”

She sighed. “How big are your feet?”

“Excuse me?” he asked, begrudgingly letting her lead him toward the door while they remained connected at the elbows.

“What’s your shoe size?” she clarified.

“Oh. Eleven. Eleven and a half, depending. Why?”

“We’ve probably got some old boots laying around that’ll fit you. You can wear those while you’re here and not risk your life in those things. If there aren’t any in the house, there should be some in the horse barn we can get in the morning.”

“The horse barn. Of course. That’s where I keep my spare boots too.” He rolled his eyes... and almost slipped again.

“Attitude,” Merry said in a voice low with warning as she tipped her chin toward where a woman came out of the house carrying a large white plastic bag in her hand. As she walked toward them, Merry said, “My sister, Beth.”

In other words, their show had begun starring him and Merry as the new happy couple, as evidenced by the pictures of them together she’d been posting all week.

“Everybody okay here?” Beth, the sister, asked.

“I think so,” Merry answered for him. He had to wonder if she was going to make a habit of doing that.

“Somebody didn’t dress for upstate.” Beth smiled, glancing at him in his button-down work shirt, suit pants and impractical shoes. She extended her right hand, now free after she transferred the bag to her left. “I’m Beth. So nice to meet you, Alexander.”

“Xander, please. Pleasure to be here,” he returned, shaking her hand without thinking too much about if he actually meant that or not, since that had yet to be determined.

All that he did know was that it had been interesting so far. And a little painful—he had a feeling he was going to be sore in the morning. And freaking cold—he should have packed warmer clothes.

“Mom’s inside chomping at the bit to meet him, so you go on in. I’ll take care of the ice.”

“Thank you,” Merry sing-songed as her sister, dressed in practical boots and a thick coat, moved toward the car.

He could see the resemblance between the siblings, except that Beth was a blonde and Merry a redhead. But that was just a fleeting observation as Merry, accompanied by the two excited dogs, led him to what turned out to be a side door and inside into the relative warmth of the home’s mudroom and then kitchen.

And that’s when he met the mysterious and unexpected Clark family.

CHAPTER 11



Merry cringed as her family—all of them—descended upon Xander.

She should have known better than to tell them in advance that she was bringing home a guy.

Clearly, she should have sprung it on them. *Surprise! Meet my boyfriend.* Instead, because of her warning, they'd had time to assemble.

Everyone was mustered in the kitchen like the first wave of an attack. Her brother Eddie and his wife Anna. Her father Ambrose and her mother Susan. Even Beth's fiancé Brian was here. And of course, her grandfather, the patriarch of her branch of the family tree, Robert Vanderpoel Clark Junior.

At least they hadn't summoned any of the Clark cousins still living in the area. The sheer size of the welcome party might have sent Xander running for the hills.

As it was, he was beginning to look a bit overwhelmed as they swarmed, surrounding him with an unbroken circle as he did his best to shake each hand as he repeated their names after every introduction.

She felt bad until she realized he was in his element, playing to a crowd. He'd be fine. He was a people person. A salesman to the core. He basically sold celebrity personas to the companies who wanted to hire them. After he'd sold himself and the company and what services they could offer to the celebrities to begin with.

And even though she rarely saw the grumpy workaholic smile around the office, the moment a client arrived he turned on the charm and hiked up the wattage on what had to be a fake smile.

As her extended family finally eased away and gave him some breathing room, she was able to get a better view. Xander already had a cup of egg nog in his hand and as his gaze met hers he was actually... *smiling*.

Her eyes widened at the sight, but in the back of her mind she couldn't help but wonder, was he faking it now?

Was he that good at turning it on and off as needed? If he were, she should be grateful for that skill since this whole damn weekend was about them fake dating.

This was exactly what they'd agreed he'd do and it seemed to be working perfectly.

The level of chatter as her family grilled Xander—about his life, his job, their relationship—was beginning to get overwhelming as the back door opened and her sister walked in.

“How's he holding up to the fam's scrutiny?” Beth asked.

“So far, so good. And you could have texted to warn me we were walking into an ambush.” Merry sent a sideways glance at her sister.

“What fun would that have been?” Beth grinned.

Merry narrowed her eyes. “Evil.”

“Payback,” Beth replied. “Brian had to go through it too. Your turn.”

“I suppose so.” Merry sighed.

The one difference was, Brian had been actually dating Beth at the time.

She'd just consider this a dress rehearsal for whenever she did get a real boyfriend. Sometime down the road when she, and her career, were settled.

“He's cute,” Beth observed, her eyes focused on Xander.

A burst of a laugh escaped Merry at that comment. Alexander Barrington could be described as many things, but *cute* wasn't one of them.

Devilishly handsome. Emotionally unavailable. Oddly enticing. Sexy AF...

She reminded herself she was only fake dating him, so none of that mattered. But she did owe her sister an explanation for her outburst.

“Don't let him hear you call him cute. He likes to be the shark in the office. He smells blood in the celebrity waters and dives in to gobble up the client before any other predators even know what happened.”

Beth stopped staring at Xander long enough to glance at Merry. “His job sounds much more exciting than yours.”

Merry laughed again. “His job *is* much more exciting than mine. But I wouldn't want his for any amount of money.”

She was much happier running things from behind a computer keyboard.

Let Xander wine and dine their clients and woo everyone in the board room. She was fine working in the shadows. Just one more way they were total and complete opposites.

Xander sent her one more glance and this time it looked more like a plea for a rescue.

“I probably should go help him,” she commented, not moving.

Beth chuckled, her gaze on the group of still chattering Clark family and Clark family adjacent members. “Good luck. Talk about sharks and blood in the water. Jeez.” She shook her head.

“No kidding. Where's the egg nog?” Merry asked. She had a feeling she was going to need a generous serving of the rum-laden beverage to get through this weekend.

“It used to be my grandchildren came to greet their grandfather when they arrived. Now I see I'm second fiddle to my daughter-in-law's egg nog.”

Merry smiled as she stepped toward the man who'd broken away from the group to greet her. "Well, it's really good egg nog. How are you, Gramps?"

She wrapped the older man in an embrace.

"I'm enjoying watching your mother's interrogation techniques," he answered.

Merry groaned as her gaze moved to the group again. "I'd better get over there."

Time to rescue her man—make that her pretend man. Well actually real man, pretend boyfriend.

Was there a lexicon for fake dating descriptors? If there were, she wasn't aware of it. Somebody needed to invent a title for a person's fake boyfriend. Faux mate, perhaps?

Maybe she'd just start thinking of him as her boyfriend in her own mind, strictly for simplicity's sake.

Happy with that plan, Merry strode across the large modern kitchen that had been renovated so many times since the eighteen hundreds the original occupants wouldn't have recognized it.

Parting the throng she reached for Xander's arm.

"I'm going to show Xander to his room." An idea of how to break up the crowd struck. "Eddie, Brian, can you two get our bags out of the Land Rover and bring them upstairs? I'm sure Xander wants to change out of work clothes."

Without waiting for their answer, she whisked Xander out the door.

"You did pack something other than work clothes, right?" she asked as she led him toward the staircase in the front hall.

"No mukluks like your boots, but yes. I did." He glanced pointedly at her feet.

"Good." She noticed once he'd insulted her footwear, his gaze was everywhere, bouncing around the art and architecture they strode past as they made their way up the grand staircase to the second floor.

She couldn't blame him for gawking. The stone house built overlooking the Susquehanna River for Edward Clark was an architectural masterpiece.

"This is a hell of a house," he commented.

"Yeah." She nodded.

"Are you seriously trying to pretend this is all... normal?" he asked.

"It's normal to me. I was born here. It's been in the family forever." At the top of the staircase she turned to face him and saw he was now taking in the upper hallway with its windows that overlooked the property and the river.

"Normal." He let out a laugh as he trailed a finger along the wood paneling. "Or maybe this is normal for upstate New York and I should start looking at investment properties."

"You definitely get more bang for your buck here than in Manhattan. And free parking," she joked, hooking a thumb toward the front of the house where she'd left the Land Rover.

He nodded in agreement even as he seemed to be looking a little too closely at her. Studying her.

She might have liked it better when he used to look right through her. Back before she'd come up with this hair brained scheme. Like a week ago when he didn't even know her name.

It was all Evan's fault. He was the one who perched his butt on her desk uninvited and brought up the wedding that sent them down this strange and twisting path of romantic deception.

And now she had the hottest guy in the company—who was also the most elusive man she knew—staying in her guest room for the weekend.

He'd been quiet for a while, staring up at a nineteenth-century oil portrait of the original Edward Clark before he turned to take in the rows of bedroom doors up and down the hallway. "This place reminds me of my childhood."

Her brows rose. "You mocked me for calling my family home *normal* and you grew up in a place like this?"

She wasn't surprised he had money. He dressed like it. His suits alone cost more than rents in Manhattan. And his address in New York had told her he earned plenty at the company to be able to afford to live where he did. But she hadn't been aware he'd grown up wealthy.

He sniffed out a short laugh that sounded devoid of humor.

"No. My parents' taste ran more toward the modern, not that I was there all that often. But my boarding school—it looked a lot like this place." He seemed to visibly knock himself out of the memory before flashing her a smile she'd guarantee was fake. "So where to? Left or right?"

Xander had just let his walls down. He'd given her a peek inside, if only for a minute. She'd seen his vulnerability. The pain he hid behind that false megawatt smile. And now that she'd seen it, she could never unsee it.

And dammit, what was that feeling in her chest?

Time to pull up her own defenses because she could not—would not—fall for Alexander Barrington. There was no way it would end well between her and the walking, talking heartbreak in a Brioni suit.

CHAPTER 12



Merry opened the door of a bedroom complete with a four-poster bed and a fireplace. “The bedrooms get cold this time of year, but feel free to start a fire. There’s wood downstairs.”

He nodded, only half listening as memories filled him and he tried to decide if they were good or bad.

What he’d confided was the truth. Most of his childhood had been spent in a place like this, where rich parents sent their offspring under the guise of giving them the best education possible. When in reality, it was so they could spend winters skiing in Saint Moritz, autumn sailing around the Greek islands and spring golfing in Palm Beach. He did get to see them summers at the house in the Hamptons. He supposed he should be grateful for that.

It wasn’t like he’d been lonely. He made friends at school. They had all been in the same boat. But family was a foreign concept to him. And a family like Merry’s—he hadn’t thought that existed outside of movies and idyllic advertising campaigns.

He bet they had a real family Christmas here, worthy of Norman Rockwell or Currier and Ives. And dammit, he was a little jealous of that.

“So tomorrow we’ll cut down the tree.”

“What tree?”

“The Christmas tree.”

“You have to cut it down yourself? Can’t you just buy one?” There were sale lots all over Manhattan to do just that, buy already cut trees trucked in from probably right around this area.

Her lips twitched. “We could but we don’t.” She cringed. “But if you don’t want to come, I can say you have a conference call or something—”

“No. It’s okay. I think I want to come.” That answer surprised him as much as it appeared to surprise her.

“Okay. I’ll make sure to dig up those boots for you before then. Oh. Also...” She moved to a wardrobe and opened the double doors. “Help yourself to anything you find in here.”

He moved to stand behind her. She was petite enough he could see over her head to the stacks of sweaters on the shelf. “Who do these belong to?”

She shrugged. “Who knows? Some I think were my dad’s. He’s gone up a size or two over the past few years. He blames the pandemic. Which I guess is true since my mother took up baking homemade bread during lockdown like it was her mission in life. Some are my brother Eddie’s things. He only took about half his stuff when he got married and moved out. But it’s up for grabs so dress warm for tomorrow.”

“I will—” His reply was interrupted by a ruckus in the hall.

“What are you doing in here?” Eddie appeared in the doorway, huffing slightly as he held their bags in each hand.

“What do you mean?” Merry asked.

“Why isn’t he sleeping in your room?”

Xander watched with interest when Merry’s face turned a lovely shade of embarrassed.

“With Grandpa and Mom and Dad in the house? We can’t share a room.”

“Brian sleeps over in Beth’s room all the time,” Eddie said as he set the bags on the floor.

“Brian and Beth are engaged,” she countered, visibly scrambling for a reason.

“That’s only since Thanksgiving. She’s had him sleeping in her room for a year, every time he visited. And come on. It’s not like Mom and Dad think you two aren’t sleeping together in the apartment. Right?”

Somehow Merry’s skin managed to attain an even darker shade of crimson. Enjoying the show, Xander stood back and let her handle this.

“Well, yeah. But I’m not doing that here.” Merry shot a quick sideways glance at Xander.

“All right. Your choice. Pretend you’re a virgin if you want.” Eddie turned to Xander. “You play pool?”

His brows rose at the unexpected question. “I’ve been known to sink a few balls. Why?”

“Brian and I are going up to the game room to shoot some pool, if you want to join us after you change and get settled in,” Eddie offered.

Xander nodded. “Sounds good. Thanks.”

Funny thing was, he actually meant it. Hell, besides the few times he’d been at a group event with the other groomsmen related to Rex’s wedding when was the last time he’d hung out when it wasn’t related to work?

Even grabbing a meal or a drink with Evan meant they talked shop the whole time.

When was the last time he’d played pool? He couldn’t remember but that could be remedied tonight in the Clark’s *game room*.

When Eddie left, Xander turned to Merry to address the issue. “Game room?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s just a pool table in the attic.”

“Somehow I doubt that. But I guess I’ll see for myself.” He smiled, reaching for his bag and tossing it on the bed.

“You don’t have to go upstairs just because Eddie asked you to, you know. I can say you’re too tired.”

As he unzipped his leather satchel, he glanced back at her over his shoulder, brow cocked high. “I can make my own excuses, thank you. Besides, I wouldn’t miss out on the *game room*, even if I were tired. Which I’m not.”

“Are you actually enjoying this?” she asked in an accusatory tone.

He considered that. “I think I am. Watching you blush as you discussed our robust sex life back in Manhattan with your brother was quite amusing.”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Our *fictional* sex life,” she hissed low, purportedly to keep the fictional part a secret from any of her many family members who might be lurking in the hall.

“Yes. I’m aware.” Very fictional.

For now.

That last thought surprised him.

He let his gaze settle on Merry as she reached to grab her own bag from the floor.

There was still the ridiculous sweater. And the untamed mop of fiery hair. And the practical but hideous boots. So why was he picturing the two of them in her apartment doing what her brother assumed they already did? Perhaps on the floor in front of the fireplace while her Christmas tree twinkled nearby and the soft strains of classical—no, jazzy—seasonal music filled the air.

He shook that oddly specific fantasy from his mind as he pulled a black turtleneck, fresh socks and loafers from his bag.

Reaching for the top button on his work shirt—he’d ditched the tie immediately after leaving the office—he turned to Merry. “Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to change and head upstairs.”

“Of course. Sorry. I’ll just—” She shook her head and backed toward the door before spinning toward the hallway.

He watched her leave his bedroom as fast as her legs could carry her.

Merry flustered, and once again blushing, was enough to make him smile. He seemed to do that a lot around this house. Smile.

In fact, after changing and making his way up yet another set of stairs, he smiled again when he saw the game room.

“Xander, welcome,” Eddie greeted. “Scotch or bourbon?”

“Scotch. Thanks.”

“Grab a cue stick, brother,” Brian said, his own already in his hand. “As the only two not officially part of the Clark family—yet—we play first. Eddie gets winner.”

“All right.” Xander glanced around the space. It might be the attic but damn, it was every man’s dream come true.

At one end of the room was a card table and a seating area. Built-in bookcases, the shelves laden with books and boxed games, flanked the lit fireplace. He spotted a few recognizable classics. Candy Land. Scrabble. Monopoly. The variety proved this house was a true home to generations of Clarks, from kids to old people.

Turning he found another fireplace at this end of the room, also with a roaring real log fire.

He spotted the cue sticks in a rack not far from the second fireplace.

By the time he’d selected one Merry’s brother, also blond proving she was the only one with the recessive red headed gene among the siblings, strode toward him with a glass in his hand.

That was how Merry found them moments later. He had a pool cue in one hand and a scotch in the other and was laughing at something Eddie had said when she appeared.

Red-faced and breathless, she skidded into the room, still in the Christmas sweater, but now in leggings with furry, cozy-looking booties replacing the rubber ones.

“Everything okay here?” she asked.

“Everything is fine,” Brian answered. The dark-haired man, probably about his age, looked amused at his future sister-in-law’s sudden appearance.

“Stop hovering, Merry Lee. Xander’s good,” Eddie called from the bar where he was mixing himself what looked like an Old Fashioned.

“Merrily?” Xander asked, wondering if he’d heard right. It would be too good if her nickname was actually Merrily.

“Mariah Lee Clark. Merry for short. Merry Lee when I want to annoy her.” Eddie grinned before focusing back on his sister. “I love you but go away. This is our time to play with him. So kiss your man goodnight and go back downstairs with the women and old folk. Boys only.”

The crack of balls on the table as Brian took a shot appeared to startle Merry out of her stupor. She jumped and turned her gaze to Xander.

He was feeling cocky and a bit loose thanks to the finger of scotch he’d already downed. That and the fact he hadn’t eaten since the fast-food hamburger they’d grabbed at a rest stop probably three hours ago, which he’d just remembered.

For whatever reason, Xander leaned his cue against the wall, set his drink on the mantle and moved toward her.

“You heard your brother. Kiss me goodnight and skedaddle.” He grinned at her look of shock, which only made him want to shock her more.

Gripping her by the shoulders, he leaned low and pressed a kiss directly to her lips.

They were soft and warm against his, as was her body as she leaned into him.

For just a moment, he forgot this was all pretend. That *they* were pretend. Forgot this was meant to be a kiss as fake as

their relationship.

And just when instinct took over and he angled his head and was about to slip his tongue between her lips, slightly parted by her surprise, he remembered himself.

He pulled back.

Her eyes were unfocused as he said, “Do as your brother asked, Merry. It’s boy’s time.”

Before she could speak, he spun her around and gave her a gentle push. “See you in the morning, Merry Lee.”

Eddie chuckled. “Yeah, because he’s definitely not going to sneak into your bedroom later.”

Brian coughed pointedly to feign covering the word, “Liar.”

With one more glance over her shoulder, she finally left, but damned if he wasn’t picturing sneaking into her room later.

Pushing that crazy image out of his head, he grabbed his cue stick and spun toward the table. “Am I up?”

Two drinks, a handful of peanuts and two games later—one which he’d won and one which he’d lost—Xander made his way back to his room.

Inside, he considered that it was probably good he didn’t know which room was Merry’s or he might have been tempted to knock on her door.

He blamed that urge on the scotch and pulled his cell phone out of his back pocket.

That’s when he noticed the screen was cracked. More than cracked. Shattered. Smashed almost to the point of being unusable.

Frowning he reviewed the past couple of hours. He hadn’t even sat down in the game room. He stood to play and to drink.

The fall. Out in the driveway. He’d fallen on his ass with his cell in his back pocket.

But that had been hours ago. And he'd only noticed now?

He stood with the cell in his hand and considered that. He, who lived and died by his cell phone, hadn't even pulled it out of his pocket to check it in hours.

He hadn't really thought about work in all that time either, save for when he answered a couple of questions about how his job differed from Merry's position in the company.

What was it about this place that made him so...different?

And was it the place or her? Or all of them? The entire Clark clan.

Life here as part of this family would be easy. Simple.

But since this was all a sham, a temporary lie, there was nothing simple about it. And soon it was all going to end.

CHAPTER 13



The collision of Merry's work life and family life was... weird.

Disturbing. Unsettling. Distracting. Take your pick. She felt all of that and more knowing that just two doors down Xander was asleep.

What did he wear to bed?

That thought careened into her mind. She tried to squelch it but couldn't before an image of him shirtless and ripped, wearing nothing but plaid boxer shorts tickled her brain.

She could not be having thoughts like that... even if he had kissed her last night. That kiss had been as fake as their relationship. Strictly for her brother's benefit.

So why had it felt so real?

She shoved that question aside and flipped back the covers, standing to pad in her socks across the rug in her bedroom. She grabbed her favorite cashmere cardigan and pulled it over the long-sleeved T-shirt and flannel pants she'd slept in, before sliding her feet into her fuzzy slippers.

On the way toward the door she paused and glanced in the full-length mirror. On a normal day she would have headed directly downstairs just like this without a second thought.

Today, Xander was here. Fake relationship or not, somehow that made all the difference in the world.

She moved closer to her reflection, ran her fingers through her hair and scowled. Crud.

Spinning, she went into her bathroom and took the time to brush her teeth, wash her face and swipe on some moisturizer and lip gloss.

That was all Xander was going to get. All she was capable of before her morning cappuccino with a double shot of espresso from the machine downstairs in the kitchen. He'd just have to deal with it.

As it turned out, Xander wasn't in the kitchen when she arrived. That was somehow both a relief and a disappointment.

What she did find was her sister, wide awake and wide-eyed, energy radiating off her as she vigorously whipped eggs in a bowl. The smell of bacon that filled the kitchen told her Beth had already put a tray in the oven. Whoever was up first prepped breakfast for the others. Once that cured meat aroma wafted up the stairs, her parents and grandfather would be down here as well.

Keeping an eye on Beth, Merry shuffled toward the coffee machine. "How many do I have to have to catch up with you?"

"I only had one. But it was a triple shot."

"Ah." Merry nodded. That explained it.

She set the machine accordingly. The only way to handle her sister's energy would be to match it with her own. And if that required three shots, then so be it.

Thank God Beth was addicted to caffeine and not alcohol or Merry's strategy of matching her drink for drink could have become a problem.

"So, how's Xander this morning?" Beth asked with far more inflection in her voice than the question warranted.

"I wouldn't know. How's Brian?" Merry countered.

"Still sound asleep. He didn't come to bed until well after midnight. And he was well into his cups when he did," Beth said, borrowing one of their grandfather's favorite sayings.

Merry's brows rose. Had Xander stayed upstairs with Eddie and Brian drinking the whole time? That would explain why he wasn't awake.

“Eddie crashed in his old room,” Beth continued.

“With Anna?”

Beth shook her head. “Anna was the good little wife. She took the car home last night so he could have a boys’ night with Brian. You missed the whole discussion when you went to bed *early*. Not that I blame you since you were going to bed with Xander.”

“I was not *with Xander*. And I’m sorry, but I was tired. It was a long day. And a long drive.”

“I know.” Beth sighed. “It always is. So when are you moving back home?”

Merry frowned. “I haven’t even given this job a year yet.”

“You’ve proven you can get hired for a position that has nothing to do with any of the Clark family businesses or the foundation. That’s all you wanted to do, right? Well, you’ve done that. Come home and work here with me and Eddie. We miss you.” Beth pouted.

“It’s not just to prove something to myself or anyone else. It’s that I can learn a lot from working for someone else. Knowledge and experience that I can carry back to the Clark Foundation or the Leatherstocking Corporation or wherever else I might end up.”

Beth screwed up her mouth at that, which was a sure sign she’d run out of arguments. “Fine. But I have you here now and we’re going to have some sister time. Drink your coffee and get dressed. I scheduled hair appointments for both of us in an hour.”

Merry’s brows rose. “I can’t leave Xander—”

“Yes, you can. Leave him a note and some bacon. He’ll be fine. Besides, we’ll probably be back before he’s even up. I doubt Brian, Eddie or Xander are going to be awake before noon. And if they are, they’re going to be too hungover to do much of anything anyway. Let them rest and recuperate. They can cut the tree after lunch.”

Sibling pressure. It could be worse than peer pressure. Especially when her sister had valid arguments that made sense.

Merry let out a huff. “Fine.”

She’d go and get dressed and write a note for Xander, but she was bringing her coffee with her... and a piece of bacon.

As Beth opened the oven and pulled out the tray of sizzling aromatic meat, Merry snagged a piece. She quickly learned that was a mistake as she juggled the molten hot meat before she tossed it on the waiting paper towels Beth had set out.

“That’s hot,” Beth said after it was obvious Merry had already discovered that fact.

“Yes. I know. Thank you.” No quitter, she blotted the piece with the paper towel then grabbed it again and took a bite.

Three hours later, Merry was wishing she’d had more for breakfast. Beth hadn’t scheduled just a hair appointment. Beth had booked her for a cut and highlights. With the blowout, it was a lengthy endeavor which had them arriving home just before noon.

Three hours during which Xander had been alone with her family. Three hours during which their carefully curated relationship could have been exposed.

He was going to be pissed. They’d never agreed she could leave him alone with the family to fend for himself. Although he’d done that willingly last night with Brian and Eddie. But they were guys. And pretty clueless, at that.

How would Xander fare against the mother of all interrogators? The matchmaker herself. Susan Clark.

“Will you stop fidgeting,” Beth reprimanded from behind the wheel of her car.

“I’m sorry. I’m worried about Xander.”

“Why?”

“One word. Mom.”

Beth bobbed her head. “Well, if he can’t deal with the family it’s best to know now before things get too serious, right?”

In a real relationship, that might be true. Merry made a noncommittal sound and wished Beth would drive faster.

“But your hair looks great,” Beth added.

“Thank you.” Merry reached up and ran her fingers over her head.

Her hair had never felt so silky and smooth. It was like some sort of black magic. Or a hell of a lot of time, effort and salon products. And she was never going to be able to replicate it herself, or even try. But it had made Beth happy. That was all that mattered.

She did like whatever they’d done to the color, though. It had involved some sort of glaze that took her hair from a bright copper to a soft deep auburn.

At least that part—the color—would last a while even if the blowout wouldn’t.

The house came into view as did a plaid-clad figure. She watched as the man raised the axe above his head and brought it down, sending the pieces of firewood flying.

Merry frowned. “Is Brian splitting wood?”

Beth laughed. “Doubtful. Is it Eddie?”

“Maybe. Although I think that’s Grandpa’s jacket. The one he leaves by the back door.”

“Well if Grandpa is splitting wood, we are going to have to have an intervention. He’s not going to want to hear it but he’s too old to be doing that.”

“Agreed.” Merry nodded. “You can handle that Sunday after we leave.”

Beth cut the engine and shot a glare at Merry. “Not gonna happen. You don’t get to be the good cop to my bad cop.”

They’d see about that. As the youngest, Merry was firmly in position to always be the good cop, or the good

granddaughter as the case may be.

She opened the car door and moved toward the back door, just as the man who was most definitely not her grandfather turned and looked in her direction.

That's when she saw those piercing blue eyes focused on her and that smile that she'd suspected and now knew would be devastating if and when he turned it on her full force.

Xander.

She hadn't identified him before. His big city GQ look had been too well camouflaged by borrowed winter-appropriate upstate clothes.

Her father's hat, furry earflaps and all, hid Xander's dark bad boy messy hair. He was wearing Eddie's boots. And her grandfather's coat was open to show he'd donned another turtleneck like the black one from last night—this one cream colored.

Xander swung the axe in his gloved hands down to the ground then leaned on the handle, looking like any woman's lumberjack fantasy.

What the hell? Where was the uptight grumpy workaholic? Where had this smiling outdoorsy hottie come from?

Xander's gaze remained on her, and the smile stayed on his lips, as she stopped to stand next to him and his wood.

"You look nice. Did you have a fun hair appointment?" he asked.

"Yes." Self-conscious under his intense scrutiny, she ran a hand over her head again. "What are you doing?"

"I came out to grab more wood for the fire but a couple of pieces looked too big so I decided to split them."

"So you just decided to chop some wood? With an axe."

"Of course, with an axe. It's pretty satisfying actually. And surprisingly soothing. Like meditating, but without having to sit there bored. Besides, one of the trainers at the gym said splitting wood is an amazing workout."

He was like some sort of Zen lumberjack.

“You feel free to work out as much as you want while you’re here,” Beth said.

Merry hadn’t realized her sister had walked up behind her. She’d been too busy trying not to squirm beneath Xander’s stare.

She noticed Beth now, as well as the gleam in her eye that matched the tone in her voice and the appraising gaze she leveled on Xander.

Beth was as turned on by Xander’s mastery over his wood as she was because, dammit, it was hot.

In fact, upstate Xander was proving to be pretty damn irresistible.

As he bent over to grab a log and toss it onto the canvas log carrier, his jacket rode up and she got a perfect view of his tight butt accentuated perfectly in his jeans. She’d never seen him in jeans before.

She swallowed hard as parts of her body she’d put on hiatus decided they wanted to go back to work.

One sideways glance told her Beth was appreciating the view as well. Merry slapped her sister in the arm with an accompanying frown that she hoped said, stop!

She refused to admit it aloud, but she couldn’t blame Beth for looking. Xander in lumberjack mode was a sight to behold.

But her fake boyfriend was also forbidden fruit. Unattainable for a girl like her. Last she’d heard he was dating a model.

A freaking model! Probably the exact opposite from Merry in every way possible.

Xander bent over and grabbed two more pieces for the carrier, during which Beth tipped her head to one side as she enjoyed the view.

Merry openly scowled at her sister’s overt admiration of Xander’s butt, but she was liking it too. Too much.

She didn't know how much more of this temptation she could take. Thank God they were returning to the city Sunday night. Back to work. Back to normal. Back to him ignoring her and her pretending it didn't matter.

Normalcy. That was exactly what she needed to get over this passing—fleeting, temporary—attraction to Alexander Barrington.

But until then, it wouldn't hurt to look...

CHAPTER 14



Xander was enjoying himself—surprisingly.

From the amazing barista-quality coffee machine in the kitchen—which helped him out of his boys’ night hangover fog—to the snowmobile ride he, Eddie and Brian had taken to choose and cut down a fresh Christmas tree for the living room, it had been...fun.

When was the last time he just had fun? Not going out to entertain clients, or some party required for this wedding, but just for the pure joy of it.

He couldn’t remember.

But that’s what he’d done today. He’d had a great time and in the last place he’d ever expected to.

He hadn’t even missed Merry being gone. Who had time? He woke up, found her note, then was pulled into a whirlwind of activity consisting of cappuccino, bacon, flannel and pine.

And questions. At least from Merry’s mother who could easily be a prosecuting attorney for all he knew. But once the men of the family extricated him from her maternal clutches, it was all about speed and sharp wood chopping instruments.

But damn, Merry was front and center in his mind the moment she stepped out of her sister’s BMW, looking freaking amazing. All it took was one look to remind him of everything there was to miss about Miss Merry Lee Clark.

He smiled at the name. It perfectly fit the curly haired red head who only wore ugly sweaters from Thanksgiving through

Christmas. But that name didn't fit the smart, funny woman who lived in the Dakota, drove a kick ass Land Rover, worked at Paragon and now, after one trip to the salon, looked like she'd stepped out of a magazine ad.

That woman was no doubt Ms. Mariah Clark, and she was only a small part of what comprised this complex female he'd somehow gotten entangled with.

Loaded wood carrier in hand, he followed behind her and her sister. It put him in the perfect position to admire the tight black pants she wore with tall black boots and today's seasonal selection, an understated cropped black sweater featuring a snowman design. But her ass looked great.

And when she flipped her hair as she hung her jacket and looked back at him, she caught him staring. But jeez, how could he not? One visit to the salon and she came back runway ready.

Although, she hadn't been all dolled up last night when he'd had to control himself from shoving his tongue down her throat.

He reviewed the last time he'd seen her. Last night, when she looked like normal everyday Merry, he'd delivered what should have been a joke kiss and ended up being anything but.

The memory of her mouth against his was all it took to send his mind to bad places.

He pictured her stripped bare, down to nothing but perhaps some lacy lingerie, kneeling on the bed in his room, flipping that silky hair as she crawled toward him, her lush ass high in the air.

The image made him smile, because he knew to his core sex with Merry would be not just satisfying, but fun.

It had to be. A woman who had the balls to wear an ugly Christmas sweater to work on December first and not care what anybody said or thought had to be fun in bed. Carefree. Unfettered.

His dick turned as hard as the wood he'd been chopping before he'd decided to give up on his meditative exercise and

head inside with Merry and her sister. He realized he was standing there by the back door, frozen in his fantasy.

Clearing his throat, and hopefully his mind of the X-rated movie running through it, he said, "I'll just bring this into the other room."

Merry smiled. "Before you do, want me to take a picture of you in your lumberjack outfit for Instagram?"

His brows rose. "Do you want to?"

She cringed apologetically. "I kind of do."

Was Merry into this manly-man kind of stuff? He'd have to remember that. He might also have to add some flannel that wasn't borrowed to his weekend wardrobe rotation.

He laughed. "All right. Go for it." He posed with his wood for her picture, but in his mind he was definitely thinking about his other wood and wondering if she'd be as appreciative of that.

Beth skidded into the room. "The tree is all set up in the stand. Lights too. They did it without us."

"Really?" A breath whooshed out of Merry as she lowered her cell after taking the shot.

Uh oh. "Was that bad? Should we have waited?" Xander asked.

Merry loved all things Christmas. That would include choosing and cutting the tree and putting it up. He should have realized she'd be upset and asked her brother to wait.

"No!" Beth and Merry answered in unison.

"We hate that part," Beth said.

"We only like the fun part. The hanging of the ornaments," Merry said.

"And the drinking while we hang the ornaments," Beth added.

Merry nodded. "Yes. And the drinking."

Xander let out a snort. He could handle that.

He moved to divest himself of the firewood. There was, after all, an evergreen to decorate and apparently drinking to do.

And he was looking forward to it. Him, the man who had never had a tree in his place ever, was actually excited about this one.

Well, not just the tree. Or the drinking. He was genuinely looking forward to spending more time with Merry. And her family too.

For a man who avoided his own family like the plague this whole weekend had been one hell of a surprise.

CHAPTER 15



“*Y*our man keeps staring at you,” Beth said in a voice much too loud.

Ornament in hand, Merry’s eyes widened as she spun to face Beth. “Shhh. He’ll hear you. And stop calling him *my man*.”

“So what if he hears? And that’s what he is. Your man. And he’s smitten, judging by the way he’s looking at you.” Beth went back to the plastic storage container for another glass ball but what she’d said stuck with Merry.

Alexander Barrington wasn’t the type to be *smitten*. But was he actually staring at her?

While Beth was occupied, Merry dared to look and see for herself—and their gazes collided. He smiled, a crooked lifting of the corners of his mouth accentuated by a dimple she rarely saw.

Her cheeks heating, she returned a quick smile of her own before becoming very busy looking for more ornaments to hang.

She could still feel his gaze on her from across the room where he and her father were discussing baseball, even though it was months before the season started.

“Told you,” Beth said.

Her sister never missed a thing. Especially not when Merry blushed. It was very annoying.

“He’s probably looking for a rescue from Dad,” Merry said, dismissing the idea that he could be looking their way for any other reason.

But there had been that smile...

“Look who’s here!” their mother announced from the doorway in an odd sounding tone.

When she glanced up it was to see Jeff—as in her ex—standing behind her mother.

Wide-eyed, her mother continued, “I found him by the back door bearing gifts.”

What the hell? She hadn’t replied to his message on Facebook in hopes he’d get the hint. Apparently that hadn’t worked.

“Gifts?” she mumbled.

“Hopefully just those two bottles of champagne she’s holding,” Beth hissed back.

“Did she invite him?” Merry said out of the corner of her mouth as Jeff’s gaze remained glued to her.

“I don’t think so. Unless she did before you called and said you were bringing Xander home.”

“Problem?” Speak of the devil, Xander had crept up on them while they’d been frantically discussing Jeff’s appearance.

“Merry’s ex-boyfriend.” Beth surreptitiously tipped her head toward where Jeff had gotten caught up in a conversation with the men of the family.

“The one you told me your mother was trying to fix you back up with? Jerry?” Xander asked.

“Jeff, and yes,” she hissed, hoping he understood the full extent of her discomfort at Jeff being here.

“Well then we just have to make sure everyone realizes you’re a taken woman.”

Any other time she'd argue feminism and that no woman ever belonged to a man. Not now when she really needed to belong to Xander and have Jeff and her mother both believe it.

"Come on. Introduce me."

Before she knew what was happening, she was under Xander's arm draped around her shoulders. Held tight against his side as he steered them directly at Jeff.

"Who do we have here?" Xander asked as Jeff's gaze settled on the two of them.

"This is an old friend of Merry's," her mother said with one of the fake smiles she reserved for awkward moments like this. "He's living back in town after being away."

"I've been playing pro ball for the last five years. Jeffrey Martin." He extended his hand to Xander, but his eyes remained on Merry as he said pointedly, "Merry's boyfriend."

She felt the blood drain from her face as she corrected, "*High school* boyfriend."

"Alexander Barrington. Merry's *current* boyfriend," Xander said without missing a beat.

"Yes, I assumed. Is this new?" Jeff motioned between the two of them looking unconvinced. "Your mom never mentioned it..."

"We, uh, kept it secret for a while. We work together. You know office politics." Merry forced a laugh that sounded so fake she almost cringed.

"Time doesn't matter. When it's right, you just know." Xander delivered that very un-Xander-like philosophy on love and then said, "Right, Jerry?"

Keeping his gaze on Jeff, Xander turned her in his arms to face him. He leaned low, pressing his forehead against hers. When she remembered to breathe again, she could smell bourbon and sugar cookies on his breath.

"Jeff," he corrected.

"Oh. Right." Xander flashed a tight-lipped smile.

She swallowed hard and managed to keep breathing.

He brought one hand up to brush his thumb across her cheek before he whispered, “So easy.”

Turning back, arm still around her, Xander smiled. “So, Biff, why are you back? What happened to the ball career?”

Shot across the bow. The battle had begun in earnest and she was smack in the middle of it.

Jeff’s eyes darkened. “Injury, actually. I’m home for a bit as I explore other options.”

“Oh, so you’re looking for work then. I’ll keep my ear to the ground for you.”

Eyes narrowing, Jeff asked, “And what do you do, Alexander?”

“I’m a partner at Paragon in the city.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Really? I’m surprised. We have a lot of elite athletes on our client roster.” Another verbal blow from Xander had her eyes cutting to see a muscle in Jeff’s jaw start to twitch.

Direct hit!

It was like watching a live action game of *Battleship* and Xander was scoring all the hits.

This felt bad. Like come-to-blows, why isn’t Beth engaged to a bouncer instead of a tax attorney kind of bad.

What had begun as a pissing contest was rapidly heating up to full blown war.

Was it as bad as it felt to her? Maybe she was imagining it. Or being overly sensitive.

One glance at her mother’s pinched expression, her brother’s open mouth, Brian’s widened eyes, and her father’s look of satisfaction—he’d never been a big fan of Jeff’s—told her yes, this was bad.

“So, who needs a drink? I know I do. Let’s pop these bottles Jeff brought and pour some. Merry, want to help me?”

Beth asked.

No freaking way she was leaving Jeff and Xander alone together.

“Beth will help you,” Merry said loud and pointedly.

“Let’s get those glasses out of the cabinet. It’s about time we all drank some more,” her mother said, springing into action. “Brian? Give us a hand?”

“Um...” Brian’s expression said he wasn’t keen on missing anything but he allowed himself to be pulled away by his fiancée and future mother-in-law anyway.

Meanwhile, Xander and Jeff remained squared off, neither moving an inch.

She wasn’t sure they even blinked, which told her one thing. No matter how convincing a boyfriend Xander made, Jeff wasn’t going to give up. And Xander was quite convincing, utilizing public displays of affection she hadn’t thought him capable of.

His arm remained around her holding her close, but he’d upped the game, drawing circles on her shoulder with his fingertips.

Finally, Jeff got pulled away to the kitchen by her mother, who insisted she couldn’t open the champagne and asked if Jeff could do it.

Once he was out of the room, Xander turned to face her. “He’s persistent.”

She let out the breath she’d been holding. “I know. I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry for what? I’m up for it. I enjoy a good challenge.”

She was glad someone was enjoying this because she sure wasn’t. It was hard to think with his hands now resting on her hips but she managed to. “You said something before...”

“I said quite a few things if I remember correctly. Can you be more specific?”

“You said *so easy*. Then you smiled.”

“Oh, that.” He smiled again.

“What did you mean?”

“It’s easy to make you blush.”

“No.” She frowned, even though she knew it was true.

“Yes.” He leaned in. “Watch. I’ll do it again.”

Then her lips were pressed against his for the second time in twenty-four hours. And she wasn’t sure she ever wanted him to stop.

But he did.

To hide her disappointment, she hissed, “He’s not even in the room.”

“No?” He feigned ignorance of that fact and glanced around before focusing back on her. “What did you ever see in him anyway?”

She shrugged even though she’d asked herself the same question enough times she knew the answer. “He was the guy to date. My school’s *It* boy. Star of the baseball team. Top of his class. What can I say? I was seventeen.”

“Ah, so your excuse is you were young and stupid?” he asked.

Jeff’s surface assets made up for the fact that during the time they’d dated, he had always been more in love with the most important person in his life—himself—than he’d ever been with her.

Merry bobbed her head. “Maybe, and he drove a Porsche.”

Xander nodded as if that was the first thing she’d said that made any sense. “Which model?”

“A Panamera Hybrid. It came out that year.”

He wrinkled his nose, demonstrating how Jeff had lost whatever modicum of respect he’d earned by owning a Porsche because he’d chosen the wrong model.

“I’ll forgive your vast lapse in judgment since your taste in boyfriends has improved greatly over the years.”

Fake boyfriends.

She almost said it aloud but standing so close, with his hands on her and with his gaze locked with hers, it was starting to feel not so fake anymore.

CHAPTER 16



Sunday arrived, as it always did after Saturday, but just this one time Xander wished it hadn't.

Today was the day they were to drive back to the city. And three-hour drive aside, he just plain didn't want to leave. He was enjoying himself so much he didn't want it to end yet, which was saying a lot.

He'd vacationed almost everywhere in the world anyone would want to go. From Paris to Cinque Terre, to Tahiti abroad, and from Hawaii to the Keys stateside. Dream destinations that people talked about, but he'd never come home from any of those places as relaxed as he felt here.

December in Cooperstown, New York. Who would have thought?

But return, he must.

With a sigh, he glanced at the meager remaining offerings he'd brought with him, and then at the wardrobe of hand-me-downs that came with the guest room.

They weren't leaving for a few hours yet and he wasn't ready to don his *city* uniform again anyway. He was starting to enjoy dressing in *upstate casual*. He'd never admit it aloud, but there was something to be said for warm flannel and fur-lined rubber boots.

Knowing the weather would help him choose, he supposed.

He turned to the A.I. device on the dresser. It was another perk supplied with the guest room. “Alexa, what’s today’s weather?”

He’d been expecting the usual answer. The high and low temperature and whether it would be sunny or not. What he got was the device issuing a winter storm warning.

And just like when he was a child getting ready for school and hearing there was a chance there might be a snow day—pre-boarding school days when he still lived at home—his heart soared.

Decision made, he pulled a thick fisherman’s style wool sweater over his jeans and T-shirt, shoved his feet into the flannel lined slippers that had also appeared in his room yesterday, and barreled down the main staircase.

Standing in the center hall, he had a decision to make. He smelled coffee and bacon coming from the kitchen but heard voices and smelled wood smoke from the living room, where they’d erected the tree the day before.

If he knew Merry at all—and he felt like he really did know her after this trip—she’d be by the Christmas tree. He pivoted to the right and strode into the large formal room that somehow managed to feel homey.

As he’d guessed, Merry was there along with her grandfather, the other early riser in the family.

Coffee cup in hand, she perched in a chair where she had a view of both the fireplace and the tree. The tree that was loaded with so many of the family’s ornaments, both old and new, that her grandfather had actually wired it to the hook already screwed into the room’s crown molding for safety. He then regaled them with the tale from his youth about the year the tree fell over. His own mother had cried for a week over the loss of the broken ornaments.

“Ah, he’s up. Morning, son,” Merry’s grandfather greeted.

After stumbling over the oddly warm feeling being called *son* had caused in his chest, he nodded to the older man. “Good morning, sir.”

“Xander. You’re up early,” Merry greeted.

That’s because there’d been less imbibing last night than the night before. He’d had to stay on his toes. He wasn’t going to get drunk and let his guard down with a predator in the room, meaning Jeff the ex.

He kept that to himself and got right to the point. “They’re predicting a snowstorm. There’s a winter storm warning.”

She dismissed that with a flick of her wrist. “There’s always a winter storm warning. Chance of sleet? Warning. High winds? Warning. Low wind chill temperatures? Warning. Don’t worry about it. That’s why I bought the Land Rover. We’re fine to drive back to the city today. Don’t worry.”

Even her reminding him of the pleasures of riding in his dream car didn’t change his mind. He wasn’t worried about the drive. He just didn’t want to leave.

“Or, we could stay another day,” he suggested.

“We have work. You have clients.”

“So?” He shrugged.

She cringed but looked tempted. He took that as a good sign.

“Won’t we get in trouble?” she asked.

“Of course not,” he dismissed. “I’m a partner. Alonso Pereira doesn’t dictate my schedule, even if he is technically above me in the company. And you are with me, so we’re fine.”

“I don’t know…”

“You weren’t hired yet, but during the pandemic we all worked from home for over a year. We set our own hours. As long as we took care of what needed to get done, it was fine. Can’t you take care of anything critical from here?”

“Yes. I can. But—”

“So can I,” he interrupted her protest.

The condition of his cell phone was less than optimal at the moment, but it worked well enough. He could receive and make calls.

Funny thing was, since he hadn't been calling and leaving messages for people who felt compelled to call back, he hadn't gotten a single work phone call this weekend.

His bedroom also came with an older model iPad—another hand-me-down he guessed. But it connected to the internet and the browser worked so he'd been able to log in to his work email inbox. And if he really wanted to, he could check up on his clients or research potential new clients on the social media apps on the iPad—he just hadn't found that he wanted to.

He focused back on Merry. She was torn, he could see that. Which meant she could be swayed.

“Come on. Let's play hooky and stay an extra day. We can be back in the city tomorrow night and be at our desks Tuesday morning. No one will even miss us.”

“It's not playing hooky,” she clarified. “I'm going to do a few hours of work this afternoon and tomorrow morning to make up for missing a day.”

“So you're one of those. An over-achieving rule follower.” He smiled.

“He's sure got your number.” Her grandfather chuckled. “Merry was the one who spent her snow days getting ahead in her schoolwork.”

“I went outside too,” she protested.

“For about an hour, then you'd come in for hot cocoa. But the three of us did have some epic snowman building contests back in the day,” Beth said, walking in with her own cup.

Xander's eyes widened as he spun to Merry. “Can we have one today?”

“A snowman building contest? You—you'd really want to?” Merry sputtered.

“Yes. Yes, we can,” Beth jumped in. She pulled a cell phone out of a hidden pocket in her leggings. “I'll call Eddie

and get him over here with Anna. Then I'll wake Brian up. We can have couples' teams. I love this idea!"

Xander shot a satisfied glance in Merry's direction. "Guess it's settled then. We're staying an extra day and we're building snowmen."

A frown creased the skin between her eyebrows. "Who are you and what have you done with Alexander Barrington?"

"I'm deep, baby. Like an onion. So many layers to peel." As he grinned at the change in her expression at being called *baby*, her grandfather chuckled.

Fun. There was no other word to describe it all. This place. This family. And especially this woman.

With all he had in his life back in the city, the one thing he hadn't realized he'd been missing was fun. But that was going to change.

CHAPTER 17



The Land Rover's vents pumped hot air at her face and feet, but that wasn't the reason for the fire burning inside Merry. The man seated next to her for the past three hours was.

She glanced sideways at Xander in the passenger seat.

He was wearing jeans with a turtleneck under one of the flannel shirts from the guest room and staring out the side window at the passing scenery.

The feeling of warmth spread through her, starting in her cheeks, working its way down her chest and settling in the long-neglected area between her thighs.

Why did it have to be flannel?

She might have been able to control herself if he'd been in his City Xander clothes. But this strange lumberjack lust that flannel-clad Upstate Xander inspired was strong.

Another change struck her, besides his sudden preference for soft warm faded flannel that made her want to reach out and touch the bulging bicep she'd never noticed beneath his suit jackets at the office.

His cell phone.

Where was it? Why wasn't it attached to his hand like it had been on the drive Friday? In fact, now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen it out the whole weekend.

It was like a Christmas miracle. Or a dream.

Was she still asleep having a bourbon-spiked egg nog inspired dream in her childhood bedroom? The room with the little league trophies still on a shelf along with her Harry Potter hardcover collection. With the lavender painted ceiling she'd insisted on when they wouldn't let her paint the wood paneling on the walls purple.

She was about to ask him about it, if only so she could make sense of this strange new Xander to preserve her own sanity, but her cellphone rang out loud and clear through the in-dash stereo system's Bluetooth.

Cringing, she glanced at Xander. "It's Eddie. Sorry. I should answer."

He turned to her. "No problem. Go ahead."

The last thing she wanted to do was to put any of her family members on speakerphone with Xander in the car and give them the power to embarrass her, but she didn't see that she had any choice.

She hit the button to answer and said very pointedly, "Hi, Eddie. You're on speakerphone."

"You're not back to the city yet?" Eddie's disconnected voice broadcast through the car's speakers.

"We don't all drive the speed of light the way you do, Eddie."

"Hey, Xander. Does she have the cruise control set on sixty-seven miles an hour?"

Xander leaned over and glanced at the dashboard. "Looks like." He smiled at her and mumbled, "Rule follower."

She scowled, then moved her attention back to her brother's intrusion into her drive. "Was there a reason you called, oh brother mine?"

"Yes. This is a head's up that I'm emailing you the final schedule for Legends Weekend. Thought you'd want to know so you can update the website."

"All right. I'll be sure to take care of that."

“You’re the best, sis.”

“I know. Talk soon. Bye.”

“Wait. I want to bother you more—”

“Nope. Bye!” She disconnected before Eddie said anything else.

The radio switched back to the twenty-four-hour Christmas station she’d had on before the call had interrupted as Xander’s gaze darted sideways.

“Legends Weekend, huh. Sounds intriguing. What kind of legends are we talking about?”

“Baseball.”

“Ah. Like Gregory, your ex.”

“Jeffrey,” she corrected, knowing it wouldn’t do any good.

Xander could shake a dozen hands in the boardroom and remember every one of their names. That he couldn’t seem to remember Jeff’s was clearly by design.

“I do some volunteer work for the Baseball Hall of Fame,” she explained.

“Very civic minded of you.”

“I try,” she returned as the GPS announced they’d reached their destination. “And we’re here.”

“So we are.” He turned to face her as he unbuckled the seatbelt. “You wanna come in?”

“Come inside?” she asked. To his place?

“Yes.” He nodded, amusement in his tone.

Nope. Well, yes. She did. But she didn’t trust herself to. They’d done too good of a job pretending they were dating for her family. Her body believed it and wanted the fringe benefits that came with having a real steady boyfriend.

“Or not,” he said, his gaze feeling like an X-ray machine scanning her mind and all the thoughts racing through it as she had yet to answer him.

“I, uh, better get home. You know, to update that website.”

“Ah, yes. The legends of baseball shouldn’t have to wait for any man...or woman.” He managed to mostly maintain a deadpan expression but she didn’t miss the mocking levity in his tone.

Just when she was afraid he might call out the real reason for her hesitation—that she couldn’t resist his flannel-covered body—he stretched into the backseat for his bag.

She watched as, bag in hand, he reached for the handle and swung the door open.

Standing the sidewalk in front of his brownstone—and dammit she really did want to see inside there because it was probably just like Carrie’s in *Sex and the City*—Xander leaned inside.

“Thanks for the ride and for the weekend.”

“Thank you for being so convincing,” she replied. “Consider your part of our deal fulfilled.”

His brows twitched up. “We’ll see.”

“Wait, what?”

He didn’t hear her question. Or he ignored it as he slammed the door. She leaned forward in her seat and watched as he headed up the stairs to the door of his brownstone, keys in his hand.

What had he meant? She resisted the urge to text and ask. She was convinced his phone must be dead anyway since he hadn’t looked at it once during the drive.

She waited and watched. She saw him swing the door open and deliver a quick wave of an arm before closing it again with him on the other side.

With no non-stalker-like reason to remain there staring up at his building, even though she had kind of wanted to wait for a light to go on so she could maybe see inside, she pulled away from the curb.

Tomorrow at the office, with Xander back in city-mode, everything would return to normal.

She hoped.

CHAPTER 18



Xander swung open the door of the taxi and extended one leg, then remembered it was winter in New York and more likely than not there'd be some sort of slushy mess along the curb.

He glanced down and indeed there was. Extending his leg over it, he stepped safely onto the sidewalk and slammed the door behind him. Satisfied with his victory, small though it was, he found himself whistling as he made his way across the stream of pedestrians and to the door of the office building.

There he paused as the clang of a bell caught his attention.

It was early, barely nine a.m., but Sidewalk Santa had already set up for the day.

He rang his bell with an energy that would likely be depleted by the time Xander left for the day. That would probably be sometime after six tonight—*if* the west coast didn't want to Zoom in the afternoon their time, forgetting that would be evening his time.

But Xander had been in and out of this door enough times this December to know no matter how late he left, Santa was still there. Ringing his bell, collecting coins and small bills in the city that never sleeps.

That kind of dedication deserved some recognition. And as much as he hated the added noise in a city that already had too much, he was going to offer that recognition. Today.

It was a cold one. Not as cold as upstate when the wind whipping past his face on the snowmobile had felt like ice

daggers leaving a thousand cuts on any exposed skin. But still cold to be standing outside all day, even covered in a red velvet suit.

He hadn't been in the Starbucks on the corner more than a handful of times because they had decent coffee in the break room upstairs, but today he wouldn't mind a cappuccino with an extra shot of espresso, extra foam, sprinkled with cinnamon. Merry had made him one at her house and now, if his craving was any indication, he was hooked.

Pivoting, he headed toward the familiar green logo and pushed open the glass door. When the barista asked what he wanted, he ordered his drink, then said, "Two of those, please."

Grabbing a handful of sugar and sugar substitute packets and shoving them in his pocket, he carried the two paper cups outside and directly over to the big guy himself.

"Morning."

Santa turned at the greeting. "Good morning."

"I thought you could use something warm to drink. Chilly out here." He thrust one cup forward.

After a brief hesitation, Santa took it. "Uh, thanks."

"Oh, wait." Xander shoved his hand in his pocket and offered the multi-colored jumble of packets to the man. "Here."

Santa's brows rose as he set his bell down and opened his palm to accept Xander's offering. "Thanks."

"One more thing," Xander switched his own coffee to the other hand and plunged his now free hand into his other pocket. He drew out a ten-dollar bill, his change from buying the coffee and shoved it into the slot of the red kettle. "For the pot."

The shadow of surprise remained on Santa's face, what Xander could see past the beard. But to be fair, that look had been there since he'd handed him the coffee.

Santa recovered and said, "Bless you."

He'd been expecting a Merry Christmas, but the blessing threw him.

What was the proper response to that?

He wasn't sure. To his knowledge no one had ever blessed him before, so he winged it. "Bless you too. And Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," Santa replied with a smile.

Feeling good, Xander headed inside and upstairs.

Another mood lifting event awaited him—maybe this karma thing was real. The box containing his new cell phone sat on his desk.

He lifted the crisp white box hermetically sealed in clear wrap just as Merry paused in the doorway and said shyly, "Hi."

Today, she was in yet another themed sweater and he mentally kicked himself for not sneaking into her room and taking inventory of her full collection. It must number in the dozens.

Missed opportunity.

Remembering the weekend, and how easily he could make her blush, and how soft her lips were beneath his, he smiled, honestly happy to see her. "Good morning."

Her gaze swept him and she was silent for a moment before stuttering out, "You look, um, very nice."

This woman, who'd come up with catchy lines and viral posts, increasing the company's social media following by ten percent monthly in each of the six months since coming onboard—he knew because he checked—couldn't come up with a better description than *very nice*?

Why was that?

"Do I?" He glanced down at his gray wool trousers topped with a black sweater that matched his black Italian leather shoes.

"Yeah. Casual. Not the usual buttoned up Office Xander."

“Office Xander?”

“As opposed to Weekend Xander,” she explained.

“Ah.” He nodded.

After working most weekends for years, there hadn’t felt like much of a difference, until now. Until her.

“I don’t have any in-person client meetings today so I thought I’d forgo the suit,” he explained.

True, but in reality, he was also trying to ease himself back into work mode after the relaxing work-free long weekend he’d spent in borrowed clothing that had started to feel far too comfortable.

The two-hundred-dollar cashmere sweater was his compromise. And of course, Merry had noticed.

She might be shy, reserved when she was Office Merry, but she was quick and bright and very observant.

Then there was Weekend Merry. He remembered her fondly. In fact, he was looking forward to seeing her again. Soon.

“Thank you for the compliment,” he said. “I’m very glad you approve of my alternate work look.”

Her cheeks-tinged pink. He enjoyed that as he took note that her hair once again looked fabulous. Sleek and straight, the cut making it bouncy and alive, the color taking her from cute to show stopping.

“New cell?” she asked knocking him out of his mental inventory of all he liked about Mariah Clark.

Clearing his throat, he went back to his losing battle against the cellophane covering the new phone’s box. “Yeah. My screen’s all smashed. I ordered a new one and had it sent here.”

He finally gave up trying to break through the wrappings with just his fingernails and started looking for a scissor inside his desk drawer.

“Ah. That explains a lot,” she said as she watched the process from the doorway.

He glanced up. “Such as?”

Merry shrugged. “Like why you weren’t glued to your phone all weekend or on the drive back to the city. I was starting to worry you were having some sort of existential crisis. Glad to see it’s nothing.”

He frowned, feeling somehow like he’d been insulted. He refused to give Merry the satisfaction of mentioning that.

The reality was he really hadn’t missed not being on his cell the past three days.

“No crisis here,” he answered, pulling his broken phone out of his pocket so he could transfer the information over.

She eyed the cracked device on the desk. “Eek. That’s really smashed. When did that happen?”

“When I fell at your house.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“It worked enough I could receive calls and check messages. No big deal.” He shrugged.

She took a step inside, and then another.

The air stirred and he got a whiff of something sweet. Perfume? No. Not perfume. Hair product. He’d smelled it on his last girlfriend.

Last girlfriend?

He reminded himself Merry and he were not dating as she continued, “Seriously, Xander. My family should have had that driveway salted before we arrived. Then you wouldn’t have fallen. Let me pay for your new phone.”

Forcing his attention back to the conversation and not the fact he liked her inside his office—a visit from her was much more pleasant than when Evan stopped by—he said, “No need. I have the insurance plan. They replaced it for free.”

She chewed on that information for a moment. “I still feel bad.”

Seeing an opportunity, he jumped on it. “Well, maybe you can make it up to me some other way.”

Her gaze snapped to his, suspicious, wary. “What other way?”

“Help me with my Christmas shopping?” The endorphins raged as he basked in his own brilliance.

The solution accomplished so many things. It was a win-win, for both of them.

One, like it or not, his shopping needed to get done and he really hated doing it. The crowds in the stores this time of year sucked. Even when he tried shopping online, he never knew what to get. He ended up sending gift cards.

Two, it was a good excuse to spend more time with Merry, which he was finding he craved more and more.

And three, the look on her face at his suggestion—as if she’d just won the lottery—was worth a hundred broken phones. She wanted to make it up to him. And she loved Christmas shopping.

He’d seen her in action at the tux shop that first day, buying bow ties for Eddie, her father and Grandpa.

Now that he knew these men, and their personalities, he so wanted to see them all wearing their matching Christmas bowties together.

Like them or not, they’d wear the gift because they loved their Merry Lee. It would be hysterical.

Meanwhile, Merry was all smiles. “Uh, yes! Of course I’ll help you shop. Oh my God. I can’t wait to take you to my favorite Christmas market. We’ll still have to go to the old standby department stores too, of course.”

“Of course.” He laughed at her enthusiasm.

She beamed like a kid on Christmas morning but it was over the thought of buying gifts, not opening them, that had

her so excited.

“When’s a good time for you?” he asked, actually not dreading the task.

“Any day. Any time. I’m all yours.”

All his. It was an offer he wasn’t about to refuse.

CHAPTER 19



Merry had one addiction—besides Christmas itself—and that was binge watching all of the many Christmas movies that appeared beginning in October.

The movies where the girl and the guy collide in some sort of hilarious meet cute that throws them out of their everyday lives. They don't get along at first, but then through an event or a common goal bringing them together to work as a team, they grow closer.

Then *bam!* Something bad comes between them, which occurs at almost exactly eighty percent into the movie, without fail. But it's all right because the viewer knows that by the end all is well. The blissfully happy couple kiss and live happily ever after.

There was no risk watching those kinds of movies. No fear. No John Wick dead puppy or Nicholas Sparks tear-jerker ending. She knew what to expect and she liked it that way.

It didn't matter if the plots and the actors became so familiar, so repetitive, she couldn't be sure if she'd seen it already or if it were new. She was certain she'd walk away from the experience feeling good.

The problem was, she didn't know what to expect when it came to Xander. And she definitely wasn't sure she'd walk away from this experience happy.

If this were a Christmas movie, the shopping excursion she'd agreed to would bring them closer until they fell madly

into a love that eventually conquered all obstacles. A guaranteed happily ever after.

Her life was not a Christmas movie. And dating—fake dating—Xander felt more like she was walking blindly into the elevator in *Die Hard* than into some small-town sweet shop where she'd meet the love of her life on the Hallmark Channel.

This was dangerous. He was dangerous.

Wanting him, liking him, spending extra time with him was a disaster waiting to happen. Before she knew it she'd be walking barefoot in broken glass like John McClane—figuratively speaking. Because Xander dated models. And even though he looked amazing in old flannel, his real casual wear of choice was high end cashmere.

And yes, he went one weekend without obsessing over work or being glued to his cell phone, but since returning to the office she hadn't seen him without his Bluetooth headset blinking in his ear as he paced and talked inside his corner office.

That was why she definitely should not have made a list of places for them to go shopping starting tonight. But she had because the fact he hadn't even bought one gift yet and it was less than two weeks until Christmas was giving her heart palpitations.

The list—agenda really—was currently held in Xander's hand.

She watched the kaleidoscope of reactions change and morph upon his face.

“Too much?” she asked.

Unlike her, Xander only needed a handful of gifts, but she'd included a bunch of places they could go—should go—just because.

A person couldn't live in Manhattan and not see everything there was that made the city so special during this time of year. It was a sin.

She'd chosen to ease him into it. She'd presented the list to him during their first fun Christmas activity—drinking a decadent and much too sweet holiday coffee from Starbucks (her treat) while they stood in the queue to view the window displays at Saks Fifth Avenue.

“Not too much. No,” he said slowly, stretching the word out as he turned the page over to read the back. “But I am wondering why we’re standing out here instead of going inside to shop.”

“Because seeing the windows is all part of the experience of going to Saks.”

He lifted his dark brows. “We could go in and shop first, then by the time we’re done maybe this line will be gone.”

“We could, but we’re almost up to the front so let’s just hang here. We can take the time to go over your gift list.”

“All right,” he agreed on an exhale.

“I think we’ll be able to get something for your assistant and your mother here.”

“Do you?” he said more than asked, the skepticism clear in his tone.

“You don’t think so?” she asked.

“My assistant, probably. My mother—the hardest woman in the world to shop for—doubtful.”

“Tell me about her.” Even good old standby gifts, such as a scarf or perfume, required knowing more about the recipient.

“Let’s see. Let me go back in my memory and excavate the handful of Christmases I actually spent with my parents.”

Rolling her eyes, Merry said, “Just give me some personal details and stop exaggerating.”

The stare he leveled on her was devoid of humor. “I wish I were. Exaggerating.”

“You’re serious.”

“I am.” He nodded.

His answer took the breath from her lungs. “So what did you do—where did you go—if you weren’t with your parents?”

“My grandparents’ place, while they were still alive. Boarding school friends’ houses after they’d passed. Luxury resort vacations more recently.”

“And this year?”

“This year was busy. Time got away from me. I never got around to booking a trip. Plus, there’s the Christmas wedding. We’ll see. Maybe I’ll hop on a flight to Hawaii. Or Banff since I’ve been exposed to the pleasures of snow and snowmobiles thanks to you and your family.”

“You’d go alone?” She couldn’t imagine anything lonelier.

His gaze darted to her then away. “I’m not afraid of being alone.”

“It has nothing to do with fear. It has to do with joy.”

He held up the paper. “After this list, I’m not sure I’ll be able to handle much more *joy*.”

The line crept forward another foot. Xander pointedly took a single step forward then stopped.

They were going to be there a while. She might as well use the time. “Where is your mom right now?”

“St. Moritz, as usual.”

“You could fly to be with them—”

“The fact they purchased a one bedroom was a pretty good indication I’m not welcome.”

Okay. There was tension there so no surprise visit. She drew in a breath and regrouped. “So she skis?”

He wobbled his head. “She likes to dress like she does while hanging around the ski lodge drinking when she’s not back at the slope side accommodations watching the skiers—also while drinking. Does that count?”

“Perhaps.” Her mind started to work as a clearer picture of the woman who had everything began to solidify in her mind. “What does she drink?”

“Anything and everything.”

“And your dad, the same?”

“Yes. He’ll actually do a few runs then join her in the lodge.”

“Okay, one more question. How much do you want to spend?” It might seem like a rude question but she needed to know. The answer would dictate her suggestions.

“To find gifts to make my parents happy? The sky’s the limit.”

“Perfect.” She smiled, an idea forming.

“Is it?” he asked, amused.

“You’ll see.”

“*If* we get up there before the store closes for the night,” he mumbled.

“We will. It moves fast once you get to the windows. This isn’t my first time.”

“I never for a moment assumed it was.” He laughed. “In fact, how many times will this make this year for you?”

“Three,” she mumbled.

He shook his head. “And is it worth it?”

“Worth every second.”

His lips twitching with a smile, he nodded. “All right. I trust you.”

That might be the most romantic thing he could have said to her.

Not a romance, the little voice inside her shouted.

She told the annoyingly truthful voice to pipe down and didn’t let it squelch her feeling of satisfaction.

CHAPTER 20



“Can’t you just pick one for me?” Xander realized that had come out sounding like a whine and added, “Please?” As if that would make it sound better.

“She’s *your* assistant. I’ve stood you right in front of what I suggested you get for her. All you have to do is choose one. Seriously, Xander, it’s not that hard.”

“It’s not easy either,” he countered mostly to himself as he wondered why Merry got to sit in the chair playing on her cell phone while he was faced with about a hundred options he was supposed to choose from.

Did he go for the practical and useful or the decadent and impractical? What he thought she would like best or what he liked best himself?

This was ridiculous.

If he was having this much trouble choosing something for his damn assistant at work, what hope did he have finding something for his parents?

He turned, about to point that out to Merry when something on the next counter caught his eye. He skirted around the display that had been torturing him and moved toward the new item.

“What are you doing?” she asked, barely glancing up from her cell.

“Getting the gift.”

“No,” she said with a definitive shake of her head.

“What do you mean, no?”

“Perfume is too personal a gift for you, a handsome single man who is also her boss, to give to your young also single assistant. Go back to the scarves and gloves. They’re safe.”

“Safe. You’re the one who said to have fun. Maybe perfume is more fun than a scarf,” he mumbled as he stomped back to the scarves, where he paused and glanced over at her. “So, you think I’m handsome, huh?”

“Not the point,” she said.

He was prepared to argue that when she stood and walked over to him.

“Okay. For your parents. I can get an appropriately wrapped gift basket containing a bottle of Krug Champagne from the Badrutt’s Palace Hotel Wine Cellar and a pair of matching his-and-her Dior slippers delivered to them Christmas morning in St. Moritz.”

He turned to face her, wide-eyed. “How can you manage that?”

She ignored his question and asked one of her own. “Do you like the idea?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think they’ll like it?”

He shrugged. “They should. Alcohol and designer labels are right up their alley.”

“You sure?”

He nodded. It was better than the Brookstone’s gift card he’d sent them last year. He was pretty sure they’d agree.

“All right. I’ll tell them it’s a go. They’ll need your credit card number.”

“Fine. You’ll need my parents’ address in St. Moritz too.”

“Already got it.”

“How?”

“From your assistant.”

“Seriously, Merry, how are you getting this all done from here sitting in that chair with just your phone?”

“I’m just that good.” She smiled. “And I know people.”

“People in St. Moritz?” he asked, but she was too busy studying the selection of cashmere scarves in front of them to respond.

She picked up one in a deep shade that was not quite red, but not really purple either and thrust it toward him. “This one.”

“You think? It’s awfully bright.” He frowned.

“Magenta is Pantone’s color of the year. Besides, it’s a friendly color. She’ll love it. Trust me.”

“*A friendly* color. All right. If you say so.” He took the scarf and carried it to the register, handing it over along with his credit card.

“Can we also get a gift box, please?” she asked the person ringing them up, something he would have completely forgotten to ask for if she hadn’t been here.

“You’re good at this,” he said, handing over his credit card to her once the sales associate gave it back to him.

“I know.” She smiled, taking the card and going back to sit with her phone to complete the transatlantic transaction.

“Your wife has excellent taste. We can’t keep this color in stock this season,” the man behind the counter said as he placed a shopping bag containing the gift on the counter.

“Oh, she’s—” Xander was about to correct the clerk’s misconception when he stopped himself.

He and Merry were already fake dating. Why not pretend to be married?

“She’s a very good shopper,” he finished, as he took the bag. But before he turned away from the counter, he said, “Merry Christmas.”

The man smiled. “Merry Christmas to you as well, sir. You and your wife enjoy the rest of your shopping.”

“Oh, we will.” He floated back over to his *wife* and collapsed into the chair next to hers, holding up the bag. “Done.”

“Done,” she echoed, handing him back his card with a wide smile as she peeked past the tissue paper at the beribboned gift box inside.

“What has you so smiley?” he asked. “Besides spending my money both here and abroad, that is.”

“It’s silly.” She dismissed his question and moved to stand.

Intrigued, he said, “No, tell me.”

Standing, she glanced back at him. “It’s just...I love shopping bags,” she confessed. “It doesn’t feel like Christmas unless I’m loaded down with bags full of gifts.”

She was absolutely adorable. All bright eyed and dressed in yet another sweater—he had yet to see her repeat one—all excited over shopping and, in particular, shopping bags.

It made him want to keep that kid on Christmas morning look on her face for as long as possible. “All right, then. Let’s go get us some more bags.”

He stood too.

“But you only had three people on the list and they’re done.”

“Then I’ll come up with some more people. How are you with wedding gifts?”

Her eyes widened. “For the Christmas wedding?”

“The very same.”

A smile spread across her face. “Just give me the bride and groom’s names and I’m on it.”

“I have no doubt. The bride is Chelsea Calhoun and the groom—”

“Rex Buchanan. Got them.” Her smile grew impossibly wider as she raised her gaze to his. “What do you think about a gift from Tiffany?”

“I think we’re going to be adding something blue to our shopping bag collection shortly.”

“Yay!”

“Did you just say *yay*?” He laughed.

“It’s Tiffany. There’s a lot to say *yay* about. Come on. Tick-tock, time’s a ticking. Let’s go.” She tapped a fingertip to her bare wrist where a watch would be if she wore one.

“So bossy,” he said as he followed behind Merry, smiling the whole way outside.

Half an hour later, Merry and the saleswoman had their heads bent together as they debated the perfect font for the engraving of the silver punch bowl they’d selected from Rex and Chelsea’s gift registry while Xander stood happily at a distance, uninvolved except for his contribution of handing over his credit card.

Where they were and what they were doing made the name that appeared on his cell’s screen surprising. “Well, this is a coincidence.”

After a pause, Rex asked, “A good coincidence or a bad coincidence?”

Xander frowned. “What, exactly, would constitute a bad coincidence about your calling me right at this moment?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you were about to call me to tell me you broke your leg and can’t stand at the altar with me.”

“Nope. I’d stand there in a cast and crutches if I had to.”

“You’re patient zero for the newest pandemic and the doctors have you locked down in quarantine?”

“Nope. I’m healthy as a horse.”

“Then there’s only one thing left. Your wedding date fell through, you’re attending the rehearsal dinner and the wedding alone and my mother is going to swoop in with one of her matches for you. She’ll never let me hear the end of it that she had to save the day with her matchmaking skills. I’ll be hearing it every Christmas and anniversary until the day I die

—because there is no doubt in my mind she’ll outlive me. But it’s fine. Don’t worry.”

“Are you done?” Xander asked.

“Not even close.”

“You know I have a date. I texted you her name for the all-important place card calligraphers. She did not *fall through*, as you say. In fact, she’s currently having a great time running up the balance on my black card buying your wedding gift.”

Merry glanced up and saw him looking her way. She wiggled her fingers at him in a little wave. Smiling, he returned the gesture and didn’t even feel ridiculous doing it.

“Huh. Not what I expected to hear,” Rex said.

“Which part?”

“All of it. You shopping. With a woman who you really sound like you like. And that you’re taking the time to buy a gift. I figured I’d get a check in a card in the mail in a couple of months when you finally remembered and got around to it.”

“Hey,” he said, insulted. “And I already bought the card.”

“*You* went card shopping?”

“Fine.” Xander huffed. “My assistant bought the card for me. But I asked her to.”

Now that he thought about it, Merry was right about that cashmere scarf in the friendly color. His assistant deserved a nice Christmas gift for all the non-work-related shit he had her do for him.

“That’s more like it.” Rex chuckled. “I look forward to your gift. And I’m especially looking forward to meeting this new girlfriend.”

For the second time that night, Xander had opportunity to correct someone’s misconception about him and Merry and for the second time he didn’t.

That confirmed something he’d begun to suspect. Their relationship might have begun as pretend, but he didn’t want it to stay that way.

“Speaking of my girlfriend—I’ve gotta go. I’ve got a last-minute dinner reservation to wrangle.”

“Ah, yes. I remember it well. The wining and dining phase when you’re still trying to impress her. Enjoy it, Xan. Before you know it you’re eating cold take-out while rearranging your cousin’s seating assignment because your aunt’s insulted by where you put her for the reception.”

“Jesus. You’re not exactly selling me on married life.”

“Oh, married life is going to be a breeze compared to this wedding. Talk soon.”

“Indeed we will.” Xander disconnected and navigated on the screen to his browser.

He found the listing for the restaurant at Rockefeller Center and placed the call.

It took some name dropping—as in the biggest name client he and Paragon had on the roster—but a few minutes later he’d secured a window table with a view of the skating rink and the Christmas tree for that night.

Of all the places he could have taken Merry for dinner—places with better food, more exclusive, more expensive, less crowded, less touristy—he had a feeling *this* would make her the happiest.

A rink side view of one of the most iconic Manhattan Christmas experiences—she was gonna love it!

CHAPTER 21



“So you’re not going to tell me where we’re going?” Merry asked as they made their way down the city sidewalk.

“It’s a surprise. Don’t you like surprises?”

“Usually.” She just wasn’t sure she wanted any from Xander.

“We’re almost there.” He glanced at her. “At least I didn’t insist on blindfolding you.”

She shook her head. “Not gonna happen.”

“Chicken.” He grinned and she thought again how she’d rarely seen him smile while at the office. Maybe he wasn’t all-around grumpy. He was just a work grump.

“Not chicken. Smart,” she said in response to his teasing.

“Well, it doesn’t matter anyway. We’re here.”

They’d reached Rockefeller Center where every December a massive freshly cut evergreen stood sentry as the Prometheus statue kept a watchful eye over the ice rink and tourists below.

This place, steeped in history, was quintessential NYC at Christmas and she felt her pulse speed with excitement.

Even now, when she technically lived here, the city caused an excitement within her just like when she’d been a child and the whole family would drive in from Cooperstown and spend a weekend, or sometimes a week, in the apartment in the

Dakota, doing all the things that made New York so special this time of year.

Her eyes widened and she turned to him, gripping his arm. “Are we going ice skating?”

He frowned at the enthusiasm in her question. “No. We have reservations for dinner here. Did you *want* to go skating?” he asked, warily.

“Honestly, I prefer Wollman Rink. But yes, I do enjoy ice skating. Don’t tell me you do.”

“Why do you ask it like that?”

“You don’t seem like the type.”

His brows rose. “I’ll have you know, I’m an excellent skater. One day I’ll take you to Wollman Rink and prove it to you. I played ice hockey once upon a time.”

“*That* I really can’t picture.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Miss Merry Lee.”

She ignored his use of the name her annoying brother had shared with him and decided to change the subject.

“Which restaurant?” she asked, referring to the dinner he’d mentioned.

She could definitely eat. Shopping worked up an appetite and it had been a long time since lunch.

“Jupiter. We have a table rink level.” He opened the door of the restaurant.

She felt the blast of heat compared to the cold outdoors as she ducked past him and inside. “Really? Yay! I’ve been dying to eat there.”

He smirked. “Another *yay*. I guess I chose well. And dinner is on me. A thank you for your helping me shop.”

“Pfft. No thanks necessary. I loved every minute of it.”

“You did, didn’t you?”

“Loved shopping? Of course. What’s not to love?”

He laughed at that. “Where do I begin?”

Enticing aromas tickled her nose and had her empty stomach growling. Garlic mingled with the scent of seared steak. Garlic that was sure to give them both bad breath, not that they’d be kissing or anything.

That thought fled as a server carried past a basket of what she hoped was warm focaccia—warm bread was her weakness. It was delivered to a nearby table as her mouth watered.

Swallowing, she watched as Xander approached the podium. The din of diners made it impossible to hear but she assumed he’d given his name to the hostess, who gave him an appraising head-to-toe look in return.

Merry took note of a couple of women seated nearby also tracking Xander’s progress as he moved back to her.

There was no doubt about it. Alexander Barrington cut a dashing figure. He was like a modern-day Mr. Darcy. Aloof. Self-absorbed. But tempting none-the-less.

“Follow me,” the hostess said after an interested glance at Merry when she realized she was Xander’s dinner companion.

It was as if the woman was trying to decide how the two of them fit together. Him all in black in a long wool coat over a cashmere sweater. Her with her red puffy jacket over her colorfully embellished Christmas sweater.

“Ready?” He pressed his hand to her back as they followed a distance behind the hostess leading them. “She promised us the best table in the house. Rink side.”

Merry lifted her brow. “Because she thinks you’re hot.”

“Really?” His gaze remained fixed on Merry as he said, “The joke’s on her, because I’m not interested in fake dating anyone else besides *you*.”

He smiled as he laid his arm around her shoulders, pulled her close and pressed a surprising kiss to the top of her head.

Maybe not so aloof after all.

Her heart pounded out a staccato as they slipped between tables to reach their own, where he took her coat and held the chair for her.

Once they were both seated, the hostess and her judgmental eyebrows left them with two menus and a male server approached.

“Hello. My name is Fred. Can I get you something to drink to start?”

The server had the look of a man who’d been around for a while. Who’d seen the good, the bad and the ugly of waiting tables during Christmas in Manhattan and survived to serve another day, sticking it out because the money to be made was worth the hassle.

“Wine?” Xander asked, reaching for the wine list while glancing at her. “Perhaps a bottle of red?”

“Yes, please,” she said with relief.

She was going to need it because Xander was proving to have many sides to him. And this newest one he’d revealed tonight, the considerate romantic, was going to be impossible to resist.

They started with marinated olives and an order of focaccia. His suggestion with which she agreed wholeheartedly even if his choosing the appetizers made her momentarily wonder if he was the kind of guy who liked to do all the ordering on a date.

Not that this was that. A date. Far from it. But still—she was ordering the main course for herself. She already knew what she wanted.

When the server looked to her she said, “The Pansotti di Zucca, please.”

Basically, that was a fancy name for pumpkin ravioli. As excited as she was anticipating the meal, the restaurant lost points for not just saying plainly what the dish was for the patrons who didn’t understand snooty-restaurant-menu-speak.

Xander ordered the seafood risotto then turned to her, smiling.

“Why do you look so pleased?” she asked, eyes narrowed.

“I’m pleased because, for the first time in possibly forever, I’m sitting in a restaurant across from a woman who eats carbs. And I am particularly pleased because I wanted to try the Pansotti so, fair warning, I’ll be stealing a taste.”

Her brows shot high. “We’ll see about that. And what are you saying? Six-foot-tall size zero supermodels don’t eat ravioli? I’m shocked.” She pressed a palm to her chest to further express her overt shock before leaning forward and shaking her head in commiseration. “It must have been so hard on you. How did you ever survive dating models for so many years?”

He rolled his eyes but couldn’t completely hide his smile. “Jealous?” he asked.

“Hungry,” she replied. “Where’s that focaccia? It’s been hours—hours, I say—since my last carb.”

“All right. I’m sorry I said anything.”

Her lips twitched. “No. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t tease. I am a little jealous. I can’t use any of the upper cabinets in my apartment because I’m too short. Oh, to be six feet tall. Think of all the extra space for my Christmas coffee mug collection.”

His eyes flicked wider. “Good Lord. There’s a Christmas mug collection too?”

“There is.” She grinned proudly.

“Is it as extensive as the Christmas sweater collection?”

“Even bigger,” she told him.

He drew in a breath. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I think I might need to see that. Purely out of curiosity, of course.”

“Of course. And I’m happy to show you anytime. Just my little way of spreading Christmas cheer to the cheerless grinchers of the world, such as yourself.”

“And you’re so good at it too,” he said, staring pointedly at her sweater.

“Thank you.” She accepted the compliment knowing full well it was at least equal parts insult. “But I will say, you’re getting better.”

“Am I? At what, exactly?”

“Christmas. You were patient today with the crowds and the shopping, even when I made you wait in line to see the windows.”

“I still say we could have gone back later tonight and seen them without waiting—”

“*And*,” she continued, cutting off his grumbled comment. “You were almost downright merry over the weekend upstate.”

This time there was no grumbling. Just a small smile as he reached out and covered her hand with his. “Maybe I just needed a bit of Merry to make me merry.”

There seemed to be something more—deeper—in the joke. Did he mean it to be? Whether he meant it as more or not, judging by the way her heart thundered, that’s how she took it.

And she shouldn’t.

Xander was basically a salesman. He charmed his clients with his good looks and his smooth talking, selling himself and Paragon. It was just second nature to him. That had to be what this was.

He probably didn’t even realize he was doing it. Being charming.

She stared at the place where he touched her and swallowed as he started to trace small circles on the back of her hand with his thumb.

And just like that, she was charmed.

CHAPTER 22



Xander—her fake boyfriend—only compounded her confusion about him later as the taxi pulled in front of her building.

He was in the process of paying the driver. As in, sending the cab away, leaving them both at her place. Meaning he was coming upstairs. With her. At ten o'clock at night.

She watched the yellow taxi drive away then turned to the night doorman for her second realization. He was going to see Xander come inside and go upstairs with her. At ten p.m.. And if he stayed the night, which she'd freely admit she'd thought about more than once—who wouldn't have a fantasy or two about a man who looked like Xander—the doorman would know.

The lack of privacy that came along with the luxuries and conveniences of the Dakota had never hit her until now.

She loved that someone was always there to receive her deliveries and keep them safe for her. But her cheeks heated at the thought that someone was also always there to observe her most private moments, such as Xander's walk of shame in the morning should—by some miracle—he did stay the night.

His shame would be hers as well when she had to face the staff. Look them in the eye and know that they knew she'd had a man here overnight.

She glanced up and found him watching her on the sidewalk where she'd stopped frozen—almost literally since the temperature had dropped markedly as the night went on.

“Shall we?” With the sweep of one arm he indicated the front door and the warmth it promised, as well as the doorman, who’d come out and was standing outside in the cold waiting to open that door for them.

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

She could barely meet the night doorman’s gaze as he swept the door wide, saying, “Miss. Sir. Cold one, tonight.”

“Um, yes. It is. Thank you, Murray.”

“My pleasure, miss. Have a good night.”

She imagined there was a smirk in his tone and spun back to see if there was also one on his face, but all she saw was a hard-working man facing a long cold shift.

Xander glanced back himself before frowning down at her. “Everything okay?”

“Sure. Yup. Fine.”

She strode fast toward the elevator, grateful the concierge not being on duty this late saved her from further embarrassment.

Inside the elevator, Xander faced straight ahead. So did she as she tried to ignore how closely he stood. How her shoulder kept bumping into his arm as the old elevator jostled its way up to the top floor.

She would have breathed in relief when the ride was over and the doors slowly ground open, except that left them on the threshold of her apartment, where he’d no doubt come inside.

Why else would he have come all the way upstairs when he could have easily said goodbye on the curb after handing her over into the safety of Murray’s care and taken the cab home?

Her hand shook as she fumbled the key, finally getting it into the lock. She swung open the door then turned to look at Xander. Waiting. Wondering.

“Thanks for this...and everything tonight.” He held up the single shopping bag.

The Tiffany wedding gift was being engraved then sent directly to the bride. His parents' gift was being delivered in St. Moritz. So in spite of their goal to collect more bags, all he had in hand was the boxed scarf for his assistant.

But it wasn't the lack of shopping bags that had her attention. It was that Xander still hovered in the hall, acting as if he were saying goodnight.

Just when she'd started to wrap her head around him coming in, he was leaving?

Admittedly, she'd began to imagine his mouth—and his hands—on her. An idea which her body obviously liked by how awake her lady parts felt. She hadn't been sure before but now she was. She wanted him to come in.

Say the words. Invite him in.

In spite of the instructions from the little voice in her head, she only managed to say, "It was fun. Thank *you* for dinner."

"My pleasure." He pressed his lips together for a second, then said, "Goodnight."

Before she could say the word back, he'd closed the distance between them.

Too late, she realized he'd been aiming for her cheek, so when she turned her head, their lips connected.

Mistake or not, neither of them pulled back.

In fact, she might have leaned into it, into him. And he definitely let the bag in his hand drop to the floor so he could grip both her shoulders and hold her tight.

It was like there were puppet strings attached to her hoo-ha and Xander was the puppet master, making her want him more than she'd wanted any man, ever.

A small sound came unbidden from her throat when she felt the warmth of his tongue slip inside her mouth. The sound had him gripping her tighter, closer. Kissing her fiercer. Turning her mouth into a wanton, dirty girl as it got all the loving the rest of her body craved. As if the two body parts

were tethered, the tingling between her legs grew the more intense the kiss became.

She craved him. The void inside her demanded to be filled and nothing short of Xander and the hard length she felt pressing into her stomach would do.

Her coat was unzipped and hanging open but it still felt as if steam were rising from her overheated body, seeping out the neckline of her sweater, no doubt turning her face bright red.

Not that he could see her face with his mouth on hers. Seared in place by the fire burning between them.

Then he dropped his hold, slapped both palms against the doorframe and pushed away. The press of his body against hers was gone. His lips on hers were gone, leaving her alone and missing him as he hung his head down. His posture defeated as he breathed heavily.

“I need to go,” he said, shoving off the doorframe.

He’d already scooped up the shopping bag and turned for the elevator to punch the button by the time she could wrap her head around what was happening.

The elevator hadn’t had time to go anywhere. The doors swooshed open immediately and he stepped on. When he turned around inside to press the button for the lobby their eyes met.

Silence hung heavy in the air before, just as the doors began to close, he said, “See you in the morning.”

The morning. What was happening in the morning?

Words and their meaning eluded her as she tried to recover.

Once the doors were completely closed, blocking the view of Xander, her brain began to function.

Work. He had to have meant work. It was a weekday. She’d forgotten.

She stood in the open doorway for a few seconds more wondering what had just happened before she stepped inside and closed and locked the door behind her.

At least she didn't have to worry about what Murray would think. They would have had the quickest quickie in history to have had sex in that short of a time.

But it was certainly enough time to wreak havoc on her body and her mind.

CHAPTER 23



He'd walked away from her.

Xander shook his head at his own inconceivable actions as he recalled the feel of her mouth under his.

Now, instead of being inside her apartment, warm with a hot woman in his hands, he sat in the back of a taxi that sped him away from the Dakota and Merry and toward his empty house. And empty bed.

He'd said goodnight, kissed the hell out of her, then left even though he wanted nothing more than to stay.

He could tell by the look on her face he'd left her confused. Hell, he was confused too.

But things were far from simple.

He was a partner where she worked and though he wasn't her manager directly, she was still a lower-level employee.

He'd never fished in the office waters before. It was too risky. Too awkward after it ended—which it always inevitably did. His last relationship with Hilary was proof of that.

Dating at work was hard enough nowadays. And dating with that kind of power imbalance? He had to think it wasn't a good idea. They were probably pushing the limits even by *fake* dating.

He sniffed at the thought. At that word. There was nothing *fake* about that kiss. Or about his body's reaction to it. Or about how often his mind—or his gaze—turned to Miss Mariah Clark throughout the day.

Fuck it. He wanted to be with her and human resources would just have to deal with it.

But there was the other thing that kept him from backing her inside that gorgeous apartment and tumbling into what he'd bet was a huge bed in an amazing bedroom— He liked her. A lot.

He didn't want just a casual hookup with her.

His cell vibrated. He glanced down to see Merry had posted on Instagram and tagged him. He tapped the alert and smiled when he saw the picture of them at dinner. They'd taken a selfie with the skating rink behind them.

She'd joked it would help keep up the ruse for her family, snapped the picture and then devoured her second piece of focaccia. And because the bread was warm and freaking amazing, he'd grabbed another piece for himself.

They'd discussed their different preferences for bread products as they'd chewed. He'd never been on a date quite like it.

He saved the picture to his phone's photos and stowed the cell in his coat pocket once again, leaving his hand inside for warmth since the cab's back heating vents were less than stellar. He tried not to return to lamenting about how warm Merry's apartment would have been if he'd chosen to go inside.

As he shoved his other hand in his pocket it encountered the folded piece of paper he'd forgotten about.

Pulling it out, he squinted in the dim light of the cab at the bold title she'd printed at the top. *Merry's Things to do at Christmas in the City* list was on one side and *Xander's Gifts to Buy* list on the other.

Her list was exponentially longer than his. Perhaps he should have added *buy gloves* on his side of the paper since he obviously could use a pair.

As far as her side of the page, they'd barely scratched the surface of what she'd typed and printed out, with graphics.

He skimmed the items again, his brows lifting at a couple of the suggestions—visit Santa at Macy’s stuck out—but he didn’t hate any of them. In fact, a couple sounded not so bad.

Before he knew it, his cell phone was out and he was texting Merry.

It seems I’m woefully ill equipped as far as winter gear. Would you be my personal shopper tomorrow after work? Maybe we could hit up the holiday markets?

He smiled when her response came back in seconds and once again contained the word *yay*. Plus, an excessive number of exclamation points.

Typing a quick, “It’s a date,” he hit send and shoved his hands back in his pockets.

So began a whirlwind of daily after work Christmas activities.

They shopped the markets the following day, but only after—as ridiculous as it had seemed at the time—they got a photo of the two of them with the Macy’s Santa.

Xander now owned more gloves than any man should, although that wasn’t a bad thing. His excessive inventory did guarantee there was a pair in the pocket of every coat he owned, plus a spare in his desk. He’d never be gloveless again.

And, for the first time ever, a miniature potted live evergreen tree adorned with a bow and tiny balls now sat on one of the tables in his living room.

He’d been given strict watering protocols by Merry who’d insisted he set a reminder on his phone in front of her to insure he wouldn’t forget.

On the weekend, Sunday was devoted to skating at Wollman Rink so he could prove to her he might have ended up on his back on the ice in her driveway, but on skates, he was actually quite adept. Suitably impressed, she bought them both hot cocoa in Central Park.

He soon suspected the cocoa was only to soften him up for their next event. FAO Schwarz. On the weekend before

Christmas. When Dante's tenth circle of shopping hell was in full force at the toy store.

Why were they there? To reenact the Tom Hank's piano scene from the movie *Big*, of course.

That day was followed by another fun-packed week which culminated Thursday when he and Merry snuck out of work early to have afternoon tea at The Plaza. There Merry bought him the *Eloise at the Plaza* book in the gift shop and read it aloud to him immediately upon their sitting down.

And he didn't hate it.

In fact, as proof he must have hit his head harder than he'd thought when he'd fallen at her house, he loved every damn minute of it.

The steady schedule of fun and frolic led them right up to the final days before the rehearsal dinner and wedding—the finale of their boyfriend-girlfriend playacting.

He didn't want it to end. That raised the dilemma, what to do about it?

The obvious answer was he needed to seal the deal. Lock her down. Turn this fake relationship with Merry into a real one before the wedding.

Once that final event, that she was if not legally than at least honor bound to attend, was over that constituted the completion of their agreement.

The termination of their obligations to each other. The end of their fake relationship.

But what about the real relationship they'd built? Why would that have to end? If she felt the same about him...

Did she?

In spite of that one heated kiss, he feared he'd entered the friend zone. His own fault for walking away from her that night. And then turning them into gal pals. Shopping buddies.

Friends—even though he couldn't see her rush toward something that excited her without his damn chest feeling all

warm and squishy inside.

And he couldn't count how many times he'd glanced across the office to her workstation, brightly lit with Christmas lights, to see her hard at work and smile.

How when she lifted her head and caught his gaze on her and smiled, his entire body reacted, right down to his ill-behaved dick that still hadn't forgiven him for leaving her by the door that night.

There'd been no kiss since that memorable fuck-up.

It was time to remedy that mistake...

CHAPTER 24



The past week or so had been perfect.

Xander had been amazing as they worked their way through a bunch of her favorite December in NYC activities from her list. Things she would have had to do by herself this year—the thought of which had been depressing as hell.

In past, leading up to Christmas the Dakota apartment was filled with life and chatter, music and family. The scents of baking mingled with take-out Chinese and fresh-cut evergreen.

When her grandfather's knees weren't quite so bad and her parents weren't so involved in things happening in Cooperstown, the entire family would pack up the cars and the dogs and head for Manhattan during December. That was before Eddie and Anna settled into their own lives as a married couple, and Beth and Brian were off in newly engaged la-la-land.

But Xander had stepped in, unasked, and had actually suggested most of the places they'd gone and the things they'd done off her list.

It was like he was a whole new man. The grump he'd been before would have never surprised her with reservations for tea at the Plaza, where they sat now, opposite each other with the meager remains of the tower of tea sandwiches between them.

It had been perfect.

Well, almost. Merry couldn't fight the nagging thoughts that insisted on scratching at the back of her brain.

At the most inopportune times those thoughts—doubts, questions—reared their ugly head. When she was alone at night after he'd dropped her off. Now, when she should be perfectly content after a wonderful day.

They whispered things like, why hadn't he kissed her again? Were they just friends and if so why had he kissed her in the first place? And most importantly, what was it going to be like between them after the wedding?

Did they remain friends? Go back to just being coworkers who said *hi* as they passed in the doorway of the break room? Start dating other people...

That last thought just about did her in. The idea of sitting at her desk and seeing Xander and his model dates meet at the office to head off together had the tea churning in her stomach.

"Hey." His hand covering hers had her jumping as it startled her out of her own thoughts.

"Hey," she echoed.

"I was thinking," he began.

"Uh, oh. That's dangerous," she joked with a forced smile.

"We need to come up with a cover story for why I'm not with you for Christmas. You know, to keep good old Jeffy boy at bay."

She shook her head. "What do you think? That I'm a novice at this?"

"Yes, actually. I did. This is my first fake relationship. I assumed it was yours too. Are you saying I'm not your first fake boyfriend?" He gasped, pressing one hand to his heart.

"No. You're my first. I meant at lying to my relatives. I've been making up stories since I was a kid. I created a fake friend. Gave her a name. Had her leave me voicemails. All so I could pretend to be with her when I was really—uh—elsewhere." Her cheeks heated.

That had one dark brow cocking up as a devilish smile appeared. Hand still holding hers captive, Xander asked, “Oh really? Elsewhere doing what, exactly?”

She rolled her eyes but was sure the effect was diminished by how red her cheeks must be. “Nothing you need to know about.”

“Oh, I definitely need to know.” He leaned forward and said in a too loud whisper, “Were you and Jeffy boy getting naughty behind the bleachers?”

Impossibly, her face grew hotter.

Xander’s eyes widened. “Oh my God. You were.”

“No... it was in the catwalk of the theater.”

“My, my, my. I had no idea my fake girlfriend could be such a wild woman. And with Jeffy boy too. I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“So competitive,” she said, happy to deflect some attention off herself.

He shook his head. “No. Just jealous.”

Jealous? What was happening? He’d said it but did he mean it?

Xander couldn’t possibly be serious that he was jealous she’d had sex with Jeff, albeit unsatisfying teenage sex, and not with him. Could he?

What if he were? And how could she find out?

Mind spinning, she worked on a plan. What if today when he dropped her off at the Dakota before taking the cab to his place, she invited him inside?

She had the perfect excuse too. “You know, maybe we should work up a good alibi. Lots of details to make it more believable. It’s going to have to be, to keep Jeff from suspecting when he visits over the holidays.”

“He’ll be visiting?” Xander asked, something flashing in his eyes. Something predatory.

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure.” She nodded, thrilled by his reaction. “Do you want to come back to my apartment after this? We could work on the story there. You can see my mug collection...”

Eyes still narrowed, Xander said, “Yeah. I think that’s a very good idea.”

Her heart pounded. She’d started this ball rolling thanks to hormones and a tea cake high. But now she was trembling at the thought of Xander in her apartment. In her bed. In her...

She glanced up and saw Xander taking the bill from the waiter.

“So we’ll grab a cab and head to your place,” he said, more of a command than a question.

Swallowing hard, she nodded. “Sounds good.”

Oh, God. This was it. By tonight she’d know the answer. Was she just a friend? A convenient fake girlfriend? Or could they be more?

CHAPTER 25



*F*ucking Jeff.

He got to visit with Merry and her family over Christmas.

He'd also gotten to do a lot more with Merry than Xander ever had.

Xander pushed that distasteful image out of his head.

Right now he was concentrating on the fact he hadn't gotten an invite upstate for the week between Christmas and New Year.

Why not? He'd bonded with everyone in the family during the long weekend he'd spent there. He was Merry's boyfriend—at least as far as they were concerned.

Even today when he'd hinted—too subtly obviously—she hadn't invited him to Christmas in Cooperstown. If she had, he would have said yes in a heartbeat.

She hadn't asked.

Not yet.

He'd see about changing that.

Picturing a young and innocent Merry with a pimply-faced scrawny teenaged Jeff had turned his stomach. Still, he was confident. Sex changed things. Sex between them would change everything.

And sex was one of the things he was very good at. Besides, it wasn't like the bar was set all that high in that

department if a teenaged Jeffy boy was his competition.

Hell, if he couldn't drive the memory of Jeff and any other guy Merry might have been with in her life right out of her head, he'd turn in his man card. He'd obliterate any thoughts of all the men in her past and ruin her for all men in her future.

His determination stumbled a bit when he felt sick thinking about Merry being with anyone else after him. There's a chance Jeffy might have been her first, but Xander didn't hate the idea of being her last.

One step at a time. Sex first, negotiating a long-term relationship later.

Something about that plan sounded off, but it felt like this was the right way to go.

Besides, she'd invited him back to her place, and he wasn't naive enough to believe it was really to see her mug collection, even with as much of a collector he knew she was when it came to all things Christmas.

He wasn't one to assume things, especially not regarding sex, but she had kissed him back when he'd kissed her. He caught her watching him at the office at least as often as he watched her. And they'd gotten closer with every day they spent together.

The kind of closeness that started to grow feelings. Feelings he'd never felt and had never wanted to feel—until her.

Still, she was so damn *nice*. So friendly to *everyone* she met. From the sidewalk Santa to the hostess who'd sat them at the Plaza.

He couldn't be sure. Maybe they were just friends and he was about to make a complete fool of himself.

How could one tiny woman dressed in a nutcracker sweater throw him so completely off his game?

He'd had sex with models, gold medalists, billionaires and academy award winning actresses. Old money, new money, those who'd earned fame and those who were born into it. Yet

Merry Lee Clark had him tiptoeing along the line of insecurity. And doing it while wearing the hand-knit alpaca gloves in a colorful pattern he never would have bought if she didn't insist they were *fabulous*.

The gloves were warm though. He appreciated that as they exited the taxi and stood for too long outside as she relayed their entire Plaza tea experience to the doorman while insisting he take his wife and daughter immediately.

Xander's lips twitched at her enthusiasm. It didn't matter if the guy did open doors for a living, she treated him like he was a friend, which only ratcheted up Xander's doubt a little more.

Surely on the ladder of people in Merry's life, he had to be on a higher rung than the doorman. But with Merry, the equal opportunity hugger, he wasn't so sure.

He wasn't sure of anything when it came to her. He chewed on that as they made their way up in the elevator, and as he watched her unlock the door.

This time he stepped inside. He was tired of being on the wrong side of her door.

Time was running out. The wedding—and the official end to their agreement—was Saturday. He needed to lock Merry down today.

Although, his being inside didn't mean he was getting any farther than the impressive living room. That golden ticket into her bedroom was not guaranteed. And at the moment, he wasn't even sure where to start to get it.

The good news was that they'd become friends.

The bad news was also that they'd become friends.

That was something he didn't do with the women he slept with. And that hurdle from friend to bed seemed awfully high.

“Can I take your coat?” she asked, knocking him out of his reverie.

“Oh, sure. Thanks.” He stripped off the gloves and the scarf—yes, he'd bought the whole damn matching set—as well as his coat and handed it all to her.

She disappeared with the pile as he glanced around at the decorated room, just as Christmassy today as it had been on December fourth or whatever date he'd first come in here to create their fake dating agreement.

Once he looked past the holiday decorations, he noticed what was behind them. Heavy wood antique furniture. Porcelain vases. Paintings—old oils in heavy gilded frames. Quality works, no doubt valuable, most featuring horses and hunting. Combined it all said old money to him.

Again he wondered at Merry living here all alone.

He'd met her family. They were...normal. Average. Nice, of course. And yes, their house in Cooperstown was amazing, but that was upstate. This was Manhattan. And the freaking Dakota, no less—

“Wine?” she asked, returning as he stared at the lit tree that had turned on when she'd flipped the light switch on the wall when they'd walked in.

Of course she'd have it rigged so the tree would be lit the moment she got home. He expected nothing less from Merry.

“Sure,” he said, then followed her into the kitchen. “So where's that Christmas mug collection?” he asked, looking for an excuse to follow her. “I heard it's legendary.”

She laughed as she tipped her chin toward a glass door above her head. “In the cabinet.”

He moved closer and indeed there was shelf after shelf of mugs, with more hanging from hooks. “Do these, uh, live here all year long?” he asked, a little afraid of her answer.

Although, Christmas all year wouldn't be a deal breaker for his being with her. Just a challenge. Life with Merry would certainly be interesting.

She turned and handed him a glass of wine. “No, silly. There are heart mugs for February. Floral mugs for spring and summer. Halloween mugs for October—”

“Turkey mugs for Thanksgiving?” he asked, smiling.

Her eyes widened. “I don’t have any turkey mugs. I put the Christmas ones out November first. Have you seen Thanksgiving mugs somewhere?”

“I have not. Sorry to get your hopes up.”

She narrowed one eye at him. “You’re making fun of me.”

“Never. I think it’s adorable. You’re adorable.”

She screwed up her mouth. “Adorable isn’t exactly what I’ve been aspiring to my whole life.”

He tipped his head to the side. “I don’t know why not. There’s a lot to be said for being adorable.”

They were standing close. Close enough he could hear her breathing, quick and shallow. Close enough it seemed perfectly natural for him to set down his glass on the counter, take hers from her hand and place it next to his, then bracket her face with his hands.

“Merry?”

“Yeah?” Her eyes looked slightly out of focus as she gazed up at him.

“I wanna kiss you.” That was only a half-truth. He wanted more than just a kiss.

“Okay,” she said, breathlessly.

In the overly warm kitchen that somehow smelled like cinnamon and pine while soft Christmas music streamed from the AI device on the counter and twinkle lights lit the cabinets above like stars in a night sky, he decided now was the time for complete honesty.

“I want to do a whole lot more than just kiss you,” he confessed.

A small smile tipped up her lips. “I thought you’d never ask.”

CHAPTER 26



Xander moved in slowly, his gaze on Merry's as he lowered his head, leaning in, closer.

His lids dropped low and hid the bright sapphire glint of his eyes from her. Then his lips touched hers and a pulse of desire passed between them like an electric current.

He nipped at her lower lip before delivering a soft but sensual kiss, his thumb and forefinger gripping her chin as if to keep her in position. As if she'd ever want to leave?

She felt like the only woman in the world. Or at least the center of his world. Extra special considering that spot used to be reserved for his phone.

When he moved his hand, it was to cup her face between his palms as he tipped his head and kissed her more deeply. A glacially slow almost imperceptible deepening that ramped up the need that burned steadily hotter within her.

An uncontrollable sound of pure need escaped her throat. Xander echoed it with one of his own, the sound like accelerant on the fire between them.

His tongue stroked inside her mouth as he moved in even closer. His hands gripped her hips holding her tight against him. He leaned in, bending her back over the counter as she grabbed his arms for support.

The man could kiss.

Not that she'd expected anything less from Alexander Barrington. Still it was a wild ride navigating the many shades

of Xander that his kisses revealed. From slow and sweet, swoon worthy. To hot and passionate, assertive, claiming.

“Merry.” Her name sounded as much like a cuss as a prayer on his lips. Begging.

Needy.

She felt the physical manifestation of that need pressed against her.

“Bedroom,” she said in response.

“Yes,” he expelled on a breath part relief, part promise.

The single-word sentence conversation might be the most satisfying exchange she’d ever had. It led them exactly where she wanted to go.

Xander stepped back and, grabbing her hand, tugged her up and forward. He spun toward the hallway, then glanced back at her. “Bedroom?”

She smiled, knowing exactly what he meant. He’d never gotten past the living room and kitchen in her apartment. And as he’d commented on, more than once, there were many rooms.

Tipping her head to the right, she moved ahead of him. Taking the lead, she tugged him by the large warm hand he’d laced with hers.

They walked to the door at the very end of the hall.

“The last room? That figures.” He snorted.

“It’s worth the walk,” she said, glancing back before swinging open the door.

He breathed out a soft obscenity as he glanced around at the chandelier suspended from the high, white-painted, wood paneled ceiling. His gaze moved to the seating area in front of the fireplace and then to the king-sized bed.

The pale blue walls against the white woodwork gave the room an elegant, but light, rich quality. But somehow it also felt comfortable and cozy.

“*This* is your bedroom?” he said, finally broken out of his stupor.

She might have miscalculated taking him there rather than the smaller bedroom she’d always used as a child. The one with a full-sized bed she still slept in now. She’d wanted them to have the extra space the larger bed afforded.

That choice might have been a mistake. She was no longer the center of his universe as she clearly took second place next to the architecture. She felt the cold resulting from the lack of his attention. As if the sun had gone behind a cloud.

He was good and distracted now so she might as well answer his question. “No. But it is for tonight.”

His gaze narrowing, he turned to face her and drew her close. “Whose bed are we about to defile?”

“Once upon a time, it was my grandparents. More recently, my parents use it.”

Turning them, he backed her toward the bed. “I can live with that.”

She thought it would be the last thing he’d say as his mouth covered hers again and they both tumbled onto the bed.

But as his weight pressed her into the mattress, he broke the kiss to ask, “Jeffy boy ever come here back when you were dating?”

She felt her brows twitch up at that question. “No.”

A victorious, satisfied smile tinged with a touch of evil tipped up Xander’s lips as he said, “Good.”

Xander jealous was not a bad thing. She thought he couldn’t get more motivated than she’d seen him at work. She was wrong. Now his single-minded focus was on her and that was a very good thing.

After growling the word, “Naked,” he worked to get them both that way before he spread her legs wide.

He bent her knees, putting her feet flat on the bed. She was exposed, bared before him, but there was no time to think

about that as he crawled between her legs.

Thanking the sex gods that she'd thrown in a last-minute bikini wax at her hair appointment last time she was home, she watched Xander dive headfirst between her spread thighs.

He gazed up at her with an intensity in his eyes that had her walls clenching before he ran a fingertip down her slit that made her jump.

With a small, crooked smile, he leaned low and followed the path his finger had taken with his tongue.

He worked her with his mouth in earnest until she sucked in a breath. He thrust his fingers inside, pressing up on a spot that had her throbbing, all while maintaining that addictive pressure on her core with his mouth.

Without hesitation, without limitations, he helped himself to her body splayed out, bare and open in front of him.

He worked her until her eyes rolled back in her head. Until her fingers clawed at the bedding as she looked for something to hold to anchor herself to the bed—to the earthly plain—before she floated away.

She watched him for as long as she could. His eyes closed now as he concentrated on only her.

Then she couldn't see anything. Her head was thrown back, her eyes squeezed shut, as Xander took her to the highest heights and back down again.

The only sensations she could focus on were what he was doing to her and how her body was responding. That was probably a good thing or she might have been embarrassed by the sounds coming out of her as he drove her to orgasm, and then pushed her further to another level she didn't know existed.

Her thighs shook as her muscles clenched tight, pressing her pelvis higher, tighter against Xander's mouth. He doubled the pressure on her core and she keened out her approval with a loud, wordless cry she'd probably be embarrassed about later.

He eased off the pressure, withdrawing his fingers, bringing her back to earth, slowly.

Lowering her hips to the bed, she opened her eyes and saw she'd thrust her fingers into his hair without realizing it. She released her hold on his head, leaving his bad boy hair looking even more devil-may-care than usual.

She still gasped for breath, her throat dry, her body tingling. And he'd done all that to her just with his fingers and tongue.

What was he going to be able to accomplish with the hard length that bobbed between them now as he crawled naked over her?

She looked forward to finding out as the tip of him pressed against her entrance and began to breach her, when he stopped all forward motion, dropped his head and said, "Shit. Merry. I'm sorry."

He slid off the bed and reached for his pants and all she could do was watch as her heart pounded for an entirely different reason.

CHAPTER 27



“*Y*ou’re leaving?” Merry asked with eyes wide and one pillow now clutched to her chest as if for protection as she watched him.

“What? No. Of course not.” He thrust his fingers into the pocket of his pants and emerged with a strip of condoms. Smiling, he planted one knee on the high bed and said, “It’d take a five-alarm fire to get me to leave you and this room and even then I might have to think about it.”

She let out a visible breath.

Frowning, he paused where he kneeled on the bed. “You really thought I was leaving?”

She made a move that was half-hearted head shake with a partial shoulder lift but broadcast clearly what she was feeling.

He saw it but he didn’t understand it. She had no reason to be insecure. Or uncertain. Not about him or about them. But with a pulse beating in a hard-on that couldn’t get much harder, he chose to show her rather than discuss it.

They could talk later, if necessary. Or not. He intended to pound any and all uncertainty out of her.

He paused there on his knees, the condom in his hand. His cock weeping to be satisfied. But that pillow was still between them like a barrier.

“Merry?” The word held his question. Was she still into this? Had the moment passed?

Her eyebrows lifted as she tossed the pillow aside. “What are you waiting for?”

“Oh, thank God.” He blew out the breath he’d been holding and rolled on the condom.

Hands on her bent knees, his cock poised at her entrance, he leaned low, and kissed this amazing woman he’d been lucky enough to meet, even under the craziest of circumstances. The woman he was so happy to have in his life.

The woman he couldn’t wait any longer to possess completely.

A low groan rumbled through him as he eased inside her body and held there. He was too wound up.

He’d been ready to shoot off just from having her body grip his fingers as she came on his tongue. Even more so by the plans of all the things they were going to do together in this big bed. And maybe in the shower. Or even better, in a nice soapy bath. Tonight. Tomorrow. The next day.

He groaned again against her mouth, loving her with his tongue until he could talk his dick off the ledge so he didn’t end this thing before it began.

But damn, the only thing he could think about was how it would feel for her come around his cock the way she had around his fingers.

She slipped her hands down his back, all the way to his ass where she gripped tight and pulled him farther inside her.

Forget about it. They’d just have to do it again if he came in twenty seconds like a damn teenaged boy.

He pushed deep, bottoming out inside Merry’s slick heat before pulling back and setting an ambitious pace. If he was going to shoot off embarrassingly soon, at least he was going out with enthusiasm.

His arms shook and his head hung as he braced above her. Eyes squeezed shut, he felt it happening. The tingle in his spine that reached down into his balls. The point of no return.

No. Please. Not yet. He silently begged his body to wait but he was too far gone. His dick rarely listened to his head anyway.

With his face buried in the pillow next to Merry's head, he thrust deep one more time and held. A full body tremor ran through him as he filled the condom.

He stayed there, collapsed over Merry, still buried inside her, his head next to hers until both of their breathing began to return to normal.

"I'm sorry," he said into the pillow.

"For what?" she asked.

"I'm usually not that quick. I swear." He lifted his head to look at her, but he didn't pull out. It felt too good to finally be inside her, even now.

"That was probably about how long it used to take Jeff, so don't worry about it." She flashed him a smile that told him she knew she was torturing him and enjoying it.

His eyes narrowed, he finally pulled out.

He padded to the bathroom through the open door, his mind working out that night's agenda as he snapped off the condom and tossed it into the trash pail.

First they were doing it again. Immediately. And he knew damn well the second time he'd last forever. So she'd be sorry for that comment.

Then, after a suitable length of recovery, he'd fill the bathtub behind him and see how she felt about him doing all the naughty stuff he had on his mind with her in the tub.

Jeff. Ha!

He was going to make her regret that one—and by regret it he meant making her come until she couldn't come anymore.

When he emerged from the bathroom she said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't tease. Are you mad?"

"Me? Get mad? Nope. I don't get mad, sweetheart. I get even." He smiled as he reached for the second of the four

condoms he'd had the foresight to bring, just in case.

Her eyes widened as, sitting upright against the headboard, she watched him tear into the packet.

He met her gaze. "What? You thought we were finished? We're not even close, baby. Not even close."

Crawling onto the mattress, he grabbed each of her ankles and pulled. She squealed as he tugged her down until she was flat on her back. Hooking her knees over his arms he pressed inside her, slow this time, enjoying every inch inside without fear of it ending too soon.

He hit a spot that felt particularly good. Nice and tight thanks to the angle. He pulled out and went back in to feel that specific friction again the angle provided.

Perfect. He could spend a nice long time right there. In fact, he might do just that, he thought as he hit the spot again.

Merry gasped.

"You all right?" he asked, his gaze shooting to her face.

When she opened her eyes he saw they were unfocused. Her cheeks were pink. Her breath came shallow and quick.

He hit the spot again and her eyes drifted closed. "You like that?"

It was more comment than question since the answer was pretty damn obvious.

"Mm-hm."

He wet his thumb and found her clit, putting pressure right there while he bumped the spot. That elicited a moan from her and a smile from him.

Working her now in earnest, he felt her orgasm coming probably before she did. Her muscles tightened until her body gripped his cock.

He eased inside deeper, then farther still, not about to miss out on being fully engulfed inside her when she tipped over the edge.

She let out a sound that made him think she liked him where he was, filling her completely. He stayed there, deep inside, circling his hips to create an exquisite friction for both of them.

That's all it took.

Merry clung to him with her arms and legs wrapped around him, riding him, bucking herself to orgasm. The feel of which had his mouth opening and his eyes closing as he absorbed—memorized—every sensation.

He rode the wave with her to the very end. Then enjoyed the ripple of aftershocks that stroked against his length as she continued to quake.

“Amazing,” was all he said when her body finally quieted. “Now flip over.”

He saw her sleepy satisfied eyes flash as he flipped her over onto her belly and thrust inside, pounding himself to completion.

Collapsed over her for the second time, he mumbled into her hair, “Best. Sex. Ever.”

She shook as she laughed beneath him.

Still inside her but slowly slipping out, he lifted his head enough to say, “You don't agree?”

“I agree,” she said into the pillow.

“That's good. Because I have plans.”

She turned her head to glance back at him over her shoulder as he eased off her. “Uh oh. What plans?”

“You'll see.” He smiled.

“Should I be worried?”

He bobbed his head from side to side as her eyes widened.

“We have work tomorrow, remember,” she reminded.

“We'll see about that too.” He grinned as he shocked her one more time.

CHAPTER 28



*F*riday dawned and so did another workday—the final one before the holiday break.

In spite of wanting to, Xander didn't play hooky. He was at his desk bright and early but only because he had a working lunch scheduled with Alonso.

Of course that meant he'd had to do one of the hardest things he'd ever done—leave Merry all warm and snuggly in her bed.

But he'd done it, gotten dressed and caught a frigid cab back to his place.

He'd gotten a handful of hours sleep, showered and put on his best suit because he was leaving directly from work this afternoon for the rehearsal.

The church was first, where the wedding party would be put through a full run-through since he was sure *momzilla* expected nothing less than perfection from them all. Then they'd head directly to the Oak Room at the Plaza for the rehearsal dinner, which is where Merry would join him.

Just looking forward to having Merry next to him at the end of the day—both for the dinner and again in bed—would be enough to get him through whatever the workday and the church rehearsal threw at him.

He hadn't even gotten a chance to talk to her since she'd gotten in this morning—and that was killing him—but he'd texted. He could see her across the office working diligently in a blue and white snowflake cardigan.

“And again, I find you smiling at your desk,” Evan said as he stood in the doorway of Xander’s office.

“There’s a lot to smile about.” Xander shrugged, leaving his answer purposely vague even though he couldn’t deny he had been smiling just from seeing Merry from afar.

He reached for the Starbuck’s seasonal coffee he’d picked up this morning when he’d grabbed one for Sidewalk Santa and took a sip of the sweet concoction.

Eyes completely focused on Xander, Evan tilted his head like Merry’s dogs did when they sat in the kitchen watching the tray of bacon cooling on top of the stove.

“Something’s different. *You’re* different,” Evan accused.

Xander dismissed him with a scowl. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m exactly the same.”

“No, you’re not.” Evan shook his head. “It’s like you’ve taken a step back from work.”

Xander frowned. “That’s bullshit.”

“Is it? Your biggest client, Bailey Knowles, dropped a surprise single slamming her ex-boyfriend and was trending all weekend after buying that billboard opposite his apartment and you took off that Monday!”

Admittedly, Xander had missed that storm thanks to being upstate with a smashed cell phone but it all worked out fine. Bailey’s very public retribution in response to her boyfriend’s infidelity only helped her reputation and no one was the wiser that he’d missed it all.

“I can handle Bailey from anywhere I have cell service. It doesn’t have to be while sitting at my desk,” Xander defended himself with what, in theory, was the truth.

“Okay. There’s more than just that. You wore slacks and a sweater four days this week when you used to only wear suits every day. You never used to buy coffee downstairs and never the fancy holiday stuff. Instead of working late every night, you’ve been leaving at five, or earlier like you did yesterday

with Mariah—” Evan stopped in his ticking off the supposed evidence on his fingers as his eyes flew wide.

His head on a swivel, Evan spun to glance toward Merry’s desk, before pivoting back to face Xander.

“Oh, my God.” He moved farther inside, closed the door, then pinned Xander with a stare. “You and Mariah are together.”

“What? No. Don’t be ridiculous.”

It felt wrong denying what they had. But it felt more wrong to be talking about her with Evan just hours after he’d left her bed.

“She’s been helping me finish my Christmas shopping this week,” Xander offered up as an excuse.

Evan’s sandy brows rose. “Every night?”

“Yup.” Xander nodded.

“You *hate* Christmas shopping,” Evan accused.

“Hence why she’s helping me,” Xander responded with what he felt was perfect logic.

Evan wasn’t having it. He turned toward the door, hand on the knob. “Fine. I’ll just go ask her if you two are dating since you’re not willing to admit—”

“Stop.”

He turned back and waited, his hand poised on the knob like a threat.

“Yes. We’re...dating. I guess. Hell, I don’t know. We didn’t really discuss putting a name to it.” Because they’d been too busy fucking last night...

“This is great.” Evan looked positively gleeful before his expression turned hurt. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“First of all, she’s an employee. I’m a partner. We talked about this before. The power imbalance.”

Evan waved the concern away. “You’re not her supervisor. You’re not even part of her department.”

Xander hoped all of that would hold up in the eyes of HR should this thing become an issue. But there was more behind his desire for secrecy.

“It’s all *really* new.”

They’d started out publicly fake dating for her family right out of the gate. And as of tonight, she’d be publicly on his arm at the rehearsal dinner.

Work was the one place no one knew. The only place where he could be selfish and keep that new relationship magic just between the two of them. Without them being under a microscope as a couple.

Evan scoffed. “New? You two have been hanging out together for like three weeks.”

Three weeks. Evan putting a measure on the time since they’d begun all this had Xander thinking.

It felt like those weeks had flown by. But at the same time, it felt like forever. Like she’d always been a part of his life and he was having trouble remembering the time before her.

His cell phone dinged with a Google alert and it had Bailey’s name on it. What now?

Xander drew in a breath and reached for his phone. The headline said something about Bailey dating her bodyguard. If it wasn’t one thing, it was another.

With a sigh, he moved his gaze to Evan. “Bailey’s trending again, so if you’re done...”

Evan narrowed one eye. “For now. But I’m going to be watching you.”

Xander had no doubt.

Evan moved into the hall and was about to close the door behind him when Xander called, “Leave it open.”

His friend shot him a glare. “Yes, boss.”

“Thank you,” Xander said to appease him, happy he could see Merry at her desk again now the door was open.

He had to pull his gaze away from her and force it back to his phone. “What are you up to now, Bailey?” he said to himself as he opened the article to read it.

Bailey and her latest shenanigans with the media took the better part of an hour for Xander to get caught up on.

That led him up to the time he had to leave for his working lunch with Alonso, which they were having at one of the restaurants at Rockefeller Center.

Xander was in such a good mood, he didn’t mind having to travel to the restaurant.

The sun was shining. The air had a seasonal nip to it but wasn’t oppressively cold. And Alonso was in his usual good mood, thrilled with Xander’s performance at work—even if Evan had basically accused him of slacking off.

They wrapped up lunch with best wishes for a good Christmas, Alonso off to an early start to the holiday and Xander, heading back to the office to put in a few more hours before he had to leave for the church.

But he wasn’t ready to be back inside just yet. Saks caught his eye as he considered walking back to the office rather than fighting traffic in a cab and, as if an outside force guided him, he found himself crossing the road toward the store.

He bypassed the long line where even more tourists than usual stood to see the windows and went directly inside. He knew where to go. The same floor Merry had led him to for his assistant’s scarf. Today, his goal was not a scarf—even after seeing his assistant’s delight when she’d opened the box he left on her desk this morning.

Today, his destination was the perfume counter. The same one where he hadn’t been allowed to buy a gift for his assistant because Merry said perfume was too personal. Too intimate. In other words, it was the perfect gift for him to give Merry.

With the help of the statuesque mannequin-like saleswoman, he smelled every selection at the counter, but didn’t find one that fit her perfectly.

About to give up, dejected, he sniffed the final card presented to him then drew back, taking the card from her fingers.

He held it near his nose again and even while on perfume overload, he knew. It was the perfect scent. He didn't know what it was called and he didn't care because it was so *her* it might as well have been named *Merry*.

“That’s the one. Ring it up.” Remembering her shopping bag fetish he smiled and added, “And can I get that in a shopping bag?”

He handed over his card and waited for the bag that would make Merry so happy and that’s when he realized... He didn't hate Christmas shopping after all. He just hadn't been shopping for the right person.

CHAPTER 29



Concentration was impossible.

Xander was just yards away from her in his office and Merry felt his presence like a physical thing.

Even the two hours he'd disappeared over lunch hadn't given her any relief, because she'd spent the whole time waiting for him to return.

How could a little sex change everything so completely?

A little sex. Ha!

The tug of soreness in various key places in her body said otherwise. There was nothing *little* about him or what he'd done to her, multiple times.

Another text came through, the latest of many. He might not have spoken to her in person but he hadn't stopped communicating. She'd gotten everything from *good morning* to *nice sweater*, to this latest one that read, *I can't wait until tonight*, which was accompanied by a winky face emoji and an eggplant.

She burst out laughing and had to apologize to the person sitting nearest her. But she couldn't help it. The oh so serious, stuffy and always professional Alexander Barrington had sent her an eggplant emoji. She'd dare anyone in that office to not laugh about that.

Smiling, she shook her head and had yet to come up with a suitable reply when her cell rang and Xander's name appeared on the display.

She pressed the cell to her ear and hissed, “Are you seriously calling me from your office?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You didn’t reply to my text.”

“You didn’t give me a chance to.”

“Never mind that now. Can you come swing by my office quick?”

“Now?”

“Yes. Please.”

“Fine.” She let out a huff and carried the cell with her across the office to his door.

“Come in. Close the door.”

Brow furrowed, she did as asked, only to turn and find him right there as he backed her against the wall. Angling his head, he covered her mouth with his. His hands splayed over her hips. His tongue stroking in and out of her mouth while he pressed against her leaving no doubt he was hard.

She fought her way back from the haze of pleasure and pulled away. “You don’t walk over to talk to me all day and now you’re molesting me in your office? I’m not sure how I feel about that, Mr. Barrington.”

One dark brow cocked up high. “I had very good reason I didn’t walk over to see you all day.”

“Oh really? And what is that?”

“This,” he said, pressing that hard length into her stomach. “I’ve been like this most of the day, thanks to you. And forgive me, but I thought it best if I didn’t parade my arousal around the office.”

As far as excuses went, that wasn’t a bad one. “All right. I guess I’ll forgive you.”

“Thank you. So, I have to leave for the church for this rehearsal, but you’re going to meet me at the Oak Room for

dinner, right?”

“Yes. And you could have texted that. Or asked me on the phone.”

“Then I wouldn’t have been able to do this.” He leaned in and nipped at her bottom lip.

“I see a flaw in your plan.”

“What’s that?”

“How are you going to leave now with this?” She bumped her pelvis against his temptingly hard length.

Tonight when they were done with rehearsals and dinners and could get back to her bed couldn’t come soon enough.

“I have that figured out.” He grinned. He reached for his trench coat hanging on the hook on the back of his door and said, “Camouflage.”

God, she loved him like this. Fun. Playful. Hot as hell. And he was hers. How amazing was that?

He glanced at his watch then cursed. “I’m gonna be late. You’re going to have to leave first or I’ll never want to go.”

Again, it was a good line. Smiling she kissed him one more time, pressing close to leave that lower part of him with a promise for later, then opened the door and slipped out.

A moment later, back at her desk, she saw Xander leave his office. Coat wrapped tightly around him he sent her one heated parting glance full of promise for later before heading for the elevator.

Now her concentration was really gone. All she could think about was the heat of his mouth over hers. And where else she’d feel him later tonight. Glancing at the time on the corner of her screen, she made a decision.

It was late enough—ten minutes left in her workday plus it was the final day of work before the holiday. She could be done. Besides, she had to get home, do something with her hair, put on actual going-out make-up and get herself into her dress for the dinner tonight.

If ever there was a day to leave early, today was it.

She stood and grabbed her bag and coat, pushing aside the thought that her work ethic had gotten a lot more *flexible* since this thing with Xander first began weeks ago. Whatever this amorphous, complex, ever-changing thing between them was.

The brisk walk home did nothing but elevate her already high spirits. The week before Christmas in the city was amazing. It was as if someone twisted the dial and turned up the intensity of everything. The people. The sounds. The energy and the excitement.

She'd stuffed her coat pocket full of small change so she could contribute to the kettle of every bell ringer between the office and her apartment building. One handed her a candy cane in return. Delighted she stripped it immediately of its cellophane and enjoyed its minty goodness as she completed her walk.

“Good afternoon, Miss Clark.” Charles beamed even more brightly than usual as he greeted her while holding the door open. The staff would have received their cards from her today, each with a nice check inside.

She walked through the door he held wide for her. “Thank you, Charles. And please, thank your wife for the cookies. They were amazing. I’ve been missing my mom’s cookies this week.”

“I sure do miss them, as well. Nothing like when the Clark family came to the city for Christmas. But you’ll be home with them soon enough. Right, miss?”

The older man had worn a Dakota uniform in some capacity since he’d been a child of seventeen, working his way up to doorman. He knew her parents and her grandparents as well as he did Merry and her siblings. Of course he’d noticed the change in the whole family’s usual holiday habit of being here for Christmas.

She wobbled her head at his question as they both moved into the vestibule. “It looks like I’ll have to wait to see them

this year. I'm planning on leaving Christmas Eve morning. I have a wedding to attend at the Plaza tomorrow."

His eyes widened. "Oh, that should be lovely, miss."

"Right? I think so. I'm excited."

Charles's lips twisted like the Cheshire Cat. "And will you be accompanying Mr. Barrington to the wedding?"

Of course the staff knew. Between the day crew and the night crew, and the fact there was most definitely a daily catch-up between them during the changing of the guard, they would have noticed the amount of time she and Xander had been spending together. How she was arriving home at ten instead of five-thirty most nights.

And, the thing that had her cheeks burning now, how Xander had crept out of her bed and back to his place sometime early this morning.

"Yes," she answered simply, unsure what else to say. Not that she needed to say anything.

Charles looked at her like her grandfather had when she'd told him she was moving to the city for the new job at Paragon. Pride mingled with a bittersweet realization that things were changing. "I hope you two have a wonderful time."

She nodded, torn between a smile and a blush. That's what this new phase of this thing between her and Xander did to her.

Upstairs, she made a cup of hot cinnamon tea in one of her Christmas mugs and carried it to her bedroom. The wardrobe there had already held a variety of formal gowns. She'd accompanied her family to more fundraisers and events than she could count. But she'd also grabbed a few more options from home when she'd been back with Xander for the weekend.

She guessed the rehearsal dinner would require something dressy, but not as formal as the wedding tomorrow. Having worked all day and with only two hours to get ready and get over to the dinner—for better or worse—she'd have to handle her hair and makeup herself. Tomorrow she'd have all day to

get her hair blown out and styled before the ceremony and reception.

Three dresses ended up on the floor, along with five pairs of shoes, before she was satisfied with her outfit. And even then, it required raiding her sister's closet for a purse and her mother's jewelry box for a pair of earrings for the finishing touches before she was completely satisfied.

She snapped a selfie in the mirror to send to Beth later, knowing her sister was going to demand it then moved to the coat closet. She knew her usual winter jacket wasn't going to cut it today.

The row of outerwear, hung on the overstuffed rod with a visible dip in the center from the sheer weight, represented at least three generations of Clarks.

That's the thing with a family apartment passed down for a hundred years. It was never cleaned out. Things just built upon what was there before. It was why her great-grandparents' wedding china mingled in the same cabinet with the cartoon character McDonald's happy meal drink glasses from her father's childhood. And the game chest included an original, as in a first-edition 1935 Monopoly game, as well as a now vintage Trivial Pursuit from the eighties and, dating from even more recently, an electronic travel-version of Scrabble for car rides.

She moved past her grandmother's mink, dating from a long gone past when fur was thought of as a luxury, not animal cruelty. But next to that a flash of brilliant crimson caught her eye. The rod was packed with hangers. It was hard, but she managed to extricate the one item she wanted without sending the whole thing crashing down like a house of cards.

Standing in the hall, she held up the three-quarter length, wide collared, cashmere coat in a perfect Christmas red. Thank goodness the closet was lined in cedar or the moths would have long ago had a feast on the wool. But from what she could see, it was still in perfect condition. And even better, her grandmother had been petite, like her, so the coat was just the right length.

She pulled it on over the tea-length, A-line emerald green keyhole neckline dress and looked in the mirror.

The reflection had her staring. She looked like a different person but at the same time, familiar. Perhaps she should dress up more often. One moment's thought about the long, wet walk to work in heels cured that notion. But for tonight, it was fun to play dress up.

Grabbing her purse, she made sure her phone, ID, keys, money and a credit card were inside, along with a lipstick because today she was actually wearing some. Seeing all was in order, she headed out the door.

In the lobby, the shift had changed. Murray let out a long low whistle. "Looking good, Miss Clark. Hot date?"

Was it? It hadn't started out that way weeks ago when they'd made this deal but now? After last night?

"Rehearsal dinner at the Oak Room," she corrected, cheeks burning.

He nodded. "I'll hail you a cab."

"Thank you, Murray."

As she waited she opened her photos app and texted the picture she'd taken of herself to Xander with the message, "On my way."

His response was a smiley face with the words, "Can't wait!"

How things had changed. The man she'd formerly thought of as Mr. Grumpy now used smiley face emojis.

Smiling herself, she slid across the backseat of the cab as Murray closed the door with a salute.

"The Plaza Hotel, please," she told the driver.

Settling in for the short ride, she leaned back in the seat and was just navigating to the photo app again to forward the picture to her sister when the phone rang in her hand.

Beth's name flashed on the display.

She swiped the screen to answer the call, then pressed the cell to her ear. “I was just about to text you a picture. I swear ___”

“Merry.” Beth spoke her name on a sob between ragged breaths.

Immediately on alert, she asked, “What’s wrong? What happened?”

She could hear rustling, like walking, and the sound of Beth breathing fast before a car door slamming.

Finally, Beth answered. “It’s Grandpa.”

CHAPTER 30



The rehearsal was run like a military operation by Rex's mother. He hadn't been exaggerating about the domineering woman's perfectionism. But it was finally finished.

The wedding party was set free to make their way up the block from the church to the Plaza for drinks—they all could use one after two hours of wedding drills—and the rehearsal dinner.

Some of the girls took a cab the couple of blocks. He couldn't blame them after seeing their footwear. But Xander walked. It felt good to move after standing still for so long.

He made it into the hotel and was about to head to check his coat when he saw through the glass doors the cab pull up and Merry step out.

As beautiful as the late nineteenth-century Fifth Avenue church had been, it didn't compare to Merry's beauty. Bold in a red coat, as usual, but this one long and tailored. Classic. She was in a dress, which was new. He got a glimpse of high heels and leg as she stepped onto the curb.

He'd pushed through the revolving door to greet her outside when he finally saw the expression on her face.

She saw him and lowered the cell as he strode forward to grip her shoulders. "What's wrong?"

Unshed tears made her eyes reflect the lights above them like glass. Her face was drained of all color. Her lips trembled.

“Beth called. She’s on the way to the hospital...following the ambulance.”

“Who?” he asked, his heart clenching as he thought of all the Clarks he’d met and how they’d embraced him as family.

“Grandpa,” she said as the tears spilled over.

“You have to go.”

Her gaze met his. “Our deal. I promised you...”

“Fuck the deal. You need to be with your family. But shit. You’re upset. It’s already dark. You probably shouldn’t be driving. I’ll get you a car from Paragon’s service. But dammit. It’s the Friday before Christmas. There might not be any—”

She shook her head. “I’ve done this drive in the dark so many times—I’ll be okay. But are you sure you don’t mind? I’ll be missing the dinner. And probably the wedding.”

“Don’t even think about it.” He bracketed her face in his gloved hands.

She brought her hands up to grip his wrists and he saw they were bare.

“Where are your gloves?” he asked.

“I guess I forgot to bring a pair. They’re in my other jacket.”

“Here.” He stripped off his alpaca wool gloves and handed them to her. “Put those on. I’ll get you a cab back to the Dakota so you can get your car. I want you to text me the minute you get to Cooperstown so I know you’re safe. And please, tell everyone my thoughts are with you all.”

His chest tight, he was babbling as he stepped up to the curb and thrust out an arm. Talking was what he did best. That and action. It helped at times like this when nothing was going as planned.

A taxi pulled up to the curb and he turned to her. “Are you sure you’re okay to drive?”

“I’ll be fine. Once I’m on my way there I’ll be okay. Beth said she’ll keep me posted once they know more.”

He didn't like it but he opened the door and watched her slide inside. "Don't speed. The roads might be icy."

"I won't," she promised.

Xander drew in a breath and nodded. "All right. Remember to text."

"I will." Her eyes met his one last time before she leaned forward and gave the driver the address.

With nothing left to do, he slammed the door closed and watched the cab pull away from the curb and into traffic before turning and heading back into the lobby.

"Was that your date I saw you putting into that cab?" Rex asked, frowning.

"Yes."

"Where's she going?"

"Cooperstown."

Rex's brows rose. "Cooperstown as in like the Baseball Hall of Fame Cooperstown?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That's where she lives."

"I have so many questions." Rex shook his head. "Is she taking a cab all the way to Cooperstown? Why is she going there instead of coming inside for dinner and, last but definitely not least, is she coming back for the wedding?"

Xander sighed. Time to face the consequences.

"She just got a call with bad news from home. A family emergency. She's not going to be able to make it tonight or tomorrow." He raised his gaze to meet his friend's. "I'm sorry, Rex. I'll apologize to your mother myself. I'll sit next to one of her fix-ups. Whatever it takes so as not to cause waves for you and Chelsea."

Rex laid a hand on Xander's shoulder and squeezed. "Don't worry about it. We'll figure it out."

“Thank you. And it looks like I owe you that bottle.”

“Forget about that. I’m more worried about you. You really like this girl, huh?” Rex asked.

Xander let out a snort. “More than like.”

When he glanced up again it was to see Rex beaming. “I never thought I’d see the day. Alexander Barrington is in love.”

“I didn’t say that.”

Rex grinned. “You didn’t have to. Come on inside to the party. Sit down. Relax. We’ll get you a drink.

“That sounds really good.”

Xander reevaluated that opinion shortly.

He got his drink. He also got shit from all the guys who’d actually succeeded in getting dates.

If that stupid bet they’d made at the engagement party months ago was still en force, if he showed up at the wedding the following day without a date all the groomsmen lost and the bridesmaids won.

And it looked as if the bridesmaids knew it too.

Sadie, whom he’d mentally begun calling *the witch of Holly Creek* ever since meeting her at the engagement party, wandered over to inquire about his date. Or lack thereof.

The smug expression on her face told him she knew very well he was sans date for the dinner and just wanted to rub it in.

He explained he’d had one but she had a family emergency but Sadie’s cocked brow told him she didn’t believe him at all.

No doubt half of them probably thought he’d been stood up. The other half probably assumed he never had a date to begin with and was lying.

At one point, he resorted to showing them Merry’s *on my way* text and picture just to prove he hadn’t made her up. That

didn't do much to stop the ribbing but he was starting not to care.

His mind was on a certain redhead he'd rather be sitting beside in that Land Rover heading North-West.

He unlocked his cell and checked his texts again. He told himself it was to check if she'd sent him anything, even though it hadn't been three hours yet and there was no way she'd arrived. In reality, he just wanted to see her picture again on his phone.

"Not your usual type," Rex commented, glancing over his shoulder at Merry's picture.

Insulted, he sent Rex a glare.

Yes, Merry was curvier than some of the waifs he'd been with. Models who'd rather die than eat the croutons that came on their salads. Women who were definitely not interested in hot cocoa or extra whip on their gingerbread latte.

Merry was real. She loved life and food and that was just one of the things he liked best about her.

Rex drew back at the sight of Xander's glare. "Hey, man. Relax. I'm just saying she looks special and I can see she makes you happy."

He drew in a breath. "She does." At least she did when she was with him. He didn't like being separated. So why not do something about it?

An idea hit him. He'd fulfill his wedding duties, then he was going to rent himself a car, get on the road and head upstate to be with her.

Mind made up, he did as Rex had suggested. He let himself relax—just a bit. But he didn't breathe freely or truly feel at ease until Merry texted she'd arrived safely and was with her grandfather in his hospital room.

With that worry aside, he could have gone out for drinks with the guys after the dinner was over. But he found himself telling them instead that he was tired and heading home.

His excuse was the big day tomorrow. The reality was he wasn't in the mood to go out.

He went home and slept with his cell on full volume on the table next to his bed so he'd hear a text or a call, in case Merry needed him.

His sleep went uninterrupted. No text. No call. He supposed no news was good news but all he could think was that she didn't call because she didn't need him.

CHAPTER 31



She should have changed. Her dress. Her shoes especially.

As she navigated the parking lot outside Bassett Hospital in Cooperstown Merry had to weigh the ten minutes she'd saved taking the cab directly to the parking garage and her car versus going back upstairs to her apartment to change versus the risk of breaking an ankle out here in the dark.

At least she was in the right place should that happen.

Dark humor seemed to be all she was capable of as she pushed inside the double doors and into the lobby.

The hospital was always decorated beautifully at the holidays. Her mother made sure of it since the hospital fell under the purview of the Clark family charitable enterprises.

Merry always assumed the festive decor helped ease the worry of family members here for less than happy reasons during the holidays. Now that family member was herself, she realized nothing but seeing her grandfather alive and well would give her any relief to her stress and worry.

Photo ID already out, she approached the check-in desk. Even this late at night it was manned by both a volunteer and a guard.

The volunteer—an older woman wearing a pinched expression and a pale pink cardigan—looked Merry in her inappropriately formal wear up and down as she said, “Visiting hours ended at nine.”

Her decree only begged the question, why then was she still sitting there?

“My grandfather was brought into the Emergency Room earlier,” she said, sliding her ID across the desk.

“ER entrance is around the building.”

Merry nodded, taking a calming breath. “He’s been moved to a room. Robert Clark.”

The guard, letting the volunteer do the talking, reached for her ID.

After taking one look at her license, he slid it into the machine, which spit out a visitors’ pass.

He pushed the pass and her ID across the desk.

“Our apologies, Miss Clark. We didn’t realize who you were.” He punched a few keys on his computer and said, “Your grandfather is in room 403. Do you know how to get to the elevators?”

As the volunteer looked as if she’d been slapped after the guard usurped her authority, Merry nodded gratefully. “Yes. Thank you so much.”

Over the echoing sounds of her heels on the tile floor in the quiet lobby she heard the whispered discussion between the volunteer and the guard begin. She couldn’t make out words but the intensity of the tone was clear. The woman was unhappy and the man didn’t care.

Sometimes it was good to be a member of the family whose foundation funded the hospital. She’d only wished she were here for a happy occasion—like the birth of Eddie and Anna’s first child—rather than for this one.

She found room 403 easily enough.

With her visitors’ pass stuck prominently on her chest, no one on her grandfather’s floor looked twice at her. Not the overworked overnight nurses or the doctors, some of them looking so young they had to be residents.

She had a feeling no other patient would have been given a private room in the Special Care Unit so quickly after being admitted. Again she was thankful her grandfather's last name was Clark.

That small feeling of gratitude evaporated the moment she pushed open the door and entered the room.

Her grandfather lay in the bed, mouth slack and open. Tubes were in his nose. Wires were connected to his chest. And one big loud machine was blaring an alert that had her heart stopping.

“Grandpa.” She could barely get the word out past the lump in her throat as she rushed to his side.

She reached out one shaky hand but couldn't bring herself to check for a pulse in his throat.

The door to the room opened and a nurse came in, shaking her head as she moved toward the bed. She reached for her grandfather's hand as Merry watched from the side, not breathing. Not believing he could really be gone.

She was too late. She'd come all this way and she'd missed saying goodbye.

The alert silenced and the nurse laid her grandfather's hand back down gently.

That was it then. Tears streamed down Merry's cheeks...

Then her grandfather let out a giant snort of a snore before opening his eyes.

He glared at the nurse. “You vampires here to stick me again?” he grumbled.

“No, Mr. Clark. The sensor fell off your finger again. The alarm was going off.”

He grumbled some more as the nurse delivered a small smile to Merry and made her way back out of the room.

Merry rushed to his bedside.

“Louise?” He frowned at her, confused as he called her by her grandmother's name. The only other family member who

had red hair. The one who'd passed that recessive gene down to her. "Jesus. Am I dead? Are you here to get me?"

The coat!

"No. Gramps. It's me. Mariah. Merry. Not grandma. I borrowed her coat." She yanked the coat off and tossed it on the chair. "See. Just me."

"Jesus, girl. You had me thinking I was meeting my maker and my dead wife was here to escort me there."

"I'm so sorry."

"What are you doing here all dressed up in the middle of the night? It is the middle of the night, isn't it?" He squinted at the dark outside the window.

"It is. I drove from the city as soon as Beth called me."

He scowled. "They shouldn't have bothered you with this. It was nothing."

"It was enough to have an ambulance bring you to the ER."

He waved away her concern with the flick of one hand, which sent the sensor flying off his finger once again.

She jumped to grab it and reattach it before the nurse had to bother coming back in. "I wanted to come. I want to be here."

"And where should you have been instead?" He eyed her dress.

"The rehearsal dinner for that wedding I'm—that I was going to with Xander."

One bushy gray eyebrow rose.

"All dressed up and nowhere to go because of me." He shook his head. "This is your fault."

He glanced over her shoulder as he said it.

"What's my fault now?" Beth said from behind Merry.

She spun and saw her sister carrying a hospital pitcher of water that she set on the bed table.

“He’s saying I shouldn’t have come. I told him I want to be here.”

“So he’s blaming me because I called you. That’s fine. I can take it. You look nice by the way.”

“Thank you.”

“If you two are going to chatter, go home and do it. Some of us would like to try and get some sleep.”

Beth turned toward the bed. “I see you’re just fine and as crotchety as ever so I think I will go home. Merry, come on. Mom and Dad left about an hour ago. Let’s leave crabby here to get his beauty sleep. He certainly needs it.”

The old man snorted as Merry leaned low and pressed a kiss to his wrinkled cheek. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Can you not dress like my wife so I don’t think I’m dead?”

“I’ll do my best.” She smiled, then turned, grabbed her stuff and followed Beth out.

“Drive with me. We’ll get your car in the morning,” Beth offered.

“Okay.” She wasn’t going to disagree. Now that she was there and had seen her grandfather, the adrenaline that had carried her here fled leaving bone deep weariness.

She slumped against the passenger seat and let her eyes drift closed. The warmth of Xander’s gloves on her hands had her fighting tears.

Their agreement was over. And as sweet as he’d been tonight, she couldn’t help thinking what had happened between them last night amounted to nothing more than a one-night stand for him. Scratching an itch. Maybe friends with benefits if she were lucky.

And now she wouldn’t even get her fairytale night with the fancy dress and the romantic dance with her handsome prince.

CHAPTER 32



The following morning Merry woke in her childhood bed in the house she'd grown up in.

The events of the night before hit her again. Grandpa had always been there. From her earliest memories. To have him gone...

She reminded herself he was fine. Well, maybe not fine, but alive and with this cardiac event as a warning, they'd all take measures to insure he stayed that way for years to come.

Still tired and dragging, she was never-the-less awake so she swung her legs out of bed, stumbled into slippers and shuffled her way downstairs.

Nearing the kitchen, she heard the grinder and smelled fresh ground coffee and knew she wasn't the first up.

As the morning sun streamed through the kitchen windows, she found that although their parents were still sleeping, Beth was there. She was bright eyed and bushy tailed as if they hadn't been at the hospital until late the night before.

"Hey." Merry collapsed into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

Concern over her grandfather and her lack of adequate sleep wasn't the only thing weighing on her. Xander was right up there in the list of woes.

"Hey. What's wrong?" Beth asked. "Gramps is going to be all right, Merry. I mean they're talking options. Maybe a pacemaker and possibly an angioplasty, but the doctor said

there's no reason he can't live a happy, healthy, active life for another decade or more."

"It's not just that."

"What is it then?" Beth asked, glancing over her shoulder as she flipped on the water in the sink to fill the coffee maker.

The lies Merry had told her family about her and Xander's relationship weighed on her. Especially now, after facing losing one of the people closest to her.

"Xander and I faked dating so Mom wouldn't throw Jeff at me but now I think I really, really like him but I don't know how he feels about me and now it's over because I'm not at the wedding." It all burst out in a long-blurred confession.

Beth stared at her for so long, Merry finally had to say, "Beth, the water."

Her sister shook her head and turned off the faucet that had long since overflowed the receptacle in her hand.

She refilled the water reservoir then hit the button to start the coffee maker heating the frothed milk, before turning. "All right. Start at the beginning and don't leave anything out."

Merry did, and it felt good. At least until the end when it came time to voice the dark truths that haunted her aloud.

"I don't know if he feels the same or if we'll even be anything to each other now. The wedding deal is over. He won't need me anymore. There's no reason for him to even have to speak to me now."

One-night stand or no one-night stand, she couldn't imagine a future between her and Xander. They'd had some fun, but now it was over. Everything would all go back to the way it had been with Xander so engrossed in work he wouldn't even notice Merry was in the office.

The coffee was done and Beth turned to face her as she reached for the sugar bowl. "It might have started out fake but I saw you two together. He genuinely likes you. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he feels the same way you do."

She shook her head. “A man like Xander doesn’t fall in love over a weekend snowman-making contest or some Christmas shopping. Especially with a girl like me.”

“Love?” Beth’s eyes widened, the spoon pausing mid stir. Her sister smiled. “You’re in love?”

“Not the point, Beth. The point is his ex-girlfriend was a model. Like a legit six foot tall, size zero model.”

Tall. Toned. Fashionable. Flawless. She looked like a young Tyra Banks. While Merry had been rocking the Little Orphan Annie-look her whole life.

“*Ex*-girlfriend is the operative word in that sentence. Model or not they’re not together. He’s not with anyone. That’s why he came to you for the wedding.”

“Exactly, because it was Christmas weekend and everyone else was busy. I was convenient.”

“If he didn’t like you, why would he extend the weekend here? You were leaving on Sunday, right? He suggested you stay until Monday.”

“Because of the snow.”

“That was an excuse. It had nothing to do with the snow and you know it.” Beth scowled as she lifted her cup to her mouth.

Seeing her sister was not going to make her a cappuccino too, Merry stood and started the process as memories of Xander here in the kitchen just a couple of weeks ago hit her hard.

Those images were followed quickly by the memory of what had happened two nights ago at her apartment. What they’d likely never do again since they had no more reason to be together once the wedding was over.

Sighing as the sadness of loss overwhelmed her, she grabbed her coffee and sank into a kitchen chair.

“Oh my God. You slept with him.”

Glancing up, she found Beth's wide-eyed gaze pinned to her. "What? Shh! No."

She glanced around to make sure her parents were still asleep and not creeping nearby.

"Liar." Beth smirked.

"Fine. Yes. Once. And it will never happen again so shush before you wake up the whole house."

A wide smile spread across Beth's face. "It was good, wasn't it?"

"Beth! I'm not going to tell—"

"So that's a big old yes." Looking satisfied, Beth was smiling so wide she could barely wrap her lips around her coffee mug.

Letting out a breath, Merry said, "Okay. Yes. It was incredible."

Beth pinned her with her gaze. "Merry, men don't have incredible sex with a woman they're only looking for one night with. Or with women they're with because of some sort of a bargain."

"Maybe men like Xander do."

"Okay, then tell me this. Do men like Xander willingly build a snowman with their bargain girl?"

"I'd appreciate if you didn't call me a *bargain girl*, thanks." But she got the point.

Beth's eyes flew wide yet again. She leaned forward and slapped her palm against the table. "You have to go back."

"What?"

"The wedding's tonight?"

"Yes."

"Drive back today. Be his date. Fulfill your part of the bargain. Plus give him the best night of sex of his life after the wedding. Then tell him how you feel."

Merry drew back. "I couldn't."

“Why not? What do you have to lose? Seriously, Merry. He either feels the same or he doesn’t. Don’t you want to find out?”

“But Grandpa—”

“Will be the first to tell you to go. You’d be back here tomorrow for Christmas Eve anyway, right? You’d be gone like twenty-four hours. Spend this morning with Gramps. Ask him yourself.”

Merry didn’t have to ask him. She knew her grandfather. Tough as nails didn’t even come close to describing him. “He’s going to tell me to go. That he’s fine and doesn’t need me hanging around his bedside like he’s an invalid.”

“Of course he is.” Beth smiled. “He really likes Xander, you know. He can’t stop talking about him.”

Her heart fluttered. “Really?”

“Yes! So go get us that man. Lock him down. None of us wanted Jeff around anymore anyway, except maybe Mom. But even she took a liking to Xander immediately.”

Merry shook her head, afraid to hope. “None of this matters if he doesn’t feel the same.”

“And you’ll never know until you ask.”

It was the most terrifying yet exhilarating thing she’d ever contemplated, but no. She couldn’t do it. Could she?

She was too tired to think any more about it right now.

“I’m going to get dressed.” She stood, taking her coffee with her.

“Good. I’m booking you an appointment for a blowout before you leave.”

“I didn’t agree to go yet,” Merry said as she walked away.

“You will,” Beth called after her.

CHAPTER 33



Xander hadn't heard from Merry since that one text the night before saying she'd arrived safely.

Not surprisingly, obsessively checking his cell for messages had done nothing but run down his already low battery.

The obsessive checking definitely hadn't made him feel any better and now, things had gotten worse because the cell was dead.

One of the groomsmen walked by and Xander reached out and tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey. You got a charger on you?"

The man's eyebrows rose. "No. Sorry. Maybe ask one of the women."

That confirmed it—Xander was acting like a woman, ringing his hands and worrying even though there was no evidence he had anything to worry about.

He shoved the useless cell phone in his pocket. It was probably for the better it was dead. He'd gotten more than a few death glares from momzilla for being on his phone between every shot the professional photographer had set up.

It wouldn't have surprised him one bit if the woman had confiscated all their phones until after the ceremony. Hell, she still might.

With a sigh, he allowed the photographer's assistant to angle him in the row of groomsmen so he faced the correct

way. He must have not heard her directions because of the complete lack of attention he'd paid to this eternally long photo session.

“Smile!”

He forced a smile, then let his mouth go slack again the moment the shot was taken.

“Let's have just the parents of the groom now,” the photographer said.

Relieved to be dismissed, Xander slunk away.

“Still no word from your date?” Rex asked.

Xander shook his head. “No.”

“I've never seen you like this. You really like this girl,” Rex observed.

“Yeah. I do.” More than liked her. But he wasn't the only one being affected by Merry's absence. “I'm really sorry about her being a no show.”

Rex waved away his concern. “Don't worry about it.”

“But what about *momzilla*?” Xander whispered. “She's going to be pissed about the lopsided dais. And the pictures.”

“Her power over me ends in...” Rex checked his watch. “Forty-six minutes. The moment I stand next to Chelsea and we both say *I do*.”

Xander wasn't so sure about that but he let Rex have his fantasy.

Meanwhile, he was being summoned for another photo.

His body might have been present but his mind was elsewhere. Namely, upstate with Merry.

He needed a car. He was in luck. They happened to be taking photos at the Plaza, where he was sure the concierge would be very helpful in hooking him up with a rental or a car service or something—

Did he have time to run to the front desk before they had to head to the church for the ceremony? Maybe, if he hurried and

there was no line at the concierge desk.

Rex was being posed for a photo with the best man as they both pretended to look at the rings when Xander tapped the groom on the shoulder. “Hey. I’ll be right back.”

“You’d better be,” Rex called after him as he skidded out of the room and trotted to the lobby.

He was distracted, single-mindedly focused on getting a car so he could get upstate to Merry the moment his wedding responsibilities were complete.

Xander didn’t even see the woman he bounced off as he skirted around her, saying, “Sorry. Sorry.”

“Xander?”

Her voice stopped him mid-step. Spinning he turned to see Merry, gorgeous and definitely dressed for a wedding.

“You’re here.”

“I am.”

“Your grandfather—”

“Threatened to tear off his monitors, check out of the hospital and drive me himself if I didn’t come.”

Xander let out a breath, willing his heart rate to slow. He itched to reach out and hug her, but things felt weird.

They were in that limbo between friends and lovers and he wasn’t sure what to do, so he asked, “He’s okay, then?”

“He had what they’re calling a cardiac event. There’s probably going to be an operation. But after that, the doctors said he’ll live many more years if he takes his pills and cuts back on all the bad stuff—like bacon and booze.”

Xander smiled. “*That’s* the part that might kill him—healthy living.”

She smiled. “True. We’re all aware that’s going to be an uphill battle. But I promised I’d be back tomorrow and help the family keep an eye on him through New Year’s Day.”

Again she didn't mention inviting him to come home with her for Christmas, even after the night they'd spent together.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't here for you last night," she said, interrupting his thoughts. "The deal was for both nights and I bailed on you for the rehearsal dinner."

Who cared about the fucking deal? This—they—had nothing to do with the deal.

"Hey! We gotta go," Rex called out as the wedding party, photographers included, mobbed the lobby heading for the door to the street.

Xander turned to Merry. "I gotta get to the church."

"Of course." She smiled and he turned to go, but heard, "Hey, Xander."

He paused and turned back to her.

"I'm glad I'm here." Rising on tip toe, she gripped the lapels of his tux, tugged him down and kissed him hard, smack on the lips.

That kiss was like an electric jolt bringing his heart back to life.

"I'm glad you're here too. Now I really gotta—"

"Go."

Breathless more from the kiss than the run, he caught up with the group. Trotting up next to Rex, he said, "She's here."

"That's good."

"Yeah," he agreed until a realization hit him. "Shit. Wait. Did your mother already fill her seat with someone from her list because she wasn't at the dinner last night?"

Rex glanced sideways. "No, because I lied my ass off for you. I swore up and down your date would be here for the wedding even though she missed the rehearsal."

"And if she didn't show?"

"Momzilla would have had to get over it."

Xander shook his head. “I’m not sure if you’re brave or just foolish.”

Rex laughed. “When it’s your turn to get married you’ll learn it helps to be a little of both.”

His turn to get married... Those words didn’t strike fear in Xander’s heart the way they had in the past.

But even thinking the word marriage was premature considering he didn’t know if he and Merry were on the same page. All because of this stupid deal they’d made to fake date. He wanted to really date her, not fake date.

It was long past time to find out what she wanted. Tomorrow, when this wedding was over.

CHAPTER 34



Merry was radiant.

Xander had the opportunity to watch her unnoticed as she sat politely and listened to the conversation happening on the other side of her.

The gold of her dress complemented the copper highlights of the silky hair framing her face. Set against the alabaster of her skin, it gave her an ethereal kind of beauty.

The venue itself was beautiful as well.

The architecture of the Plaza's ballroom was always impressive even on a normal day. But decked out for the wedding it was magical. Regal. The centerpieces alone were works of art, towering above every table.

But it all took a backseat to Merry, the center of his attention.

He'd spent most of the night with his arm around her shoulders. When he wasn't leading her by the hand to introduce her to the others.

It was as if he couldn't bear to not touch her. And now that the night was wrapping up, he hoped to touch a whole lot more of her upstairs in that room he had reserved for the night.

At the time, months before Merry was even a blip on his radar, he'd booked the room thinking he might be too tired and possibly too drunk to want to go home.

As it turned out, with Merry next to him and the event in its final moments, he was grateful to have that room upstairs

for a different reason.

The toasts had already been made and the cake cut and eaten when a slow song began. It had the feel of the final dance, or close to it.

Xander pushed his chair back, drawing Merry's attention to him. He held his hand out, palm up. "Dance with me."

A smile tipped up her lips. "I'd love to."

He couldn't say they actually danced. More like rocked to a beat in their own heads while staring into each other's eyes. All he knew was that at that moment, with Merry in his arms, her gaze locked with his, all his doubts fled. He was confident. About her feelings. About their future as a couple.

That confidence only grew as they stumbled their way into his hotel room, barely remaining upright as clothes and shoes flew.

They crashed onto the king-sized mattress, laughing as they fell, until the moment felt serious and Xander sobered. "Thank you for coming tonight."

"Thank you for inviting me."

"I—" So many words could have come out of his mouth.

I want to keep seeing you.

I want to spend Christmas with you.

I can't stop thinking of you.

I love you...

None of those came out of his mouth. Instead, what he said was, "I'm glad I did."

Then he kissed the hell out of her, hauling her body close as he feasted on her mouth before he slid down and feasted lower.

The second night of sex with Merry was no less magical than the first. Every sigh, every tremble, every time she said his name etched her indelibly into his heart. His soul.

They'd gotten to the room and into bed around midnight. They didn't actually get to sleep until hours later. The discovery of a jacuzzi tub big enough for two in the bathroom had added close to another hour to their marathon love making session.

Finally, they'd fallen into an exhausted sleep in a tangle of naked limbs.

That was not how he woke up.

He awoke alone in the room, the cold sheets the only thing his hand encountered as he reached for Merry.

As the cold light of dawn crept through the space between the drapes he could see she wasn't in the room.

Maybe she was in the bathroom.

"Merry." He listened and didn't hear anything.

Flipping on the bedside lamp he looked around the room.

Her stuff was gone. The only things left were his, which she'd been kind enough to scoop up and drape over a chair before sneaking out.

She must have left a note. He swung bare feet onto the carpet and got up, checking all the usual spots a person might leave a note. Even the bathroom. Hell, he'd be happy with a lipstick heart on the mirror. Something. Anything.

There was nothing.

He felt in the pockets of his tux jacket and located his cell...and of course it was still dead.

After Merry had arrived just before the ceremony, the last thing on his mind had been finding a charger. He regretted that decision now.

He shook his head, hurt, angry, baffled.

She'd left for Cooperstown to spend Christmas with her family. Without him. Without even a goodbye.

His fairytale night with Cinderella was over and he didn't even have one of her glass slippers to show for it.

Time to go home.

He got dressed in slacks and a sweater, balled the tux and shoved it in the overnight bag, and headed downstairs. He needed to find coffee and a cab.

What he found first were the newlyweds. Rex and Chelsea sat at a small table with a pot of coffee between them.

“Hey! Look who’s awake.” Rex smiled.

Xander groaned.

“What’s wrong?”

“Merry left. I guess she headed back upstate.”

“Weren’t you talking about joining her?”

“I was. To you. I guess I never got around to mentioning it to her.”

Chelsea shook her head. “Typical man.”

“I’m not going to argue with my lovely bride on that one before the honeymoon. Xan, why don’t you just rent a car like you were thinking of doing and follow her?”

Besides the fact he had no idea if she actually wanted him there, because she wouldn’t have snuck out if she had, there was another reason. “I don’t remember her parents’ address.”

Rex’s eyes widened. “I thought you spent the weekend there with her.”

“I did. But she drove and I guess I wasn’t paying attention where we were going. I don’t even know what highway we were on.”

“Uh, hello. Google maps,” Chelsea suggested.

“Yeah. My phone is dead.” He hung his head in shame.

He supposed he could break into the HR office at Paragon and find her file. But that might only have her city address at the Dakota. He needed her home address.

Chelsea shook her head, picking up her own phone. “What’s Merry’s last name and what town do her parents live in? I’ll see if I can find a listing for them or at least map a

route for you. You can charge your phone in the car and call when you get close.”

“Cooperstown. And her full name is Mariah Lee Clark. Her parents are Ambrose and Susan Clark. Her grandfather is Robert—”

Chelsea wasn't googling anymore. She was looking at him like he'd grown a dick in the middle of his forehead.

“What's wrong?”

“Merry is a *Clark*?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Why had she said it like that? *A Clark*, like that was supposed to mean something to him.

She typed in something then turned her cell to face him. He took it and read what was on the screen and it was a lot.

The search results page was populated with press about the history of the Clark family in Cooperstown. They were the founders of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

As he went further down the rabbit hole the word Dakota caught his eye and—*mother fucker*—the Clark family had built the Dakota.

The more he read, the more things started to make sense. Like how a low-level new hire could live in a seven-bedroom apartment in one of the most prestigious buildings in the city.

But it also raised questions.

She and her family were the most down to earth people he'd ever met. Yet, her family was also possibly among the wealthiest of his acquaintances. And not new money either, but long-standing generational wealth. Old money. Rockefeller rich, and they had been for a century and a half.

That meant his theory, his excuse that he'd been raised by absentee parents and sent away to boarding school because that's how it was when families had money, went right out the window.

The Clarks had money and were the most loving, kind, close-knit family he'd ever known.

Rex leaned over and glanced at the screen on the phone Xander still held, frozen in his hand. "Look at you, dating up."

Only Xander hadn't known that was what he was doing. Not at all.

All he knew was it didn't matter who Merry was or what she had, he loved her. Her being a Clark didn't make a lick of difference to him. He'd loved her before knowing and now that he did know, it didn't matter. Not one iota.

What mattered was if she loved him back.

He handed the cell back to Chelsea.

"Are you going to follow her?" Rex asked.

"I don't know if she feels the same way I do."

"Did you tell her how you feel?" Chelsea asked.

"No."

She shook her head again on an exhale.

Rex said, "I've only been married for about eighteen hours but I can tell you that face on my lovely bride is her polite way of telling you she thinks you're an idiot."

"I know. And I agree."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Chelsea asked.

"I'm going to go home, pack a bag, book a rental car and find Merry's house?" he said, more question than answer.

"Good idea." She took a pen from her purse and scribbled on a paper napkin.

It said, "Fernleigh Manor, 55 River Street, Cooperstown."

"What's this?"

"Her address."

Rex glanced over at the napkin, his eyes widening "Her house is a manor and has a name and you didn't notice?"

“Yeah, I know. I was an idiot.”

But not anymore. He was going to get that girl and make sure she knew exactly how he felt about her.

CHAPTER 35



Xander wasn't answering.
Why wasn't he answering?

Maybe he was still sleeping? Or maybe his cell was on silent from the ceremony and he forgot to turn the sound back on. That would make sense.

She dialed the number for the Plaza and asked for his room but was told he'd already checked out.

Okay, that was good. He'd go home, right? If he was feeling anything like she was after their handful of hours sleep, he'd get coffee, possibly something to eat, then head home.

So that was where she was going to go. His house.

Her phone rang as she swung the Land Rover out of the parking garage.

She saw it was Beth and hit to answer. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Miss Cynical. I'm checking up on you. Where are you?"

"In the car about to head to you."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Merry! Why?"

"Because I didn't have the nerve to ask him to come home with me for Christmas last night at the wedding." And they'd been a little busy doing other things in the hotel room. "And

now this morning he's not answering his texts and calls are going right to voicemail."

"Oh, my God. I swear, you're helpless when it comes to these things. I should have gone back to the city with you. If I had he'd be in the car with you right now."

Probably true. But in the process Beth would no doubt have embarrassed and humiliated her so...

But Beth was right about one thing. Merry had messed up. She'd thought she was doing him a favor letting him sleep in this morning. Her plan had been to go back to the apartment and do all the things that needed doing that she hadn't had time to handle Friday night when she'd rushed to Cooperstown.

She was going to be gone for a week. She had to pack a few things, including her computer. Water the plants. Remind the concierge she'd be gone. Turn down the thermostat. Pour out the milk and toss anything in the fridge that would get funky. And empty the garbage so it didn't smell when she got back in January.

All stuff she thought she could get done quick before Xander woke. Then she was going to call him and see if he maybe wanted to spend at least part of the week with her in Cooperstown.

She could give him the bus information if he only wanted to come for a couple of days and not the whole time. They ran between Oneonta and Penn Station a few times every day. Although now she thought about it, Alexander Barrington on a bus would be like King Charles eating at McDonalds.

Yup. Beth was right. She was helpless at this stuff. And now, she couldn't even get a hold of Xander to make the ridiculous offer.

"So what are you going to do? Just give up?" Beth asked, her tone accusatory.

"No, I'm not. I'm heading to his house now to see if he's there and didn't see my messages."

"There you go. Finally! Be assertive."

Merry had a flashback of Beth on the cheer squad in high school performing a cheer that said exactly that. *Be Assertive. Be-be assertive.*

She shook the memory away and concentrated on the road. There was a surprising number of cars considering it was Sunday morning and Christmas Eve. She guessed it was all those people who had last minute shopping to do. Whatever it was from, it was making her drive challenging, even without her hands shaking and her heart pounding as she made her way to Xander, where she'd very possibly make a fool of herself inviting him to Christmas with her family.

“Let me go so I don't crash.”

“Call me—”

“Will do. Bye.” Merry disconnected the call then gripped the wheel at ten and two as she wound her way slowly toward Xander's brownstone.

She pulled up to the curb just as a taxi was pulling away.

Then she saw him. He was bounding up the stairs, head down, keys out.

Panicking that he'd disappear inside without seeing her, she leaned on the horn.

He turned, frowning before his eyes widened.

She cut the engine and got out to stand on the sidewalk. “Hi,” she said when he got to her.

“Hi,” he said, his expression hard to read.

“I called and texted,” she said, which sounded pitiful and needy in her own ears.

“My cell has been dead since yesterday before the ceremony.”

That fact made her feel moderately better.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, setting his bag down on the ground.

Xander's question did not make her feel better. She swallowed hard. It was time to be brave and just ask him.

"I wanted to know if you maybe wanted to spend Christmas with me. In Cooperstown," she blurted.

His expression softened. "You want me to?"

"Yes. I should have asked long before now. I just wasn't sure you'd want to."

"Of course I want to. I love spending time with your family."

"My family loves spending time with you too." She took a step closer. "I love spending time with you."

He stepped closer still, his head tipped down as he looked at her. "I love spending time with you too."

"So maybe we can keep spending time together?" she asked, catching her lip between her teeth.

He shook his head as a small, crooked smile tipped up one corner of his lips. "We're both really bad at this."

"I know, right?" She let out a breath and stared into his eyes, hoping he'd take the lead.

There was so much she wanted to say, but she didn't think she could. He'd have to start.

Lifting one hand he brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek. "Merry Lee Clark, I don't want to fake date you anymore. I want to really date you. If that's what you want."

"That's what I want."

He nodded his head. "Okay, good. So as long as we're communicating, I think I should probably tell you that I've fallen in love with you. And if Jeffy boy shows his face at your house again, I can't be held responsible if I deck him."

Tears filled her eyes as she smiled. "I'm in love with you too. And if Jeff shows up again, I'll deck him for you."

"Good. Now we've got that settled I'm going to pack a bag and then we can leave. Oh—after we stop at the holiday

market.”

“The holiday market?” she asked.

“Yup. I’m buying those damn alpaca gloves you got me hooked on for everyone in your family.” He took her keys from her and hit the button to lock the doors on the Land Rover before handing the keys back.

“You don’t have to get them any—”

Picking up his bag in one hand, he grabbed her hand with the other and led her to the stairs. “I want to. And I’m just warning you, I got you a gift too and I don’t care if you didn’t get me one. I wanted to get this for you so too bad.”

“Fine. I got you something too. It’s in the car. I was going to shove it through your mail slot if you weren’t home.”

“Fine. I can’t wait to open it.”

“Me too.”

“Why are we fighting?” she asked.

He turned to face the door, dropping the bag to fish his keys out of his pocket again. “Because I’ve been upset with you not inviting me to Christmas for like a week now.”

“Really?” She tugged on his hand and pulled him back to face her. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Chelsea and Rex would tell you it’s because I’m an idiot. And I might have to agree with them.” Holding both of her hands in his, he dipped his head to press it against her forehead.

“We make a perfect pair then, because Beth would tell you I’m also an idiot for not inviting you to Christmas a week ago.”

“I love you, Merry Lee. Promise me we’ll both try to stop being idiots and tell each other what we’re thinking from now on.”

“I love you too, Alexander Barrington. And I promise.”

He let out a groan.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I’m tempted to drag you into my bedroom and make us late for Christmas Eve at your family’s house. It’s going to be a long sexless week with you so close yet so far in your bedroom and me in the guest room.”

“Oh, no, it’s not. The walls of that house are like a soundproof vault. Not to mention there’s a full bathroom attached to my bedroom... and it’s got a bathtub.”

His eyes flashed. “This week is looking better and better. I’ll grab my computer. We might be staying longer.”

“Xander. We can’t.”

He sighed. “One day you’ll learn, you’re not dating a rule follower. You’re dating a rule breaker.”

“Break all the rules you want. Just don’t break my heart.” She said it like a joke, but she’d never been more serious in her life.

“Never,” he whispered, before leaning low and sealing that promise with a kiss.

EPILOGUE



ONE YEAR LATER

Inside the apartment in the Dakota was as bustling as the city streets outside.

Eddie and Anna with their new baby Robbie, Beth and her new husband Brian, Grandpa with his new pacemaker and Ambrose and Susan had all descended upon the city en masse for the week leading up to Christmas.

Xander was told—by none other than Charlie the doorman—that this was how it always used to be *in the old days*. The family would come to the city for the weeks leading up to Christmas every December. Then head upstate for the actual holiday.

This year, they'd revived the tradition and he could see Merry couldn't be happier.

The women went shopping and yes, he was told they did wait in line to see the windows. The men were dragged to the Nutcracker, choir and orchestral performances, and a few Broadway plays. And there was more drinking and eating by all than was healthy.

Truth be told Xander loved every minute of it. Just like he'd loved last Christmas in Cooperstown. Christmas Eve service at the family's church. Presents around the tree in pajamas in the morning. And tons of amazing food throughout the day as friends, neighbors and relatives stopped by to raise a glass and wish the Clarks good cheer.

Even Jeffy boy had dropped by, but as the victor in the contest for Merry's heart, Xander found it in himself to be

magnanimous to the guy. That was mostly because he and Merry had celebrated the holiday privately the night before by taking a pretty naughty—as in X-rated—bath together.

Sexual exploits aside, the holiday at the Clark's was as he'd expected. Like living in a Norman Rockwell painting.

It was the family Christmas he'd never had and didn't realize he'd always wanted.

“Are you sure you don't want to go out with your friends? They can probably still add to the reservation—”

“I don't need to go out with the guys. I'm happy to be with your family.” He tugged her to him and held tight, close enough he could smell the perfume he'd given her for their first Christmas together.

“Are you sure?” she asked, playing with one of the colored designs on the ugly sweater she'd given him last year.

He'd laughed when he'd opened it and put it right on. He'd even bought himself one this year. It was cashmere but even so, it was over the top and ridiculous so it qualified as an ugly sweater in his mind.

“Merry, stop. We promised to always tell each other what we want and I'm telling you I'm exactly where I want to be. Right here, with you and your family.”

She smiled. “Me too. Except when we're in Cooperstown. Then I'm happy to be there.”

He smiled and echoed. “Me too.”

They'd been managing pretty well, spending most of their time in the city, but also spending plenty of time upstate. Sometimes working remotely, sometimes just using up their vacation days.

He anticipated that continuing, even when Merry finally did make the career move that was long overdue, left Paragon and took a job with one of the Clark organizations.

Since the family had businesses in both the city and upstate, not much would change for them—except they'd

spend less time gazing at each other across the office like they did now.

But he did anticipate one change... the ring box he'd been carrying around all week, hidden in his pocket, reminded him of it.

He was torn about when to give it to her. Christmas was obvious, and he hated being obvious. New Year's Eve too.

Fuck it. There was no time like the present.

She'd turned to say something to her grandfather, and when she turned back, Xander had the ring box out and open and was kneeling down.

Merry covered her mouth with both hands. "What are you doing?"

"It's a proposal, darling," he began. "And I'm hoping you'll say yes. Merry Lee Clark, will you make me the happiest man alive and be my wife?"

The room had gone silent. Every Clark eye was on him, but still Merry seemed speechless until Grandpa said, "Jesus, girl. Don't keep him waiting. Answer the man."

"Yes." It came out as a squeak but it was good enough for him.

He stood and slipped the ring on her finger. Meanwhile, around him chaos erupted. Congratulations were delivered while cell phones were raised to document the event.

"Oh my goodness. What a surprise. It's a good thing we've got champagne chilled," her mother said, rushing to the kitchen.

"Good thing you needed a date for that wedding," Beth said softly as she hugged him first and then Merry.

"Good thing," he agreed, laughing.

In fact, he might have to ask meddling Evan Klein to be his best man. Hell, he should probably send Rex's momzilla a bottle of bubbly too as a thank you.

It might have come together in a convoluted roundabout way but everything happened exactly as it was meant to.

Glancing up, he saw money exchanging hands amid the males of the family and frowned. “What’s going on over there?” he asked.

Merry glanced over and shrugged.

Beth chuckled. “Oh, that. We all had a bet going about when you’d propose. I was betting on Christmas, so thanks for ruining *that*.” She slapped at his arm playfully.

“So who won?” he asked, ever amused and amazed by this family.

“Gramps. He said you’d never make it all the way to Christmas.”

Xander smiled and pulled Merry in for a hug. The old man was right. He couldn’t wait.

Although knowing Merry and her love of this holiday, he couldn’t blame Beth for betting on Christmas. He would have bet on it too.

Remember Xander’s new client Bailey?

She gets herself into some trouble and it’ll take Xander and one sexy unsuspecting Navy SEAL to get her out of it.

Read it all in [HOME COMING](#)



Want more Merry and Xander?

Wedding bells are ringing but with Xander’s parents in town meeting Merry’s family for the first time sparks fly!

Grab the free [BONUS](#) to be there for the action. Can’t tap on that link?

Enter CatJohnson.net/bonus into a browser or scan the QR code.



BEHIND THE BOOK



Writing can be a balancing act of fact and fiction. One of my favorite parts is taking real places, people and events and wrapping them in the romance in my stories.

For instance, although Mariah Clark and her immediate family is fictional, the Clark family and their Cooperstown Gilded Age home, *Fernleigh Manor*, is very real.

The family's not-for-profit, the Clark Foundation, also exists. It funds local hospitals and museums.

I live not too far from Cooperstown's Baseball Hall of Fame, founded in 1936 by Stephen Clark. His granddaughter, Jane Clark, is still very involved in operations there, in particular the annual Legends Weekend .

As for the Manhattan setting, the Dakota Building overlooking Central Park where Merry lives is real. It was built by the older generation of Clarks. They owned the building until it turned co-op in 1961. My research says there is actually a seven-bedroom apartment inside. I don't know if it still belongs to any of the Clark family, but wouldn't it be fun if it did?

But what about the story concept itself?

The idea of a group of bridesmaids and groomsmen being forced to come up with dates for a Christmas wedding by the groom's overbearing mother was not mine. That credit belongs to Zee Irwin, who lucky for all of us, invited other authors to come along for the ride and I happily jumped on board.

Besides fake relationships, love stories between opposites are some of my favorite to write—whether grumpy-sunshine or opposites attract or even enemies-to-lovers—I love writing the friction when vastly different characters rub up against each other. Since every one of the stories was to have a Christmas theme, I chose to have a story between a holiday hater versus an over-the-top Christmas lover and so Xander and Merry’s love story was born.

Cat



A big city billionaire with a bride from a small town. A high society New York City wedding with a momzilla being bossy boots. And one crazy bet. Will the bridesmaids and groomsmen find their own dates to the wedding of the century this Christmas, or will they all fall victim to Momzilla's decree? Find out in these [Betting on Christmas](#) romances.

The Groomsmen

[Mr. Grumpy's Christmas Date Cat Johnson](#)

[He's Looking Like a Christmas Miracle Amy Stephens](#)

[The Christmas Bargain Peggy McKenzie](#)

[She's a Hot Christmas Mess Sofia Aves](#)

[All I Want for Christmas is Her Harper Cross](#)

The Bridesmaids

[It Happened One Christmas Zee Irwin](#)

[Who Needs a Boyfriend at Christmas Delancey Stewart](#)

[Christmas & Other Inconveniences Tracy Broemmer](#)

[Merry & Bright Christmas Megan Ryder](#)

[Christmas with Her Fake Boyfriend Kim Law](#)

View all the books in this collection:

Scan me



MORE FROM CAT

Want more steamy small town romance?

Welcome to Mudville, NY!

Smalltown Secrets

KISSING BOOKS

Things heat up when misplaced author Harper clashes with grumpy small town farmer Stone Morgan.

RED HOT

Will Red & Cash get out of the friend zone? And will these friends become casual lovers, or much more?

HONEY BUNS

Opposites attract between small town baker Bethany and the man trying to ruin her town and her business, big city billionaire Brendan.

ZERO FORKS

Sparks fly between the youngest Morgan brother, the always optimistic Boone, and his boss, the older workaholic, down-on-love woman who hired him as her male nanny.

UNDERCOVER SANTA

Local girl Elizabeth gets a second chance at love when her teenage crush, city-boy Christopher, returns to Mudville decades later. But why is he pretending to be someone else?

MISTER NAUGHTY

Is Stone ready to step up and tie the knot? More, will Harper say yes once she knows he's actually Mr. Naughty, her hated anonymous writing nemesis?

DOG DAYS

Mudville's own wounded warrior Michael Timmerman returns home and wants nothing to do with do-gooder Stephanie who's determined to save both him and the shelter dog in her care.

BAD DECISIONS

Deputy Carson finds love, but is she the criminal he should be arresting instead of kissing?

CADAVER LAB

He's a former Army medic. She owns a book and wine shop. It's all the makings of one steamy small town romance... except he runs a cadaver lab and she sees dead people.



Welcome to Bitter End, TN

Wilder Brothers

City Girl Seeks Cowboy

A grumpy rich single dad is forced to hire as his nanny the much too sunshiny stranger who just crashed, literally, into his town with her two besties. But Olivia has a secret. One that Wyatt Wilder fears could affect his entire family.

Her Playboy Cowboy Lover

Ethan Wilder is a charmer, rodeo champion and a player not looking to commit for more than one night. But rich New York socialite Poppy makes him want to change that. Now he just has to get her to give him a chance.

Between a Rock and a Hard Cowboy

Want another story about a holiday-hating grump charmed by Christmas and love but with a twist? This book strands a grinchy city girl computer hacker with a Christmas-loving former soldier slash sexy cowboy during a blizzard.

Wilder Brothers of Bitter End

A collection of the three Wilder Brothers titles listed above. (City Girl, Playboy Cowboy, Hard Cowboy)

The Thief and the Agent

When he discovers a con man has been using his name to commit crimes all across the country, the real Emmett Wilder is forced to come out of the shadows.



Find a complete list of Cat's titles at CatJohnson.net



HOME COMING

Superstar Bailey Knowles needs a fake boyfriend, not a bodyguard. Luckily there's one unsuspecting Navy SEAL home for the holidays who's perfect to step into the role of both.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A top 10 *New York Times* and nine-time *USA Today* bestselling contemporary romance author, Cat Johnson writes hot alpha heroes (who sometimes wear cowboy or combat boots) and the sassy heroines brave enough to love them.

Known for her creative marketing, Cat has sponsored bull riding cowboys, promoted romance using bologna and owns a collection of cowboy boots and camouflage for book signings.

She writes full time from a small town in upstate New York. Learn more at CatJohnson.net.

Don't miss deals, new releases or subscriber exclusives. Join the mail list at catjohnson.net/news or scan the QR code.



Copyright © 2023 by Cat Johnson

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.