

A woman with dark hair, wearing a black hooded garment, is shown in profile, looking upwards. The background is a soft, out-of-focus scene of falling petals or flowers, creating a romantic and ethereal atmosphere. The title 'A Little Light' is written in a cursive font, with 'A Little' in white and 'Light' in yellow.

*A Little
Light*

BESTSELLING LESBIAN ROMANCE AUTHOR

MELISSA TEREZE

*A little
light*

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*With a little time
With a little hope
With a little light
You'll never know
A little strength inside
Stop and rewind...*

- Delta Goodrem

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CHAPTER I

“TELL ME...HOW DID IT GO?”

Andi lowered her hot chocolate to the wooden table, frowning as she watched the marshmallows melt beneath the liquid. How *had* it gone? She couldn't quite say. “Okay, I suppose.”

Sally watched Andi over the rim of her own cup, her eyes slightly narrowed. “I know it can't have been okay. I also know you like to pretend everything is fine when it's not.”

“Sally, I *am* fine. I have been for several months now.” Andi wasn't fine. She was lonely, and she didn't know how to get out of the headspace she was in. She dragged a hand through her black hair, exhaling a slow breath through her nose. “How about you? What's been happening?”

“Other than my best friend avoiding me, not a lot.”

Andi rolled her eyes at that. Sally always assumed it was avoidance when Andi didn't pick up the phone or when she declined a night out. It wasn't avoidance, though. It was Andi wanting space from the constant conversation she found herself in.

“Andi?”

Andi snapped out of her thoughts. “Mm?”

“How did it go? Really. How did it go?”

“I've only moved house. Something I've done many times over the years.” Andi wasn't a stranger when it came to house moves. Not only had she travelled around the country in her fifty years on this earth, but she was an estate agent, too. She watched people moving all the time.

“That may be true, but you've never done it alone. At least, not in over twenty years.”

No. She hadn't.

"And I don't want to get into something that's going to upset you, but I *do* want to know that you're okay there. The place is beautiful, but it's not the same, is it?"

"It'll all be okay. It's going to take some getting used to, but I have spent the last fifteen months alone. It's not as though I'm suddenly on my own."

Andi saw the frustration in Sally's eyes, but Andi didn't want to dwell on the past this evening. She wanted to enjoy herself with Sally; she couldn't deal with the life she had sat in boxes at home.

Home.

It wasn't quite home yet, but it would be. And if Andi had things her way, she would settle and never consider moving again. She was fifty; it was time to put down roots once and for all.

You had roots. You had it all.

Andi had the perfect life with the perfect woman. She'd had sensational Christmases, incredible holidays abroad, and she'd never imagined for one moment that it could all end. Only it had. Fifteen months ago.

"I know you had this conversation before the time came. Jane *wanted* you to move on and be happy."

Andi stared through the crowd at the Christmas market, her eyes burning.

"Babe?"

"It's hard to find that happiness," Andi said as she turned to Sally. "I know what she wanted, but it's not as easy as just moving on. I spent twenty-two years with her. I can't just erase that and pretend I'm looking for a future wife...or anything close to that. Quite frankly, I'm not sure I'll be in a relationship again."

"And nobody is asking you to, certainly not soon, but you can still...have fun."

"Have fun?" Andi lifted a brow, her stomach churning at the thought of what Sally could possibly be insinuating. "You think I'm in any position to *have fun*?"

Sally placed a hand on Andi's wrist, smiling. "All I'm saying is, don't dismiss the idea completely. You never know who could come into your life. Let's not forget that you shot down Jane all those years ago."

Andi wore a sad smile. Jane had pursued her for months on end, to no avail. They had a twenty-year age gap between them, and Andi point blank refused to go on a date with her. But Jane had wooed Andi without even

really trying. She just had a subtle confidence that had stolen Andi's heart as those months passed. But it was the moment they'd kissed that put a stop to the chasing. Andi knew she wanted to be with Jane...and what a beautiful life they'd had together. Andi had known that their marriage wouldn't last forever, Jane was seventy when she passed away, but she wouldn't change her decision to commit herself to Jane. Not in a million years.

"I did." Andi grinned this time, reminded of the back and forth they'd gone through. They'd shamelessly flirted at any opportunity. A date hadn't happened immediately, but still, it had all been a part of the thrill and excitement. "I remember those days very well."

"They were good days. I'll never forget the day you called me to say you'd finally slept with her and that your life would never be the same again."

Andi nodded. "And I was right. Nobody will ever compare to Jane."

"And I'm not saying that anyone you meet in the future has to...or will."

Shaking her head, Andi lifted her cup and finished her drink. She didn't want to think about what she'd lost. She didn't want to cry and be sad anymore. She just wanted to enjoy a rare night out. The property market was booming lately. She didn't know the next time this would be possible.

"Can we just catch up tonight? I've missed spending time with you lately, and I want to enjoy it. We can do whatever this is another time."

Sally lifted a shoulder, seemingly satisfied with that. "That works for me. Does this mean we can move onto a bar at some point, though?"

"Maybe. I'm pacing myself." Andi turned her watch towards herself. "It is only seven, after all. And we need to eat."

"I'm holding you to that."



Andi shifted from side to side, waiting patiently—just about—for another hot chocolate. Sally sat at their table, talking animatedly to one of their friends on the phone. She'd missed this. Not running herself into the ground to keep busy. Not obsessively looking for something to do just so she didn't feel so alone.

This was nice. It was familiar once. It was something Andi wanted to keep doing. Jane would hate the idea of Andi being home alone night after night. She would also hate knowing that Andi was at a Christmas market... drinking hot chocolate.

Why? Because Christmas markets always involved mulled wine and spiced cider in the past. But those things reminded Andi of a life she didn't have anymore. She wasn't ready to go back to old traditions just yet, but this was a step in the right direction. She hadn't left the house in the run up to Christmas at all last year, she hadn't bothered to put up a Christmas tree, and sadly, she'd spent Christmas Day alone.

Her friends and family didn't know that. She'd told them all she was going elsewhere. But being alone was what Andi had wanted and needed last year. This time...not so much.

Sally was right. She needed to start living her life again. She needed to find a new normal and new traditions, all while remembering Jane in her own ways. Jane wasn't a woman Andi could ever forget, nor would she ever wish to leave their memories behind. Those days had been the best of Andi's life. God help anyone who tried to top the life she'd had with Jane. That wasn't something she was sure could be matched or bettered.

But life wasn't about comparisons, not really. Life was about being fulfilled in whatever way you could do so. It was about change and difficulties that you faced head on. Andi had always liked a challenge—there was a time when Jane had been one—and she was determined to have a wonderful Christmas with the people she was lucky to have in her life. Friends, family, work colleagues. This year, she was taking whatever she could get, and she was going to make it count.

Jane was gone, and if Andi had learnt anything from it all, it was that she didn't know when her time would come. Why not make the most of what days she did have?

Smiling when the barista at the small hut placed her hot chocolate down, Andi took it and added a few marshmallows from the glass jar.

“There's nothing available. It's all rubbish or a huge project. I just want a place I can move into and feel comfortable.”

Andi's ears pricked at the sound of a woman's voice beside her. She lingered a moment, rudely eavesdropping.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a loft in Liverpool? And before you say anything else, I don't *want* a house. I don't *want* a garden. I

just want something that feels like me. Which is a loft. On the dock. Why isn't anyone selling up? I thought since the lockdowns, people wanted space and gardens?"

Andi cleared her throat and turned around. The blonde woman who spoke on the phone eyed her. Though she may have been wearing a frown, her beautiful blue eyes immediately caught Andi's attention. "Can I help you?"

"Sorry, I overheard your conversation."

The woman scoffed, shaking her head. "I'll call you back later. Seems people around here don't know how to mind their own business."

Andi's brows rose at that. Maybe she wouldn't help this woman after all. Which was a shame for them both since Andi was about to put a loft up for sale in the coming days.

The woman lowered her phone from her ear and locked it, shoving it into her pocket. "Happy now?"

With a slight smile directed at her, Andi chose not to hand over her business card. "Never mind. I was just trying to help. Have a lovely evening."

Andi took her hot chocolate then turned and walked away, stopping suddenly when a small child crashed into her. The child apologised as she wobbled on her feet, but Andi could only smile at her. No harm done. "That's okay."

As she reached the table Sally sat at, her best friend belly laughing as she continued her call, she looked up to find the woman at the hut watching her. When she wasn't so angry, she had a beautiful face. A striking jawline and penetrating blue eyes.

"Okay, well, Andi is back so I'd better go. Call you through the week. Bye." Sally puffed out a breath, shaking her head. "Hillary sends her love... and has invited you over for a Christmas party."

"It's not Christmas for another seven weeks." Six and a half, but who was counting?

"Oh, I don't know when it is. She just asked me to mention it and said that she'd be in touch with more details when she has them."

"That'll be nice."

Sally's eyes lit up. "You'll come?!"

"I'll come."

Sally almost fell over the bench as she rushed to her feet and took the seat beside Andi instead. She wrapped her arms around Andi, squeezing her tight. "It's so good to have you back, babe. We've all missed you so much."

When Sally released Andi, she turned to Sally and placed a hand to her knee. "I'm going to try harder to enjoy life more. I promise."

"It's been so difficult for you, we all understand that, but you'll find your feet again. You're one of the strongest women I know, Andi."

"Once upon a time, yes."

Sally took Andi's face in her hands, stroking a thumb across her cheek as a tear fell. "When you're ready, we're *all* here for you. Okay?"

"I know you are. You've all been amazing since I lost Jane. But what you said before...you were right. It's time to live again and have some fun. I don't know what fun looks like anymore, but being with friends is a good place to start."

Sally leaned in and kissed Andi's cheek. "It's the best place to start."

Andi exhaled a breath. She was done with crying and feeling sorry for herself. And even if she wasn't done with crying, this wasn't the best place for it. Not while families sat around getting into the Christmas spirit. She could cry while she was alone at home.

"Excuse me?"

Andi wiped at her tear-stained cheeks, clearing her throat as she looked up and behind Sally. It was the woman from the hut. The one with the dreamy blue eyes. Andi shouldn't be admiring her eyes, should she? "Yeah?"

"I upset you back there. I'm sorry." She nervously shifted from left to right, her nose red from the cold. "I'm not having a very good day. I'm sorry I took it out on you."

"It's fine. You didn't upset me."

Sally turned around and looked up at the woman. "Why would you be here apologising unless you'd done something wrong? Who even are you?"

Andi placed a hand to Sally's shoulder. "It's okay. Relax."

"No. If she's upset you, I want to know why."

Here we go. Andi got to her feet and took a business card from her jeans pocket. She had those bloody things in every place she could. "I heard you on the phone. I have a loft going up for sale towards the end of next week. If you wanted to have a look at it before it goes live, here's my card. I'll be there tomorrow morning taking pictures and preparing it for sale."

The woman frowned, looking down at the card now in her hand. "Thank you."

"Not everyone is out to interfere. I really did just want to help."

"God, I'm so sorry." She eyed the business card again. "Andi."

“As I said, I’ll be there tomorrow. Call me if you want to come over and have a look around.”

“Absolutely. I’ll be there.” The woman extended her hand; Andi took it and shook. “I’m Rachel. And I feel like a complete idiot now. Can I buy you a drink or a waffle to apologise?”

“No, thank you. Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow.” Andi almost held her breath waiting for a response from Rachel. She hadn’t anticipated being so struck by someone this evening, but she was sure it was only down to the setting they were in. Had it been snowing, Andi may well have imagined herself in a Hallmark movie. *Those eyes...damn.*

“You will. Definitely. Thank you so much.”

Andi took a step back and returned to her seat at the table. Sally was still eyeing Rachel suspiciously, but Sally was often protective of her friends. As Rachel slowly walked away, clearly embarrassed by her behaviour at the hot chocolate hut, Sally turned back to Andi.

“What was that all about?”

“She was looking for a loft to buy. I cut into her call, and she didn’t take that very well. But it all worked out in the end.”

Sally grinned. “Does this mean we can go and get warm in a bar now?”

“Fine. Yes. Let’s go to a bar.”

CHAPTER 2

RACHEL DIDN'T KNOW WHETHER TO LAUGH OR CRY AS SHE WALKED THROUGH the gates on the dock and towards the building Andi had given her an address for. The humiliation of last night still sat at the front of her mind, reminding Rachel that she had to curb the attitude she seemed to have developed recently. Andi had only been trying to help, and Rachel had practically flown off the handle. Unnecessary and certainly uncalled for.

She stopped outside another set of gates, looking up at the old building. She had studied pictures online of these loft apartments and had wanted to take a closer look for quite some time. But nobody seemed to want to give these particular homes up...until now.

She's some kind of friggin' Christmas angel.

Rachel put their initial meeting to the back of her mind and squared her shoulders. Everyone had bad days now and then, and she'd apologised to Andi already. If Andi was still offended, she wouldn't have invited Rachel over for a first look at the loft. *Okay, it's time to find your forever home.*

Rachel had a feeling this loft was going to be exactly what she had been dreaming of for so long. Now more than ever, she desperately craved a fresh start. With a love life that eluded her and a heart that was slowly beginning to mend, she needed to find something that felt safe. She wanted to be in a home that she could turn into her forever.

Okay, it would have been ideal if she was viewing this loft with a significant other by her side, but Rachel was still very lucky to be in this position at all. She had worked hard, saved every penny she could, and this was the outcome of her dedication. Some may say that her job wasn't 'respectable,' but those people didn't matter to her. She had done well for

someone who came from nothing...and she was going to make the most of it.

With excitement building in her chest, Rachel pressed the button beside loft nine. Part of her had expected Andi to ignore her call this morning—karma, if you will—but she hadn't. Andi's gentle voice hadn't held a single hint of attitude. Unlike Rachel, who didn't know how to speak to people these days.

"Hello?"

That was Andi's voice. Rachel recognised it instantly. It was calm and soft. It was the kind of voice that had the hairs on the back of Rachel's neck standing. Sultry, perhaps.

"H-hi, it's Rachel."

"Oh, hi. Come on up. I'll leave the front door open for you."

"Perfect, thanks." Rachel pulled the main door open and rushed towards the lift. She didn't want to waste another second. This home could be really what she needed. She was fed up in the place she lived in, and it only reminded her of a woman she'd tried to have love her in return. *Juliet*. Rachel had to smile at the thought of her. Still, it wasn't to be.

It hadn't mattered that Juliet had only been to her place on a very small handful of occasions; it was the fact she'd been there at all. Rachel had foolishly fallen for her client, all while her client was in love with another woman.

Story of her life, really.

She reached the top floor of the old dock building, noting how quiet it was. *Exactly what I need. Peace and quiet*. She strode down the hallway, her breath catching when she realised it was the last door *and* the corner plot. It could only mean great views of the river and dock area.

With a deep breath inhaled, Rachel pushed the front door open, taken aback by her initial impression. "H-hello?"

"Come on in," Andi called out, but she was nowhere to be seen. "Help yourself to looking around. I'll be with you soon. No rush or anything."

Rachel dared to take another step forward, her legs shaking. She adored exposed brick walls, and this loft had several. The enormous open-plan kitchen with the long island caught her eye immediately, but it was the living area that she moved towards. She'd never seen a corner couch like it in all of her days. Soft, dark brown leather. It had to be at least an eight-seater... maybe more. It separated the living room from the rest of the space alone. The hardwood flooring had to be worth a fortune, and it had been maintained

very well. Perhaps even recently re-varnished.

“Hi.”

Rachel placed a hand on her chest at Andi’s voice. She spun on her heel, knowing full well she was wearing a ridiculously huge grin, and focused on Andi. *Oh, wow.* Had Andi been so attractive last night while Rachel had her own head up her arse? That wasn’t important right now. Rachel was here for one thing only... “Who the hell would want to give up a place like this?”

“You like it?”

“Oh, I adore it, and I’ve only seen the living room.” Rachel shoved her hands in the pockets of her jeans, slowly taking in each and every feature. The floor-to-ceiling windows let in monumental amounts of light, even on a cold and dreary Liverpool winter’s day. “This is something else, Andi.”

“Could you see yourself living here, though? That’s the big question.”

Could Rachel see herself living here? Without a shadow of a doubt. “Can I move in today? Does that give you an idea of how much I love the place?”

Andi smiled, lowering her eyes to the camera in her hands. Only as she did so, Rachel realised she wanted to be looking into those huge brown eyes. Andi was a very attractive woman. “Maybe you should have a look around the rest of the place first. It’s only a two-bedroom loft, but they’re a good size. The third bedroom was turned into an office and reading space by the previous owners. I guess you could turn it back. It depends entirely on what you and your boyfriend, husband, partner want to do with it.”

“First of all, I don’t have a boyfriend. Nor do I plan to find one who will come in here and take over my space. Also, I’m into women...*thankfully.*”

Something flashed in Andi’s eyes at those words. And then she nodded. “Then this couldn’t go to a more perfect person. The previous owners were a married lesbian couple.”

Rachel threw up her hands. “I should have known the moment I walked in here. It’s tastefully decorated, so that explains a lot.”

“Thank you.”

Huh? Why was Andi thanking her? “Thank you?”

“This is my place. But I wasn’t the one who had an impeccable eye for detail. That was *all* Jane.” Andi lowered the camera she was holding to the island in the kitchen. “I’m going to step outside and give you some time alone in here. If you have any questions, I’ll just be out in the corridor, okay?”

Rachel watched Andi as she turned towards the front door. There was a

story to be told here. She felt it as the atmosphere changed. Sombre. “Stay.”

Andi stopped and looked over her shoulder. “It’s probably easier for me to not be in the way, taking pictures.”

Rachel spied the kettle that still sat on the worktop. “Do you have coffee?”

“I always have coffee. I was going to get rid of it since I won’t be here, but sometimes people like to have a cuppa while they sit and discuss their options.”

“Why don’t you make the coffee while I have a look at the bathroom and bedrooms? Then we can talk business.”

Andi smiled. “Okay.”

Rachel wasn’t entirely sure she was right, but Andi appeared to have tears in her eyes. She had a feeling she knew where this conversation could potentially go. She just hoped it wasn’t something devastating; Rachel wasn’t sure she could handle that right now. This home had been well looked after, and the thought of moving in while Andi was processing things...it didn’t feel right.

But business was business. Rachel knew all about that.

She made her way around the rest of the loft, stopping in the bedroom and taking in the view. On a clear day, this place had to be even more impressive. As she stood at the window, Rachel couldn’t believe her luck. But when she turned to find the other bedroom, she only came across the office Andi had mentioned. “Hey, Andi? Didn’t you say there were two bedrooms and an office?” Andi didn’t respond. Rachel left the small hallway and entered the main area again. And then she saw it. A mezzanine level with a bed just about visible. “H-holy shit!” With her mouth agape, Rachel shifted her focus to Andi.

Andi turned to her, her dark hair whipping around her face as she did so. “Sorry, I couldn’t hear you over the kettle. What did you say?”

Rachel stared back up at the mezzanine. “N-nothing. Never mind. When are you putting this place on the market?”

“Next Thursday, all being well.”

“And what do I have to do to make sure it *doesn’t* go on the market?”

Andi approached Rachel. “I’m sorry?”

“What’s the asking price?” This was Rachel’s dream home. There were no two ways about it.

“Three-twenty, but I doubt I’ll get that with the current—”

“I’ll give you three-two-five and sign whenever you’re ready.”

“Oh, wow. Really?” Andi asked, watching Rachel as she continued to gaze around this entirely beautiful loft. “Are you genuinely interested?”

Rachel snapped out of her daydreaming and approached the kitchen. She took a seat at the dining space at the end of the world’s longest island, clasping her hands together on the marble top. She could see herself entertaining from this very spot. “I’m serious.”

“Right, okay. Well,” Andi paused, clearly shocked that Rachel was ready to get the ball rolling. “I didn’t expect this today. Sorry, I just need a moment.”

“Take all the time you need. If it’s easier, I could maybe call you in a few days, and we’ll go from there.” Rachel watched Andi, those deep brown eyes now showing a hint of pain. “This is a lot for you, isn’t it?”

“A lot for me?”

“Letting this loft go.” Rachel regarded Andi with a sympathetic smile. “I get it. Moving on is hard.”

Andi slumped against the worktop, her elbows resting against it as she ran her hands through her hair. She remained silent, telling Rachel everything she needed to know.

“Yeah, I think we need to give this a few days. But I am seriously interested, okay?”

When Andi lifted her head, Rachel was once again struck by how beautiful her eyes were. Andi was one of those women you could probably trust with your life. Her friends likely knew they could rely on her no matter what. But Rachel judged a lot of people based on their eyes alone. Andi’s were honest. It probably wasn’t a good idea to assume that, but Rachel knew a nice, genuine person when she saw one. Andi was that person, without a doubt.

“I won’t put it on the site or in the window at the office, but could we do this another time?”

Rachel nodded as she slid from her stool. “Life gets better. I promise you.”

“Thank you for coming here today. I was hoping for a quick sale and without all the hassle.”

“Well, I want this place. It’s perfect.”

Andi beamed a smile. One that only made her eyes brighter. “Jane would like you. I know it.”

“Can I ask?”

“She passed away last year.” Andi’s voice broke as she shook her head.

Rachel’s instinct was to reach out and take her hand. “I’m sorry. I’m just making things harder by being here.”

“You’re not. And I’m okay. I didn’t know how I’d feel when the day came to bring someone else in here and potentially sell up.”

“I could have left a better first impression, I know that, but I will look after this place. I hope *you* know that.”

Andi nodded in agreement. “I know. That’s why I’m going to accept your offer. It’s just that I need a little more time.”

Rachel was satisfied with that. Andi needed time, but the loft would be hers one day. It was quite clear that Andi was struggling with the sale of the property, and Rachel could only try to understand that. She’d initially wondered if Andi had gotten divorced, but the truth was much sadder. At least with divorce, you *want* to leave your old home behind. But with death and grief? That was a whole other journey to navigate.

Rachel reached into the satchel she had slung across her body, taking a card from the pocket. “Whenever you’re ready, I’m ready. I know you have the number I called you on already, but this is my other number if you can’t get me on the one you have. If I’m working, you’re more likely to get me on this number.”

Andi took the card, placing it on the worktop. “I’ll be in touch. In a day or so.”

“No rush here, okay?”

With Andi’s great smile making an appearance again, Rachel took a step back and cleared her throat. Yes, Andi was a very attractive woman, but Rachel wasn’t looking...and Andi? Well, time would only tell *if* or when she would be ready to date again.

“I’ll see you soon, Andi. Take care of yourself.”

“You too.”

As Rachel approached the door and opened it, she turned back. “Hey, it was great to meet you...properly, this time.”

CHAPTER 3

WITH HER HANDS SHOVED IN HER POCKETS, ANDI SLOWLY STROLLED AROUND the Christmas market, alone this time. She'd left work forty minutes ago, unintentionally making her way to this side of the city. It was busier than last night, but busy was good. It meant Andi had something to do. People watch. God knew it beat sitting at home in a house she wasn't familiar with yet.

She took a seat on the steps of St George's Hall, huddling into herself as she cast her gaze on the crowd. A group of friends laughed with one another close to the German beer hut while a woman wiped chocolate from her daughter's face at the Dutch pancake stand. People queued to pick up customised Christmas tree decorations, the backdrop of the huge Christmas tree in the centre of the market quite beautiful. How had Andi avoided this last year? She loved Christmas. Christmas was the most magical time of year.

As she admired the Christmas tree, the bright lights blurring her vision momentarily, she felt a presence beside her. Then, she caught a subtle hint of perfume as the wind rushed around her.

"Andi?"

Andi looked up and to her right. Rachel stood there, holding out a cup. "I...don't—"

"I saw you sitting up here while I was waiting for my order. I picked you one up."

One what? Andi thought. "Well, thank you. That's lovely."

Rachel sat down on the sandstone step beside Andi, both hands wrapped around her cup as she stared out at the market. "Here alone?"

"Oh, yeah. I do most things alone these days."

Rachel remained silent.

“I’m sorry. That was pathetic. Yes, I’m here alone because I was on my way home from work and decided to stop by.”

“It’s not pathetic. I imagine it’s quite difficult to start again when you’ve lost someone. I only fell in love with the wrong woman and thought my world was ending. What you’ve gone through...I can’t begin to comprehend it.”

“I’m doing okay. Much better than last year, anyway. I didn’t leave the loft at Christmas.”

“Tough, huh?”

Andi lifted a shoulder, catching a waft of mulled wine. She looked down at her cup, wondering if she could bring herself to drink it. But Rachel had done something kind in buying this drink for Andi, so the least she could do was try. Just...not yet. “It wasn’t a bed of roses, I can say that much. Just the thought of drinking this,” Andi said as she held up the cup. “Fills me with dread. I haven’t done anything I used to do with Jane since she passed away. Especially not things that centre around Christmas. It was our favourite time of year.”

“Shit, I’m sorry. Let me get you something else.”

Rachel tried to scramble to her feet, but Andi stopped her with a hand on her wrist. “No, it’s okay. I’m going to try it. I used to love mulled wine. I was always the one delegated to make it at home every year.”

“You must make very good mulled wine then.”

Andi grinned as she turned and looked in Rachel’s direction. “Yeah. I do make a mean mulled wine. You should try it sometime.”

Rachel nodded. “Love to.”

“So, why are *you* here alone?” Andi may have only been in the early stages of figuring out where her life was going, but there was no denying just how attractive Rachel was. She surely had someone in her life.

“I have no work on tonight. I thought I’d get out the house again rather than stay cooped up there. I’m just not feeling it at home anymore. Hence, wanting to move.”

“Which *will* happen, by the way.”

Rachel side-eyed Andi, a slight glint present. “I know. In your own time.”

“What is it you do? Your business card said *Hush* on it, but I’ve no idea what or where that is.”

“I’m...an escort. Full time. Have been for eleven years.”

“O-oh.” Andi wasn’t sure what to say to that. She hadn’t expected Rachel

to be in that line of work. Though, if her appearance was anything to go by, she was sure Rachel was in very high demand at the escort agency. “Well, whatever makes you happy.”

“It used to make me happy. I loved going to work and meeting clients. Being wined and dined, dressing up, you know?” Andi nodded. “But I’ve recently had a bad experience, and it makes me wonder if I’m still cut out for it. Women can be brutal.”

“I’m sorry. Did somebody hurt you?”

“Emotionally, yes. But you know what? I wasn’t who she wanted, and that’s okay. She’s happy and in love, and I guess that’s what matters. That she’s happy.”

Andi lifted her cup and sipped, the explosion of spices in her mouth far more enjoyable than she thought they would be. God, she’d missed that taste. “And what about you?”

“I’ll find what I’m looking for in time. It’s not really an ideal profession to be in if I want a committed relationship. People assume you sleep with clients, but we don’t.”

“I think it’s a case of finding someone who trusts you enough to know that you’d never hurt them. Escorting is surely no different from going out for a business meal or something like that? If there’s no intimacy involved, then I’m not sure what the problem is.”

Rachel stared at Andi. Through her. Mouth agape.

“What?”

“N-nobody has ever said that to me before. You’re probably the only woman on this planet who has that opinion.”

“Look, I’m a firm believer in finding love. In finding that someone who makes you smile and laugh and who wants to hold you on the couch on Christmas Eve with an old film. Everyone deserves to experience that in their lifetime. It doesn’t matter what you do for work; you’re a human being with emotions and, unless I’m entirely wrong, someone who has a heart, too.”

“Wow.”

“Just being honest.” Andi sipped from her cup again, warming inside as the wine slid down her throat. “These are the nights I used to live for. The dark nights, Christmas just around the corner, being with friends and family...someone you love. When you find the right person, never let it go. Because being here with someone you care about, someone you couldn’t imagine living without, is incredibly special. Just drinking mulled wine can

be the greatest night of your life if you're holding the hand of the woman you share a life with."

"I hope I can have that one day."

Andi placed a hand on Rachel's knee. "You will."

Rachel shifted a little closer to Andi, clearing her throat. "Did you want to get something to eat one night after work or something?"

Andi swallowed, facing away from Rachel. Why would this woman ask her that? They didn't know one another. Though, if Andi was being completely honest with herself, she would like to get to know Rachel.

"Obviously, you can say no. But I'm always around the city, so I thought maybe if you were at a loss and you had some time on your hands, we could do something."

"Why?"

Rachel's brows drew together. "Why what?"

"Why do you want to have dinner with me?" Andi knew it was entirely platonic, but it had still knocked her ever so slightly.

"Because you said that you do most things alone, so maybe it would be nice to have some company? For both of us."

Andi needed to stop being so worried about doing things without Jane. She wasn't coming back. She couldn't accuse her of being unfaithful by being in the company of another woman. No, she'd *asked* Andi to promise her she would find someone else. That wasn't what was happening here with Rachel, but it was where her mind first went when she'd invited Andi to dinner.

"You know, it's okay. You don't have to do this. I just thought it might be nice to eat out and chat." Rachel finished her mulled wine and crushed the paper cup in her hand. "I'm going to head off and get myself some pancakes. I'll wait to hear from you about the loft, yeah?"

Now Andi felt bad. In another life, she wouldn't have batted an eyelid as Rachel invited her to dinner. Actually, she would be sitting here contemplating just how beautiful Rachel was. Because, yes...Rachel had that sexy, sultry look about her. But Andi couldn't allow her mind to wander there. It wouldn't be right.

"Take care, Andi. Get home safe."

"Rachel, wait!" Andi rushed to her feet, taking the few steps down to meet Rachel where she stood. They could be friends. Andi needed something more than the same faces she associated with Jane. And honestly, Andi was

growing quite fond of Rachel in the short time she'd known her. She seemed...interesting. "I'd like to get something to eat with you."

"O-oh. You would?"

There was that glint in Rachel's eyes again. It was quite adorable.

"I would. I finish work at five every evening, so it's probably best if we work around you."

"Maybe this Friday?"

Andi stepped closer, unsure if Rachel wanted people to know about her profession. "Wouldn't Friday be one of your busiest nights at work?"

Rachel shrugged. "I'll take the night off. It really doesn't matter to me. I'll make up for it on Saturday."

Andi blushed ever so slightly. Someone was going to take the night off work for her? "I can't ask you to do that. It's your livelihood."

"You didn't ask," Rachel said, reaching out and taking Andi's empty cup from her. She disposed of them in a nearby bin, placing her hands in her pockets. "Look, you've got my number. If you want to do something to keep us both from sheer boredom, just let me know."

Andi already had this woman waiting on the sale of the loft. The least she could do was decide on dinner now instead of having her wait around again. "Yeah. Let's meet up on Friday. That will be nice."

"Great. I look forward to it." Rachel slid a hand from her pocket and threw a thumb over her shoulder. "Would you like to get some pancakes with me now?"

Andi's stomach growled. She could eat, for sure. "Yes. I'd like that."



Rachel turned and handed Andi her tray of Dutch pancakes. They'd both gone for the Nutella and banana combination, a winner in her book when it came to toppings. She spied an empty table, nodding towards it as she shoved a pancake in her mouth and moaned. "God, they're so good. Let's sit and enjoy them."

Andi followed, straddling the bench seat facing Rachel and tucked right into her own portion. "I've missed this."

"The Christmas market?"

Andi nodded, too busy devouring her snack to respond. Rachel watched her, warmed by the joy on Andi's face at something so simple. Life had to have been hard for her lately. Rachel could see that without knowing much about this woman at all. But she, too, was having a lovely time. It wasn't often she had the chance to go out with someone new, someone that *wasn't* paying her. It was usually other girls from the agency, her best friend Kelly... or alone.

"This isn't really something I do. I don't know why, I *love* Christmas, but I've always felt as though these places were exclusively for families or lovers."

"Yes, I understand that. It can seem that way. But Christmas is for everyone, and so are these markets."

Rachel smiled at Andi as she looked back down at her pancakes. She could really get to enjoy being here with her. Andi was easy-going, unproblematic. Honestly, she was bloody gorgeous. Rachel pushed that from her mind. Andi was selling her the loft, not going on a date with her.

"Can I ask you something?" Andi suddenly eyed Rachel, chewing her bottom lip.

"Sure. Ask away."

"How do you juggle life with the career you have? It must be unpredictable."

"I've been doing it for a long time now. I have a schedule I work to, providing the clients are there, at least. I've already worked my planned number this month, so anything else I take on is a bonus. It wasn't so easy in the past when I was building my client base, but now I have a lot of regulars on my books, and I generally know from week to week who I'll be seeing."

"What made you go into escorting?" Andi pushed her empty tray away, clasping her hands on the table. The plaid scarf she wore high up her neck didn't seem to be doing the trick. She had the rosiest cheeks and nose. "If that's okay to ask?"

"I saw the money I could make, and it instantly drew me in. I can hold a good conversation, and I love to wear fancy clothes, so it seemed like my kind of thing. Don't get me wrong, there's always people out there wanting to take advantage or to test how far they can go, but it's mostly enjoyable."

"I think what you do is fantastic."

Rachel regarded Andi with another smile. She'd never met anyone who had this opinion of her. It was a breath of fresh air. "Thank you. It's just a job

like everyone else has. Nothing special.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m going to assume most people who book you are lonely in some way?”

“Correct. Most of them are.”

“Then you’re doing a good thing. I know loneliness, and I know the mind games that come with it. I know the depression and the fear of leaving the house because you can’t convince yourself that life will ever be worthwhile again. Those people who book you may well feel the same thing. So, I think you’re doing great work.”

“I really appreciate that, but you don’t have to be so polite about my job.”

“Polite?”

“People have their opinions, and I completely understand that. I find it hard to believe that someone like you, someone who is *definitely* a romantic and someone who believes that love conquers all...would agree that escorting is a respectable job.”

“I have no right to judge anyone. Nobody does. Do you live a happy and fulfilled life through your job?” Andi lifted a brow.

“I do. Most of the time.”

“Then that’s what counts. Life is far too short to work an office job you hate or to stay in a career that makes you miserable. If you enjoy doing what you do, then I think that’s great.”

Oh, dear. This was going to be an interesting relationship to build on. Because as Rachel sat across from Andi, she had to wonder if Andi was the perfect woman. There had been a time when she thought Juliet was, but Juliet had been right. She was nothing more than a client, and that was where it ended.

They’d crossed the line and started sleeping together when Juliet was going through personal stuff, but Rachel didn’t regret it. She had fallen in love with her client. But this was different. Andi *wasn’t* her client. She also didn’t have an issue with who Rachel was or how she made a living. Rachel had to be careful here. A woman like Andi could easily sway her into wanting love again.

Again? You’ve never been loved in return.

Rachel cleared her throat, studying every inch of Andi’s gentle face. “Answer me one question then.”

“Okay.”

“If you were looking for a relationship, would you date someone who

escorted? Not as their client, but can you honestly say that you could sleep soundly at night knowing your partner was out to dinner with other women?"

"If I was interested in them, then sure. Why not? We can't go through life believing that everyone is out to hurt us."

No, no, no. Rachel wanted to hear the miserable opinions about her. Not the incredibly sweet things Andi was saying.

"You seem bothered by my opinion."

Rachel stared down at the almost empty tray of pancakes in front of her. "I'm just surprised that you feel that way."

"Why?"

Could Rachel be honest here? This was supposed to be nothing more than her buying a loft from Andi. Was a heart-to-heart really thrown in with the deal? "I've been doing this for eleven years. In those eleven years, I haven't been in a relationship."

Andi reached a hand across the table, placing it over Rachel's. "I'm sorry."

"I made peace with it many years ago. There *will* come a point when I have to leave escorting, nobody will want an older woman down the line, but do I really have to wait until I quit to be happy and in love? I thought with Juliet, I was on my way to finding that, but she only ever saw me as business. And that's okay because that's what it was supposed to be. Still, it doesn't make it hurt any less when I sit here and look around at all the couples and families."

"Can I ask how old you are?"

"Thirty-five."

Andi smiled. "Well, older women are hot. *I* was the younger woman once upon a time, and let me tell you, older women *really* know what they want."

As Andi said that, Rachel had to question whether Andi was throwing a hint about being the older woman. Did that mean she knew what she wanted, too? Was it Andi's way of easing into the conversation that she was potentially interested...or ready for something more? *Don't be ridiculous.*

Rather than allow *that* train of thought to continue, Rachel laughed and said, "Oh, I know. Juliet was significantly older than me."

"So what makes you think that nobody would want you as you get older?" Andi frowned, searching Rachel's eyes. "You're absolutely gorgeous. I don't see that changing anytime soon. And you're really lovely, too. I just know someone is going to come into your life one day when you least expect

it.”

Yeah, that was kind of happening here. Rachel hadn’t expected Andi. No way.

“Maybe, I don’t know.” Rachel felt herself blushing. Why? Because Andi had just called her gorgeous. Rachel knew she was attractive to a lot of women—she had to be in this job—but gorgeous? And to Andi? No.

“Have a little belief in yourself, Rachel. If you put your mind to it, you could be snuggled on the couch this Christmas Eve with someone.”

Rachel snorted. “Never going to happen. I don’t seem to attract the ones that want to snuggle.”

Andi winked. “You will. One day.”

CHAPTER 4

AS HER FIRE ROARED, RACHEL PULLED A BLANKET UP TO HER CHEST AND GOT comfortable for the rest of the afternoon. She'd had a late breakfast with a client this morning, and she had dinner booked tonight with another, so for the time being, she was going to relax in her own space. Something she seemed to do an awful lot since she had stopped seeing Juliet. Was this what Andi meant when she said she knew how loneliness felt? Rachel hadn't realised it before today, but it was making her miserable.

She had initially assumed it was the house that she wasn't fond of anymore, but perhaps it was a mash-up of everything recently. She didn't know; she just knew she wasn't happy. She hadn't lied to Andi when she said her job fulfilled her, but she had bent the truth ever so slightly with her enthusiasm. Rachel had no plans to leave the agency, but she wanted something more. Where she started with that, she truly had no idea.

As Rachel shifted further down the couch and got comfortable, her mind drifted to Andi. It had last night, too, when she'd finished work and returned to this huge, cold house. It was too big for Rachel; she didn't know why she'd rented it to begin with. But in time, she would be out of here, and in that amazing loft Andi was letting go of. Hopefully before Christmas, but if not, the new year would be fine. Only Andi would know when it was time to say goodbye once and for all.

Her phone rang on the coffee table. Andi's name was displayed on the screen. Rachel's pulse quickened ever so slightly, and it wasn't at the thought of the loft being ready. "Hello?"

"Hi, Rachel. I know it's short notice, but I was wondering if you wanted to come over to the loft later and get started with the paperwork?"

“O-oh. So soon?” Rachel’s heart did leap for other reasons that time, but she didn’t want to show that to Andi. Her experience throughout this...and Rachel’s, well, it couldn’t be any different. “If you’re sure?”

“I am sure. It’s time to get the ball rolling.”

Rachel groaned inwardly when she remembered she had to work tonight. “Did you have a time in mind?”

“I can leave work at four and be at the loft by quarter past if that’s any good to you?”

“That’s actually perfect. I’ll get ready for work early and come over around five if that’s okay?” Rachel suddenly didn’t want to relax anymore. No, she wanted to start packing her life into boxes and get the hell out of this house.

“That’s great. I’ll make sure the kettle is on when you get there.”

God, Andi had to stop being so cute.

Rachel was wondering if she was becoming desperate as she moved towards the back end of her thirties. Her time with Juliet alone had shown her she was craving something deeper. If Rachel dared to think about Andi as anything other than a woman selling her loft, things could get complicated quickly.

“Hey, Andi? Thanks for this.”

“No, thank *you*. It’s going to someone who will appreciate being there.”

Appreciate, okay. But adore? Absolutely. Rachel was going to savour every moment she spent in her new place once the sale went through. “I really will. Don’t worry about that.”

“I’ll see you this evening. If anything changes, just let me know. I’ll bring all the initial paperwork with me. It’ll just be a case of some finalising once the sale is going through, okay?”

“Of course. That works for me.” Rachel exhaled a calming breath. Her heart rate was far too high with excitement. “See you later.”

“Bye, Rachel.”

As Andi ended the call, Rachel immediately brought up her best friend’s number. Kelly was going to be beside herself when she heard this news. Rachel hadn’t told her about meeting Andi or the offer that came after she’d spoken to her so rudely. This was huge for Rachel.

The moment the call connected, Rachel rushed out, “It’s happening! It’s really fucking happening!”

“What is?” Kelly asked, her voice laced with confusion. “Are you okay?”

“Okay? I’m amazing. I found a loft!”

“Oh! Where? How?!”

Rachel could cry; she was so happy. “On the dock. When I got off the phone to you a few nights ago, a woman had overheard my conversation and mentioned that she was selling hers.”

“Oh, is this the same woman who didn’t know how to *mind her own business* by any chance?”

Rachel winced. She’d never *not* feel embarrassed about that moment. “Yeah. That’s the one.”

“Well, that’ll teach you to have a face on about something, won’t it?”

“I know. I know.” Rachel dragged a hand through her hair, sitting upright and swinging her legs off the couch. “And the worst thing is that Andi is so lovely.”

“Why is she moving? Don’t forget to have a survey done and everything else. Be sure it’s the right place for you.”

“It is, Kelly. I fell in love with it when I walked in.” Rachel rested her head back on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. She’d practically memorised every feature she’d laid eyes on. “Andi is selling up because she lost her wife. I don’t think she wants to be there anymore. Too many memories, you know?”

“A fellow gay, how interesting!”

Rachel laughed, shaking her head. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

“Maybe she’ll end up being your client. You know how to woo women like the best of them.”

Kelly was surely joking. Rachel had only mentioned Andi briefly, and now she was putting these ideas into her head. “I’m pretty sure she’s not looking for an escort. And even if she was, I couldn’t be that escort.”

“Why?”

“Just...because.” Rachel got to her feet and slung the blanket she’d been snuggled under over the back of the couch. “Anyway, I should probably get ready. I have a client tonight, but I need to go to the loft and sign some paperwork.”

“Oh, no. Hold on. What do you mean you can’t be her escort? Since when do you care who you have dinner with?”

“S-since Juliet.”

Kelly fell silent.

“It’s fine. *I’m* fine. I just don’t think Andi and I as *business* would be a

wise idea. And as I said, she's not even looking for an escort. That's not how we met, Kel."

"You're into her, aren't you?"

Rachel cleared her throat. "Maybe. Sort of. I don't know."

"Is...she looking to move on?" Kelly hesitated as she spoke those words, but Rachel understood. To lose your wife...how does someone even begin to piece their life back together?

"Doubtful."

"Maybe you should test the water. Like, ask her out to dinner, but don't make a big deal of it. She probably doesn't know what to do with herself. Still, it could just grow organically."

"I, uh. I've already done that. We're going out for dinner on Friday."

Kelly gasped. "You didn't waste any time!"

"It's not like that. Really, it's not. I get the impression that she's *trying* to start over but doesn't know where to begin. As an escort who has been through this with several clients, I feel as though I'm in a position to be able to help where I can. It's only dinner, and it's nothing set in stone...nor is it going to mean anything. Just new friends getting to know one another."

"For how long? I think stuff is still very raw for you. You were in love with Juliet, and then she just dropped you. Are *you* in a place where you can be a friend to someone who is going through a lot?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rachel's brow creased as she stopped in the middle of her living room.

"All I'm saying is that I don't want either of you to take things further only to discover it was because you're both single and alone."

"Well, thanks."

Kelly tutted, and then she huffed. "You know I'm only looking out for you, Rae. Anything you do, you *know* I'll support, but seeing you so distraught after Juliet was quite upsetting for the people around you, too."

"I know. But I'm doing okay. If I thought for one second that I could be too close to Andi, I'd back off. I don't know why I feel drawn to her, but I am. I need to figure that reason out."

"You know what you're doing. Just please be careful. This woman is probably still grieving."

"Look, even if she was ready to move on, I don't think I could handle it all. When you've been married, and that person has passed away, it's not the same as being single for other reasons. Surely, whoever she meets...they're

never going to live up to her wife.” Rachel couldn’t say she hadn’t thought about that. Because the truth was that she had. Only fleetingly, but the thought *had* crossed her mind. Still, first and foremost, she was doing this for Andi’s benefit, not her own agenda. “It’s just friends, okay?”

“Even if you wanted it to be more?” Kelly asked.

“Yeah. Even if I wanted it to be more.”



Okay. Just relax.

Andi blew a strand of hair from her face, neatly placing the paperwork she’d brought over on the island. Rachel was due here any minute now, and Andi needed to not think too much about what was going to happen tonight. She’d spoken to Sally for the best part of an hour earlier, and this was her final decision. She was ready to do this. Because if she didn’t do it now—a time when she had someone who actually *wanted* to be here interested in the loft—then she would never do it. There would always be a reason or an excuse. Andi was done with making excuses.

She rolled her shoulders and flicked the kettle on. Andi would usually have a coffeemaker here, too, but the loft was mostly empty, so her coffeemaker was now sitting on the worktop of a kitchen she wasn’t overly fond of. She didn’t get the impression that instant coffee would offend Rachel, though. Actually, she wasn’t sure *anything* had ever offended Rachel in life. That woman was so easy-going that it was unnerving Andi. Just this morning, she’d made the short trip to work thinking about her. How Andi felt strangely happier in the past few days since they’d met. She wasn’t sure why that had happened, but it was the first time since before Jane’s diagnosis that she felt some hint of positivity for the future.

Andi shrugged. Maybe it was the idea of having a new friend in her life.

Or...maybe she was swaying a different way.

After all, Andi had gone out of her way to say as little as possible about Rachel to Sally before. Why? Wouldn’t that imply she had something to hide? Or something she didn’t feel comfortable talking about? Whatever was going on inside Andi’s head, she didn’t like it. She hated not feeling in control of herself.

The buzzer sounded around the empty loft. It reminded Andi that this would soon be filled with someone else's life. Only as she thought that, and knowing it was Rachel, she didn't feel so sad anymore. No, she felt excited for Rachel.

Andi granted her access, opening the front door and leaving it ajar. She checked over the paperwork once more, aware that Rachel had somewhere to be this evening, and took a pen from her handbag. She didn't want to take up more time than necessary, even if she did secretly enjoy spending time with the woman who was about to buy her loft.

"Knock, knock."

Andi spun around, wearing the best smile she could. But her eyes landed on Rachel, and she almost stumbled back against the island. "H-hi. Come in." Andi gripped the edge of the counter, trying hard not to appraise the woman standing before her. Rachel wore a figure-hugging navy blue dress and nude stilettos, her blonde hair straight and sitting over one shoulder.

Oh, Jesus. Andi swallowed, convinced that her neck was beginning to redden. "I, um...did you want coffee or something?"

"Coffee would be lovely. I'm a little early, but I figured since I had nothing else on this afternoon, I'd maybe hang around here until I have to leave to meet my client. If you're going to be here anyway, obviously."

Andi swallowed again, as inconspicuously as she could. Rachel had knocked her for six this evening. "Yeah, that's fine. Have a seat wherever you like."

Rachel offered a dazzling smile in Andi's direction, confusing Andi further. Why had she reacted that way when Rachel arrived? She was a married woman! *Was*, Andi thought. She *had been* a married woman, but not anymore. Not...technically.

"Good day at work?" Rachel asked as she effortlessly lifted herself up onto a stool. Huh, this was now *escort* Rachel. It had to be. Even the way she carried herself was entirely different from the times they'd met before.

"Yes. Quiet, but that's generally because it's the run-up to Christmas. Who wants the headache of buying a home during this time?"

Rachel cocked her head, a brow quirked.

"Ah. *You.*" Andi regarded her with a shy smile when Rachel kept her gaze firmly on her. Those eyes...what the hell was she doing? "Sugar in your coffee?"

"Sweet enough, thanks."

This wasn't how she expected the evening to be. Was this the woman Rachel truly was deep down? If so, she was too hot to handle as she sat at Andi's kitchen island. "G-got it." Andi turned her back and clenched her hands into fists. The whole flustered Andi was coming out of her for the first time in twenty-odd years. She didn't know how to deal with it. She...wasn't sure she wanted it, either. "What time do you start work?"

"Seven."

"Well, you're welcome to stay here until you have to leave." Why the hell had Andi said that? It wasn't normal for her to feel this way, and the longer Rachel was around, the harder it was going to be to get those incredibly long legs out of her mind.

Jane would be disgusted.

Andi could lie to herself all day long, but she knew using Jane as an excuse was poor. If this was who Andi found herself attracted to, then Jane would support her. Everyone would. She...hoped.

"Are we still on for Friday?" Rachel suddenly spoke, reluctantly bringing Andi from her confusing thoughts. "I'd hope we are."

"We are, yes. Did you have anywhere in mind?" Andi asked, her back still to Rachel. If she didn't look at her, she couldn't find her desirable. "It's been a while since I went out for dinner, so I really couldn't recommend anywhere."

"I know the perfect place. But it's a surprise, so you have to trust me, okay?"

Andi turned around this time. Only when she did, she caught Rachel staring at her backside. An unusual feeling coursed through Andi. Was that how it felt to be checked out by another woman these days? "O...kay."

"You'll trust me?" Rachel's azure eyes shone with excitement.

"I guess I don't have any other choice."

Rachel feigned offence, a hand placed to her chest. "You guess you don't have any other choice? I'm not going to manhandle you into a restaurant and a seat at a table if you don't want to be there."

"No, I do. I trust you. This just feels...I don't know." Andi exhaled a frustrated sigh. She was fed up with not knowing what she was doing now. She was fifty; she was more than capable of figuring her new life out. She lifted a hand between them. "I'm looking forward to it. Okay?"

"Good. Now, should we sign this paperwork?"

Another deep breath exhaled, followed by a nod. Andi was ready. "Yes."

Let's sign."

CHAPTER 5

RACHEL SMILED AS SHE WATCHED HER CLIENT WALK AWAY. THE CHILL IN THE air tonight was not ideal for what she was wearing. Yes, dressing up in fancy clothes in the winter was a hazard of the job. But her clients appreciated it; it gave them something to admire, and in return, it made Rachel feel good about herself. That was until she went outside and almost froze her nipples off time and time again. She would never learn.

As she turned to head for the taxi rank, her phone buzzed in her hand.

Hi. Sorry for texting unexpectedly, but I wondered if you had plans tonight? Andi.

Rachel frowned, turning her watch towards herself. Why was Andi contacting her at nine in the evening? Shouldn't she be wrapped up in her pyjamas by now? Rachel certainly wished *she* was.

Hey! I've just finished with my last client of the night. Is everything okay?

Rachel didn't want to admit it, but hearing from Andi *had* put a smile on her face. That woman was really brightening her days lately. A week on since they'd met, and she had a fairly obvious spring in her step.

I did something spontaneous.

Okay. And did you get into some kind of trouble that you need help to get out of?

No. I wondered if you wanted to join me. I'm in the city at a German bar...alone. How depressing!

A thrill rushed through Rachel at that simple offer. How could she refuse joining Andi when she'd taken it upon herself to go out and try to enjoy her evening? She couldn't...and she wouldn't.

Which one are you at? I can be there in a few minutes.

Bar Hütte. In the park.

Rachel knew the place well. She and Kelly often ventured there around Christmas time. It was known for its German beer and alpine appearance. The atmosphere was pretty good, too. But Andi was right. Being there alone wasn't ideal. It was either full to the brim with stag and hen parties or with cosy couples out on a date night.

I'll be there in five.

She rushed across the street. The signs for Bar Hütte were already visible around her. Really, Andi couldn't have timed her offer better. Although, if Rachel had already reached her place before she'd received the text, she still would have gone back out to meet Andi. Seemed she enjoyed her company far more than Rachel would deem acceptable.

It could be worse. She could be your client, and this could be another Juliet moment all over again.

Rachel pushed Juliet from her mind. Had she thought about being here with Juliet recently? Of course she had. But had Rachel accepted they would never be together...and that she was moving on? She was pretty much there. Having Andi in her life certainly helped her to forget.

She reached the entrance to Bar Hütte, pushing through the heavy wooden door as she scanned the room. Andi was waiting at the bar, looking ever so cute tonight. Black jeans, Chelsea boots, a gorgeous woollen overcoat. But it was the makeup Andi wore—and what Rachel assumed to be a new haircut—that caught her attention. God, she looked radiant. That dark hair and those dark eyes...she was a sucker for an older woman exactly like this. Hence her stint with Juliet.

Stop thinking about her!

Rachel approached the bar, smiling when Andi turned with two steins in her hand. "Did the honours and assumed you like beer."

"Thank you." Rachel took a stein from Andi and followed her through the growing crowd of people. For a Wednesday night, the place was rammed. "What made you come here?" Rachel asked as Andi slid into a private wooden booth.

"I was bored. And who doesn't want to come to an alpine ski bar in the middle of a city during Christmas?"

Rachel grinned, sensing a much less tense Andi tonight. "You make a very good point. It's good to see you. Thanks for inviting me."

Andi lifted a shoulder, her eyes focused on the stein she'd just placed on the table. "I wasn't sure if I should, but I figured if you were busy, you just wouldn't have responded."

Rachel remained standing at the end of the small rectangular table, wondering whether to sit opposite Andi or beside her. She opted for the bench next to her, slipping in as best as she could given the fact she wore a dress that finished mid-thigh. "I'll always respond. But your timing couldn't have been more perfect. I'd *just* left a client."

Andi's gaze swept down Rachel, stopping at her thighs. She saw Andi swallowing, and then she lifted her eyes again. Darker and only more intriguing. "You must be freezing."

"I'm...used to it. And I'll warm up soon now that I'm inside." Rachel felt a slight blush settle on her cheeks, her neck heating as Andi continued to stare at her. She was used to women checking her out, it came with the job, but Andi's appraisal felt different. It felt natural *and* real. "So," Rachel said, clearing her throat and then shivering.

"No." Andi got to her feet and removed her overcoat. "I'm not sitting here watching you shiver." She draped her coat around Rachel's shoulders, the inside warm and snugly. "Wear this."

"Andi, you don't have to do that."

Andi smiled as she sat back down, her cream sweater showing each and every gorgeous curve. "I do. You're cold, and I'm not. Now, drink your beer and tell me something about yourself."

Oh. Women rarely asked Rachel about herself. This was new territory.

"I, uh..."

Andi sat with her hand fisted under her chin, resting her elbow on the table. The way she gazed at Rachel sent another shiver through her, followed by a welcome warmth.

"I don't really know what I should say."

Andi shrugged. "Anything. I'm intrigued by you. From the moment we met, I don't know..."

Rachel hadn't expected that. Andi was intrigued, but why? Or was this potentially Andi's way at *maybe* hinting to be a client? If that was the reason, she only had to ask. "I'm really not very interesting. I'm just your average woman who works and goes home to an empty house."

"Family? Friends? Hobbies?"

"I have one sister. She has a three-year-old who I adore. Little Emily."

Named after our Nanna.”

“That’s sweet.” Andi lifted her beer and sipped. “I have two nephews. Much older, though. One has just started university.”

“Oh, that’s great. What’s he studying?”

Andi’s eyes lit up as their conversation continued. She was a family woman, and that went a long way in Rachel’s estimation of her.

“Nathan is studying medicine. He’s going to be a doctor. My sister has raised those boys single-handedly. I really couldn’t be any more proud of her. Or them.”

“Single mothers really are the heroes of society. And single fathers, too. My dad raised me and my sister alone.”

“I think that anyone who can raise children alone is incredible. Whatever the gender, it really doesn’t matter.”

Andi’s soft eyes shone against the low light in the bar. Rachel was getting herself into trouble here. She knew it. She could feel it in the atmosphere between them. “Andi, can I ask you something?”

Andi nodded, then lifted her beer and sipped. “Sure. Ask away.”

“Why did you text me tonight?” Rachel watched on as Andi lowered her eyes, twisting her stein on the table.

“Company.” She scoffed, seemingly embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I’m sure you’d rather be at home. You’ve been working all night.”

Rachel instinctively reached out a hand, placing it over Andi’s. “No. That’s not what I’m worried about. If you want company, then I’m *happy* to be here. But...did you have something else in mind, too?”

Andi’s brows drew together. “Something else in mind?”

“I’m an escort, Andi. I just want to be on the same page here, that’s all.”

“Okay, you’ve totally lost me.”

Rachel cleared her throat as she leaned in a little. “Is that what this is? Do you...need an escort?”

Andi seemed taken aback by that, but as Rachel allowed her suggestion to sink in, she understood why. Andi wasn’t client material. No way.

“I...no.” Andi tugged her hand out from under Rachel’s, quite clearly offended. “Is that what you think?”

“No, and I’m sorry I even said it. It’s just that I don’t know why I’m here. You’re great, and I love spending time with you, but the only time I spend the evening with women is when I’m being paid by them.”

Andi nodded slowly. “So, you want me to pay you to be here? I see.”

“No. Again, that’s not what I’m saying.” Rachel was fucking this all up. God, no wonder she was single. “What I mean is that I’m not usually invited to bars during Christmas to hang out with someone like you. Someone who invited me without some kind of ulterior motive.”

“I’m sorry that’s been your experience in the past.”

Rachel exhaled a breath when Andi appeared to relax. “It comes with the job. It’s fine.”

“Rachel, I’m not looking for an escort. I understand if that’s what you’d prefer this to be, but I can’t do that. I invited you because you’re you. I love spending time with you, too.”

“Then that’s all I need to know. No need to discuss it further.” Rachel lifted a hand, smiling. “I’m sorry that we got our wires crossed. This just doesn’t happen to me, that’s all.”

“Then expect me to invite you out in a non-escort capacity more often. You shouldn’t only have the opportunity to do this when you’re working. How are you supposed to have friends and a social life?”

“Well, I don’t. I have friends at the agency and my best friend from when I was in my teens, but I don’t really socialise with people outside of my job. That’s why I had to ask—because I prefer this. This is far nicer than forced conversation with someone I don’t know.”

“Same time again one day next week?” Andi lifted a brow, a sweet smile spread on her lips.

“Yes. I’d love to.”



Andi slid out from behind the table at Bar Hütte, sad that this evening was ending. Of course, she was looking forward to dinner with Rachel on Friday, but she’d really enjoyed this spontaneous night out. Sometimes, the unplanned nights were the best nights. There was nothing worse than weeks of planning, only for the night to be entirely boring.

“So, which way are you?” Rachel asked as they left the bar together.

“I’m just out of town. Only ten minutes in a cab. Usually, I’d have the loft to stroll back to, but, you know.” Andi smiled weakly, focusing on the bright lights of the city. “You?”

“Just outside the city, too. Can I...walk with you to the taxi rank?”

Andi's heart jumped a little at that. She didn't want it to or need it to, but it did. “That would be lovely.” For a brief moment, it had felt foreign to her, but Andi was learning that she was quite fond of these moments with Rachel.

“You should keep the loft keys on you for nights like this. I'm sure you'd rather just go back there than travel home.” Rachel linked an arm through Andi's, still wearing Andi's coat.

She'd offered it back before they finished their drinks, but Andi had insisted she keep a hold of it until they went their separate ways. Three layers and menopause meant Andi didn't have any issue keeping warm this evening.

“If I wasn't selling up, I probably would. But I have to cut ties with it at some point.”

Rachel slowed their pace, her breath misting in the evening air. “You don't want to let it go, do you?”

“Part of me does. But the other part of me wonders if I'm going to let go of the memories we made there. My friends are insufferable when it comes to me moving on, but I felt as though now was the right time. I've done a lot of reflecting this year, especially since I spent last Christmas alone, and I've realised that they're right. Jane wanted me to move on and be happy. She made me promise her I would. It's just hard when she was all I knew for over twenty years.”

Rachel offered a sympathetic smile.

“I'm sorry. That was far too much. You only mentioned the loft.” Andi rolled her eyes, aware that she was discussing things nobody wanted to hear. “I guess it just feels different talking about it with someone who didn't know Jane. Does that make sense?”

“It makes perfect sense. I have no ties to either of you, so I'm neutral. Even though your friends want you to move on, I have a feeling you wonder if they really mean it. You know, are they just telling you that, but really, they'll be disappointed if you meet someone?”

Andi laughed ever so slightly. Rachel was right. “Yeah. That's been playing on my mind a lot. My best friend has been amazing. Really, she has. But I'm not sure she'll feel so supportive if I meet someone. And...I can't really blame anyone for feeling that way, can I?”

Rachel stopped, frowning as she faced Andi. “Is she the one in the hypothetical relationship we're talking about?”

“Well, no.”

“Then it doesn’t really matter what she thinks. Of course people will think *something* about it, but that’s on them to deal with it. Not you. You’re already piecing your life back together. You don’t have to be responsible for anyone else while you do so.”

Andi’s breath caught when Rachel reached out a hand and tucked her hair behind her ear. She had the most beautiful skin, her eyes alluring yet honest. It took everything within Andi not to lean into Rachel’s touch. *Take a step back.*

“Look, you’ll know when the time feels right. Whether that is the loft, or your love life, or something else...you’ll know. Your real friends will support you because they love you.”

Andi sniffled, a mixture of tears and the cold weather. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“Now, let me get you into a cab before I’m responsible for making you ill in the run-up to Christmas.”

Andi grinned. “I’m fine. Us northerners are made of strong stuff.”

“Oh, we are. But I still don’t want you getting sick.” Rachel pulled Andi tighter to her, their arms still linked. Andi should probably question her decision to find herself in this position, but she didn’t care tonight. She was too busy loving every moment of it. “Come on. I don’t want you calling off sick on Friday for dinner.”

“I wouldn’t.” Andi nudged Rachel’s shoulder. “And you’re going to be sorry that you’ve befriended me. You’re stuck with me now.”

Rachel glanced in her direction, winking. “Not a bad person to be stuck with.”

CHAPTER 6

ANDI BLEW OUT A BREATH, STANDING OUTSIDE A BUILDING SHE DIDN'T recognise. It was in a rundown area of the city, but she was trusting Rachel. She had no choice but to do that. Still, she had to wonder why on earth Rachel had asked her to meet at a high-rise building that looked like a block of flats. No, they didn't *look* like it...they *were* a block of flats. Andi knew based on her job.

She took her phone from her clutch bag, jumping when a teenager on a mountain bike zoomed past her. So close he could have stolen her bag. She brought it closer to her stomach, looking down at the address once again.

Yep. She definitely had the right address.

Andi entered through the automatic double doors, breathing a sigh of relief when she found a security guard at reception. "Hi. I'm looking for the restaurant."

The security guard smiled and nodded towards a set of lifts. "Fourteenth floor. Have a lovely evening."

Andi had a bad feeling about this. She didn't know why. Rachel had seemed so genuine, but in this moment, she felt as though this was nothing more than a joke.

Well, this is a good start to meeting new people.

Aware that she was standing around for the sake of it, her heels clicked against the broken tiles in front of the lift. Yeah, this was a joke. It had to be. But she would give Rachel the benefit of the doubt just this once, praying she wouldn't let Andi down.

She stepped into the lift, a little uneasy being in here alone, and pressed the button that would take her to the fourteenth floor. Why would someone

open a restaurant on top of a high-rise residential building? It made little sense.

Exhaling a breath when the lift reached her floor, Andi stepped out and frowned. It didn't look like a residential building anymore. No, it looked like the entrance to a restaurant. Okay, maybe this wasn't a joke. God, she hated the unknown.

Andi approached the heavy wooden-slatted doors, pushing one open to be met with a sight that astounded her. "Oh, my God." Her eyes widened as she approached the meet and greet server, a podium between them. Thousands of baubles and twinkly lights hung from the ceiling, golds and silvers sparkling all around. "This place is—"

"Spectacular?" the server asked, cocking her head. "I'm going to assume you've never dined with us before?"

Andi shook herself from the daze she was in. This place was incredible. "N-no."

"Do you have a reservation?"

"Um, yes. I'm meeting a friend." It suddenly dawned on Andi that she couldn't remember Rachel's surname. Was Rachel even her first name? She was an escort; it probably wasn't. *I hope it is. Our contract will be void otherwise.* "Rachel?"

The server nodded and smiled. "She's waiting at the bar for you. I believe there is a cocktail chilling with your name on it."

Andi's palms grew clammy at those words. Rachel was already here. She hadn't been joking, *and* she'd already ordered drinks. Wow! Some friendship this was turning out to be.

"If you'd like to follow me?"

Andi smiled and followed the server. And then she saw her. Rachel in *all* her glory. Those clammy palms suddenly seemed like the least of her worries. Rachel was something to admire...and then some. "H-hi."

"Hey! Glad you finally arrived." Rachel got down from her stool, kissing Andi on the cheek. That same unfamiliar sensation coursed through her again. Just as it had the day Rachel turned up to the loft before work. "You look amazing, by the way."

"Thank you." Andi had chosen to go home from work early to prepare for this evening. She hadn't needed to, but she'd wanted to. She had an inkling that Rachel would be dressed up to the nines, and she wasn't wrong. Her 'friend' wore a sleek black dress that finished a little shorter than mid-thigh,

her hair sporting a wave this evening. Andi would do her very best to avoid staring tonight, but it wasn't going to be an easy task. "You look great, too."

"I took it upon myself to order you a drink. Strawberry daiquiri?"

Andi tried to fight back the grin she felt working its way to her lips. That was her favourite cocktail. How had Rachel known that? "Yes. I'd love one."

"The cocktails in this place are pretty good."

Andi calmed herself, placing her clutch bag on the bar. She lifted onto a stool as smoothly as she could, crossing her legs once she was situated.

"Do you wear this kind of stuff to work all the time?" Rachel arched a brow, then her eyes dropped lower to Andi's thighs. "I've never met an estate agent like you before."

"No. I have to confess that I went home first to shower and change. My jeans wouldn't have cut it since I know what you usually wear to a date."

"A date, huh?"

Andi wanted the floor to open up and swallow her. "Shit. That's not what I meant. It's just...you know how to dress. I had a feeling you'd dress very well for dinner tonight. I didn't want to look like I hadn't made the effort."

"Mmhmm." Rachel smirked as she sipped her drink, averting her eyes to the bar.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply—"

"Oh, no. Imply all you like. I'm not concerned." Rachel waved a hand between them. "And anyway, I'm used to all that fake dating stuff, remember?"

Andi studied Rachel's profile, that smile that was still present, how relaxed she appeared to be. Did Rachel think this was a date? Surely not. Andi hadn't done or said anything to suggest it would be. But then...Andi wouldn't complain if it *was* a date. Not at all.

Sensing that Andi was overthinking, Rachel turned back to her. "Relax, Andi. This is just dinner. Getting food together, you know?"

"Sure. Yeah." Andi cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. It's been so long since I went out to dinner with anyone. Friend or not."

"Well, tonight we're going to enjoy ourselves. We're going to eat some fine food, enjoy some delicious drinks, and get to know one another better. How does that sound?"

Mesmerised by Rachel's eyes, Andi simply lifted her cocktail and smiled. "Sounds like a great night to me."



“So, you met Jane when you were on a night out with your friends from work? At a gay bar. But none of your friends were gay?”

Andi smiled. “Correct. Two of them are gay now, but back then, it was just little old me.”

Rachel relaxed back in her seat, bringing her cocktail closer yet pushing her plate away. She’d initially been worried about Andi’s reaction to coming here, but she hadn’t batted an eyelid. Or she had but had chosen not to show it. Either way, Rachel couldn’t recall the last time she’d had such a great night. Andi was easy-going and good fun. And the dress she wore...well, it was enough to leave Rachel feeling a little more than flustered. Thankfully, she’d mastered a good poker face over the years.

“That’s the friends you want to keep around. Taking you to a gay bar so you could find your future wife. That’s dedication.”

“We’re all still good friends to this day,” Andi said, those dark eyes soft as she stared at Rachel from the opposite side of the table. “But it is nice talking about my past with you. As you said the other day, you have no ties to me or Jane.”

“Even if I did, I’m very good at separating and being neutral when it’s needed. I guess it’s something I’m used to because of my job.”

Andi leaned in, dragging her hair over one shoulder. The closer she got, the more Rachel felt spellbound by her eyes. “Tell me the kind of people you usually work...with. Or is it for?”

“With or for works for me. And to answer your question, all kinds of people. Women only, I don’t have any male clients. I have clients who are single and lonely, I have clients who aren’t happy in their marriage and just want someone to vent to, and I have clients who are in very high-powered jobs and need to let go now and then. Maybe a night at a club or something similar.”

“And do you...you know?” Andi lowered her eyes to the table, clearing her throat. “Tell me to mind my own business.”

“Sleep with them?” Rachel came right out and said it. She had no shame in who she was. None whatsoever. “No, I don’t.”

“And do clients ever come to you *hoping* for that?”

Rachel cocked her head. Why was Andi so interested in the goings-on of her career? “Of course they do. But I explain to them right away that it’s not the type of service I offer. I’m sure they can find that somewhere else, but not with me. My rules are very clear on my page.”

“That’s fair enough,” Andi said, shrugging. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but it’s not an offence to sleep with an escort, is it?”

“You’re right, it’s not. But you’ll be surprised by just how many of us *don’t* sleep with clients. We’re not the *whores* society makes us out to be.” Andi’s eyes widened as Rachel said that, but she hadn’t been pointing the finger at Andi. “Don’t worry, I don’t mean you. You’re lovely. You’re probably the most unproblematic person I know.” Rachel picked at the corner of her napkin and cleared her throat. “I...did cross the line once. My mistake and one I’ll never make again.”

“Can I ask what happened?”

“I foolishly fell in love with her. The problem was, she didn’t love me in return. It wasn’t something she’d ever considered. But that’s my fault for allowing something deeper to occur. She drew me in, and I couldn’t help how I felt.”

Andi inched her hand forward, placing it over Rachel’s in support. While she’d loved being here this evening—the setting considered romantic to many people—she was beginning to wish they’d gone to a generic burger bar. Because as Andi’s soft skin covered Rachel’s between the two candles on the table, she once again got lost in Andi’s eyes. *Fuck!*

“I know you probably think that being an escort means you don’t have the right to a relationship or something meaningful with another woman, but that’s not true. For the short time that I’ve known you, I’ve established just what a wonderful person you are. You kept me from sitting home alone...in a place I’m not familiar with. You’ve made me laugh, and you’ve reminded me that Christmas can be the exciting time of year it once was for me. All because of a chance encounter at the hot chocolate hut. Granted, it may have gone wrong during our initial meeting, but I think you’ve more than made up for it just by inviting me here tonight.”

“That’s...I...thank you.” Rachel blushed. If she’d noticed anything since meeting Andi, it was that she blushed *a lot*. Even with Juliet, she hadn’t found herself flustered, but that was likely because she had to push down her feelings in Juliet’s company. And then, when it was too late, she’d told Juliet what she thought of her. “I meet so many new people, but you’re different.

Maybe it's because there's no payment involved." Rachel stroked her thumb across Andi's knuckles. "Which I have to thank you for, by the way."

"Thank me?"

"This is all I've ever wanted. Someone I can spend time with who doesn't pay me. A friend who I can talk to about the most mundane things in life. A woman who isn't afraid to wear her heart on her sleeve."

Andi nodded slowly. "It's been a long time coming for me, but I'm ready to move forward. I know I am. And if you ever find yourself looking for someone to have dinner with again, you only have to call."

Rachel swallowed, trying hard to remind herself that this was just friends having dinner. Although, judging by the fact that neither of them had let go of one another's hand yet, *friends* was beginning to feel like the biggest lie Rachel could ever tell herself. Still, she found herself unable to pull away. "You...really mean that?"

"I do mean it."

"Then I'd love to do this again."



Andi smiled as the dazzle of the city lights came into view in the distance, feeling lighter, having spent the evening with Rachel. She was hoping it wouldn't become a habit in some ways, Rachel was very easy to enjoy, but deep down, she knew she wanted to continue doing this. Perhaps the potential for a date was there down the line, but even just friends would be lovely. She'd meant everything she said back at the restaurant. Rachel did deserve to be treated like an ordinary human being. Her job didn't make her any less of one. No, in Andi's mind, Rachel was a saint. Putting her own love life on hold so she could guide those who needed her through tough times...yes, she was most definitely saintly in many ways.

"So, you're ten minutes this way outside the city...and I'm ten minutes the other way outside of the city."

Andi turned her head, a smile spread on her mouth. "You didn't have to go out of your way to bring me home, but yes. Not for much longer for you, though. Once the paperwork for the loft is finalised, you'll be right in the thick of it."

“God, I can’t wait.” Rachel winced. “I’m sorry. I should have been more sensitive.”

“Don’t be daft. I’m *happy* for you. It’s the place you want, and I know you’re going to thrive there. The summer is incredible with the light that floods in. You’re going to love it.”

“I know, but it’s not the same for you.”

Andi lifted a shoulder and looked back out of the window. “Nothing has been the same for a long time. But I’m learning to live a different life now. After tonight, the wonderful time I’ve had with you...I *know* I’m going to be okay.”

“Here you are, love.” The cab driver pulled up outside Andi’s new place, cutting the engine.

She took some cash from her purse and handed it to Rachel. Andi had already been treated to dinner. Rachel had refused to accept half the bill—the least she could do was take care of the cab fare. “If it’s any more, just let me know.”

“That’s more than enough.” Rachel looked down at the twenty-pound note in her hand. “Thank you for spending the evening with me, Andi. We’ll definitely do it again.”

“We will.” Andi sighed when she looked up at her darkened home. And then she had a bright idea. One that was only going to lead to a place that could potentially change everything, but still... “Would you like to come in for a glass of wine?”

Rachel seemed shocked by that. But she quickly recovered. “I’d...love to. If you’re sure.”

“Come on in.” Andi exited the vehicle, proud of herself for not cutting the night short just yet and proud of herself for bringing a woman back with her. Be it a friend or not, she was still making strides instead of baby steps in her mind. “Red or white?” She asked as Rachel climbed from the other side of the car.

“Whatever you fancy. I don’t mind.”

“You’re the guest. You decide.”

Rachel followed behind Andi, closing the garden gate as Andi fumbled for her keys. “Red?”

“Red it is.” She forced the door open, glad she’d set the timer on the heating. Her new home was bigger compared to the loft. High ceilings, Edwardian-built. It took much more to heat the rooms here. She kicked off

her heels at the bottom of the stairs, pushing them out of the way. “This is strange.” Andi turned to Rachel. “You’re the first person to come here. Even my lifelong friends haven’t visited yet.”

“Why?” Rachel shed her jacket, hanging it up by the door.

“I...wasn’t ready for them to be here. I’ve done nothing with the place, but you wouldn’t know that because you don’t know the old me.”

“I think it’s lovely. It has a tonne of character. It’s quite similar to the house I’m living in.”

“Honestly,” Andi said, inviting Rachel into the kitchen. “I don’t know why the hell I chose it. It’s too big, I have nothing to fill it, and I don’t feel comfortable here.”

“Where *would* you feel comfortable?” Rachel asked, resting against the kitchen counter next to Andi. Rachel’s perfume calmed her, her slightly tipsy voice making Andi smile. “Something smaller?”

“The loft. It’s the only place I’ve ever really felt comfortable. It was... home, you know?”

Rachel nudged Andi with her shoulder. “And it couldn’t have continued to be home?”

“No. I don’t think so. And my close friends agreed. Moving on, you know?” Andi knew they’d all been right. It just took a little while for her to realise it herself. “It was the right choice. Since I left it, I’ve met you.”

“But I’m not really *moving on*, am I?”

Andi’s brows drew together. “I’m sorry?”

“Andi, I suspect your friends were talking about you moving on in the relationship sense. While it’s great that we met, I don’t fall into that category, do I?”

“I wish you did,” Andi mumbled, staring down at the wedding ring she still wore. If she had realised anything tonight, it was just how much she’d missed being with another woman. Dinner and conversation while she gazed into those blue eyes. Rachel probably didn’t see it that way—Andi was certain she didn’t—but she couldn’t change how she felt within herself. All she could do was be honest, be upfront, and Rachel could take it or leave it. The decision was hers alone.

“That’s very sweet of you to say, but you and I both know that’s not true.” Rachel turned to Andi, taking her hand. “I spend my days sitting down to dinner with people just like you. I sit, I listen, I try to guide other women through their troubles. Personally, I think you’ve come a long way, but you

and I both know you're not ready to even contemplate a love life."

"Then...why do I feel different when I'm with you?" Andi hadn't meant to speak that out loud, but it was out there now. "Why does this feel natural and...like it could potentially go somewhere?"

"I think you need company. A friend."

"I have friends, Rachel. I have *plenty* of friends." Andi offered a pathetic smile. It was true; she had more friends than she could count. But none of them made her feel the way Rachel did. "I know this is probably quite a surprise to you, it is to me in many ways, but I've always been honest. So, here I am, doing exactly that."

Rachel studied every inch of Andi's face, her eyes narrowed. "What is it that you see when you look at me? What is it that...you want?"

"When I look at you? I see a woman who hasn't had the easiest time when it comes to love. I see someone who wants to be accepted for who she is...not what people choose to assume. I see hope, and I see happiness, and I see...pain."

Rachel inched closer, her hand still wrapped around Andi's. "But you also see the escort, don't you?"

Andi lowered her eyes, but they only landed on Rachel's cleavage. She looked back up, not wanting to be that kind of woman. "Actually, escort is the last thing I think about when I look at you." A single tear slipped down Rachel's cheek, her lips parting. Andi lifted her hand, brushing it away with her knuckles. Rachel may not have known it, but Andi heard her breath catch. "You're an escort. So what?"

"It's never that simple, Andi."

"I know." Andi didn't know any other escorts, but she knew life had to be difficult for Rachel. Society was terrible when it came to judging people. "But I needed you to know that I...would consider it with you." *Fuck!* Was Andi drunk? She had to be to stand here right now saying these things. "That I'd like to see where this went. Probably not very far. I think I have all of this completely wrong, and dinner really was *just* dinner, but I wanted you to know that I don't think the same as the other women in the past have."

Andi gazed into Rachel's blue eyes. She had to consider whether a change of scenery, a new home, and the promise to herself to live life had her saying these things. Whatever it was, nothing she had said was a lie. If Rachel kissed her right now, she would reciprocate. And if Rachel remained so close by for much longer, Andi was going to make the first move. Either

she would regret it in the morning, or she wouldn't.

"Thank you for the offer of wine, but I think it's probably a good idea for me to leave."

Andi nodded slowly, the loss felt when Rachel lowered her hand and let go. *There goes the idea of kissing her.* "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I appreciate your honesty." Rachel took a step back, then another. "I'll just call a cab."

Andi watched Rachel leave the kitchen, disappointed that she'd opened her mouth and revealed her feelings. She'd known it would be a mistake, that Rachel didn't look at her the way Andi looked at Rachel, but tonight had seemed different. It had *felt* as though Rachel was flirting. Actually, Andi was certain there had been flirting involved. Maybe, for the shortest time, Rachel was entirely herself with Andi.

Well, you fucked that up!

She followed Rachel out into the hallway, watching her book a cab through an app with a shaking hand.

"A-all done. Shouldn't be long." Rachel smiled back at Andi, but she knew it was fake. This woman couldn't wait to run out the door the moment her phone pinged.

"I know we said we'd do this again, *dinner*, but...I shouldn't expect to hear from you, should I?" God, Andi was going to miss spending time with Rachel. If she had just kept her feelings to herself, that could have been happening. "I have your email on file. I'll let you know when the keys are ready for you, okay?"

"Sure. That would be great." Rachel's phone pinged. She moved towards the door, grabbing her coat from the hook. "I'll see you around, Andi. Thanks for a great night."

"Wait!" Andi gripped Rachel's wrist gently, turning her to face her. "Was it me? Was it something I said or did? Was it just terrible, and you don't want to hurt my feelings?"

"What? No."

Andi sighed. "I don't know how to do any of this anymore. Dating and knowing what women want. If it was terrible for you, I *am* sorry. I tried to dress up and to look the part, but...I really don't know what I'm doing anymore." Andi felt anxious all of a sudden. It wasn't because Rachel had turned her down, not at all. She just felt really out of practice. "I know dinner with you wasn't a date, and as I'm now learning, it wasn't even as friends I

don't think...but I *did* have the perfect night with you. That's all that matters to me."

Rachel leaned in, pressing a kiss to Andi's cheek. "It wasn't anything you did."

Andi's shoulders slumped. If Rachel didn't tell her where she was going wrong, she couldn't better herself for any other woman down the line. "Okay, well, get home safe, and I'll be in touch about your loft."

"If you've changed your mind, I understand."

"Changed my mind about what? The loft?"

Rachel opened the front door, glancing back at Andi. "Yeah. I'd understand. This is a huge decision for you, Andi. As much as I want that loft, I'd rather know you were happy first."

"The loft is yours, Rachel. It doesn't matter what's happened here tonight...I'm not that kind of woman. We have a contract, and from this moment on, I will *only* contact you regarding that contract."

Rachel offered a single nod. "Okay."

"Would you please text me when you get home? So I know you arrived safely."

"I will."

"Thank you."

Rachel stopped as her foot hit the first step down to Andi's garden gate. She turned and faced Andi with tears in her eyes. "You're going to make someone very happy someday. Just this last week with you...you've made me realise exactly what I want in my future. Someone like you. Someone who is caring and genuine. This, tonight, it's all on me. You did *nothing* wrong."

If Rachel wanted someone *like* Andi, why wasn't Andi good enough? That didn't make much sense. But Andi didn't know Rachel, and she wouldn't put herself through it by asking for another chance. "Take care of yourself, Rachel. I'll be in touch to finalise everything."

CHAPTER 7

RACHEL SAT AT THE DINING TABLE, TWISTING HER CUP OF COLD COFFEE ON the distressed wood. She hadn't slept at all through the night, Andi's conversation playing on repeat in her mind whenever she closed her eyes. She didn't know why she'd suddenly fled last night, and she didn't know why Andi being honest was an issue for her either. Wasn't that what she wanted? Someone honest and dependable? Someone who didn't turn their nose up at Rachel and who she was?

Of course it was what she wanted. Rachel just hadn't expected Andi to be the one potentially offering her that. Perhaps if they hadn't just shared a beautiful dinner with one another, Rachel would have felt better prepared for the conversation. But they had, and as she'd sat across the table from Andi, Rachel knew she felt something for her. That wasn't necessarily a terrible thing, but given the condition of her heart after Juliet...and the fact that Andi was recently widowed, Rachel couldn't help but feel as though it would be a mistake. She didn't want to put her heart on the line for someone who would step all over it again. The pain was too great.

Her phone started to ring on the table beside her cup. She sighed and answered. "Hey, Kelly."

"How was dinner?"

Rachel's skin prickled at the reminder. Andi had looked breathtaking last night. Not only in the outfit she chose to wear but also in her personality. She seemed far less tense. And when she laughed? Oh, God. When she laughed, it was something else altogether. "It was great. We had a lovely evening. I think Andi thought I'd stitched her up when she got out of the cab and saw the place, but she was pleasantly surprised once she was inside."

“I’m with Andi on this. I still can’t believe that gorgeous restaurant is in the pits of the city.”

Rachel didn’t suppose it mattered where it was anymore. She wouldn’t see Andi outside of the estate agents from now on, so it was unlikely they’d have the chance to enjoy food there again. “It seems to work. That’s the main thing.”

“So, when are you seeing Andi again?” Kelly asked, her tone hopeful.

“She said she would email me when the keys to the loft were available. So, whenever that is, I guess.”

“Okay, but you’ll see her again for dinner and stuff, won’t you? It sounds like you had a great time with one another, so it seems like a missed opportunity to not do that again.”

“I think it’s best if we don’t.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

Rachel scrubbed a hand down her face. She didn’t want to do this. Andi shouldn’t matter to her, yet she did. “You said it yourself the other night. It’s not a good idea. I’m not looking, and she’s grieving, you know?”

“Something happened last night, didn’t it?” Rachel caught the change in tone from Kelly. Her best friend had every right to be apprehensive, but Rachel had done the right thing...and left before anything could happen. “Rae?”

“It didn’t. But it almost did.”

Rachel knew that down the line, she would probably kick herself. The decision to leave hadn’t been one she’d taken lightly. But the lack of hesitancy in Andi’s voice and the fact there wasn’t a hint of uncertainty in her eyes warned Rachel off. Because it meant Andi *was* ready to date, and, in turn, Rachel couldn’t lie to herself any longer. Of course she could have easily kissed her last night. But using Andi’s grief as an excuse to *not* get her heart broken again was no longer an option...so she’d fled.

“It just wouldn’t work. Andi is great; she’s gorgeous too, but I’m not sure I’m the person she should set her sights on when it comes to dating again.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because it’s all or nothing with me, Kelly. I hear the pain in her voice when she talks about her wife. I’m not sure I can be second best.” If Rachel was being brutally honest with herself, she *did* want to see Andi again. But the Juliet saga played over in her mind like a terrible movie, and whenever she thought about taking a chance, she reminded herself of her recent

heartbreak. She had been second best the moment Paige entered Juliet's life...she couldn't willingly go into something that would cause the same issues along the way. Andi still loved her wife—rightfully so—and Rachel couldn't change that.

“Oh, babe. I'm sure it doesn't work that way. If Andi is into you, she's into you. I'm pretty sure if the day ever came, she wouldn't be lying in bed with you...thinking about her wife.”

“Still.”

“Answer me this. When was the last time you went on a date?”

Rachel puffed out her cheeks, ashamed by the answer. “In my twenties. Before I started escorting.”

“And when was the last time you made time for yourself and went out with another woman? I know Juliet turned out to be something more, but when was the last time you allowed yourself to feel something for a woman who *wasn't* paying you for your time and looks?”

“Again, in my twenties.” Rachel chewed her lip, holding the tears in her eyes at bay. “I'm not sure what the point of this is...”

“The point is that you asked Andi out to dinner, and she said yes. The point is that you took a chance, whether you want to believe it was *just as friends* or not. Because it clearly wasn't as friends if something almost happened last night after dinner.”

“She...invited me back to her place for a glass of wine. I'm sure it was just because of the night we'd had, but she told me she'd consider something more with me. That...she feels different when she's with me.” Rachel knew she was relationship material. She'd never not believed that. But while she was escorting? No, it simply wouldn't last. “I'm struggling to understand how she feels that way. Andi will find someone again, but me? How can *I* be the woman she's interested in?”

“Because you're great. Your job doesn't define who you are. You had a blip with Juliet, but the only thing that showed me was that you're ready to settle down. And I won't lie, I thought it was going somewhere with you and Juliet. Especially when you told me you two were sleeping together. But we are where we are, and that's no longer an option. I just think you should give Andi a chance.” Kelly paused. “Look, it may not go anywhere, you're right. But if it does?”

“It won't.”

“I think you're making a mistake, Rae. But only you know what's best for

you. I just think it's a shame that you won't even entertain the idea."

"I think it's for the best if we just remain business. Once the sale of the loft has gone through, Andi can move on...and so can I. We won't have a reason to see one another then."

"Okay. Okay." Kelly was frustrated; Rachel knew it. "Would you at least let me know when you're moving in? I'd love to help you."

Rachel smiled. "I'd like that. It doesn't even need redecorating. Not really. Andi and her wife had good taste, so I'll probably start putting my own mark on it after the new year."

"Yeah, don't give yourself too much to do before Christmas."

Rachel turned her watch towards herself. "I should probably shower and get dressed. Are you busy tonight?"

"Nope. I have the night to myself."

"Did you want to meet me at the markets? I'll treat you to a hot beef sandwich and a glass of wine after it."

"Yes. I'd love that. Text me later and let me know what time you're thinking of getting there."

Well, that was Rachel's night sorted. She could take her mind off the last week—off Andi—and enjoy some time with her best friend. "Okay. I'll text you this afternoon."

"Bye, babe." Rachel sighed as Kelly ended the call, dropping her phone to the worktop with a clatter.

In a perfect world, Rachel would have been waking up this morning with one hell of a smile on her face. She would have been texting Andi to thank her for the perfect evening. Hell, if she'd gotten *really* lucky, she could have been savouring the taste of Andi on her lips. God, she was absolutely the kind of woman Rachel was looking for. That was quite obvious when Rachel allowed herself a brief moment to feel a particular way about her as they shared dessert last night. But that one thought still sat firm at the front of her mind. The thought of it all going wrong...once again.



Andi strolled around the markets, smiling as she passed the carousel. She couldn't believe she'd avoided this last year; it was perfect for getting in the

mood for Christmas. But this year and last year were two entirely different things. She could barely muster up the strength to go shopping for basic necessities this time last year. Thank God she was beginning to feel like herself again. A lot lonelier but managing, nonetheless.

She was meeting Sally in the next ten minutes, but she'd had to promise her best friend a stein to get her out of the house. Sally and Claire had met up with some other friends last night, and Andi suspected she was feeling the effects of the Prosecco she'd drunk. Thankfully, Sally was partial to a 'hair of the dog'.

Deciding to make the most of her time here, Andi started at one end of the market, perusing the gift shops lined up and facing one another. It was mostly tat, or so Jane would say, but she enjoyed this. Handmade gifts were always far more appreciated than something generic off a franchise shelf.

When she stopped at the cheesecake hut, her phone buzzed in her pocket. It would be Sally telling her she was almost there or that she was here but couldn't find Andi.

Sorry, love. I'm not going to make it. Gemma has called and needs me to look after Alfie. Can we rearrange? Sal x

Andi sighed. She could have done with having Sally here this evening. But Andi and her predicament could wait. It was a ridiculous thing for her to say to Rachel anyway. The night had gotten the better of her, and now Andi felt like a fool. God, she couldn't believe she'd been close to kissing Rachel last night. Still, she hadn't woken up full of regret as she'd assumed. Just... sadness.

She probably left last night thinking you're just desperate. Jane had only been gone for fifteen months, and here Andi was, practically throwing herself at another woman. *That's not true, and you know it!*

Don't worry. We can catch up some other time. Give Alfie a cuddle for me. Andi x

She locked her phone and shoved it in her pocket. There was no point drinking beer alone, so she would pick up a few small trinkets, and then she would call it a night. Two late nights back-to-back would only have her shattered tomorrow anyway.

Now, what cheesecake did she choose to take home with her and enjoy with a glass of wine? Her eyes drifted towards the Sicilian lemon, her mouth watering. While there were all kinds of different choices, something classic was perfect. She picked up two, paid, and moved on to the next stall.

As she stopped at the ornament stand, an instantly recognisable flash of blonde hair caught Andi's attention. Rachel stood with a redhead, laughing and joking as they picked out their own ornaments, and it was in that moment that Andi froze. She knew she should turn around and leave, but she didn't want to head home yet. There was also the small matter of wanting a tree decoration. Something for Alfie to give to Sally on Christmas Eve. Sally always had her grandchildren over on Christmas Eve, and then on Christmas morning, they were all together. She had invited Andi last year—this year, too—but Christmas morning was reserved for family. Andi didn't believe she fit in that way.

She kept her head down, waiting patiently in the queue. If she could stand back a little, Rachel wouldn't even know she was here. Andi felt too embarrassed at the thought of speaking to her, anyway.

But there was no such luck. Rachel turned around at the sound of a screaming child, her eyes wide as they landed on Andi. "Hi, Rachel."

"A-Andi, hi."

Rather than continue what was sure to be an awkward conversation, Andi focused her attention back on the rows of ornaments to the left of her. She heard the woman Rachel was with whispering, felt her eyes on her, but Andi kept her focus and blocked it out.

"Hi." The woman with Rachel said, turning around fully. "I'm Rachel's best friend, Kelly."

Andi forced a smile. "Hi. Nice to meet you."

"And I'm about to get some drinks from the gin bar. Can I get you one?"

Andi eyed Rachel. She made no effort to involve herself in this conversation, and that said everything Andi needed to know. Rachel had nothing to say to her. "No, thank you."

"Oh, come on. It looks like you're here alone. Why not join us for a quick drink?"

Honestly, Andi would love to join them. Kelly seemed lovely, and well, how she felt about Rachel was quite self-explanatory. But she wouldn't join a table she wasn't welcome at. She wasn't *that* desperate to find company. "I really can't. But thank you. Maybe some other time."

Kelly seemed satisfied with that, turning back to Rachel. She whispered something to her, and then she stepped out of the queue, heading for the gin bar.

Andi had never felt so awkward. Rachel stood in front of her, her back to

Andi, tapping her foot against the ground. Andi considered her next move. She didn't want it to be this way. "Rachel?"

Rachel looked over her shoulder. "Yeah?"

"Could we...maybe talk? I feel as though everything is a bit awkward between us after last night, and that's really not how I want it to be."

Rachel cleared her throat as she turned to Andi. "Andi, I feel awful about last night. If I gave you the impression or you feel as though I led you on, I'm so sorry."

"I...didn't think that. You've been great."

"Okay. That's good." Rachel puffed out her cheeks, half-turning away. Did she feel embarrassed about the situation, too? Rachel really shouldn't. Andi was the one at fault here.

"Do we really have to fall out over it, though? I may have said something you didn't want to hear, but I'm a grown woman who is capable of being a friend to someone."

Rachel nodded slowly. "I know you are. It's just...I didn't expect any of that, and I really don't want to blur any lines."

Andi's brows drew together. "I wouldn't do anything to blur any lines, Rachel. All I can do is apologise for last night, for ruining any sort of potential friendship, and hope that we can move forward."

"Really, it's okay." Rachel managed a smile, but Andi felt the uncertainty in it. Andi had one hundred percent ruined any friendship they could have had. Rachel could barely even look at her. "I probably shouldn't have taken you for dinner at that restaurant. It was maybe a little too...intimate, you know?"

Andi agreed, but only slightly. She'd had a great evening; it wouldn't have mattered where Rachel had taken her. "Perhaps, yes." She swallowed down the unexpected ball of emotion lodged in her throat. "Look, can we try again?"

Rachel hesitated, and then she decided to lean in and hug Andi. She lingered for a moment, sighing. "I'd like to try again. And...it really isn't you. If I thought for one moment that either of us was in the right frame of mind, I wouldn't hesitate to go on a date with you."

Andi pulled out of Rachel's embrace. There was no point questioning what Rachel was saying. She had made a decision based on what she wanted...and that wasn't Andi. "You don't have to explain. It's okay."

"I have a busy week coming up, but I don't know... Can I call you

towards the weekend or something?”

Andi held the cheesecake box to her chest, confused. “Yes. I’ll...be around.” It seemed Andi would be around a lot more often moving forward. Rachel had been her only socialisation lately. Since it appeared they would be putting some space between them, Andi didn’t have much else going on. “But don’t feel as though you have to call me if this isn’t what you want.”

“I promise to call when I’m able to. Maybe we can get coffee together or something.”

Andi wasn’t convinced Rachel really wanted that, she seemed hesitant with every word she spoke, but she would see what came of it. If Rachel got in touch, great...but Andi wouldn’t hold her breath. “Okay. But if this is about the loft and you wanting to keep in touch so I don’t change my mind, you don’t have anything to worry about. I told you it’s yours, and I meant it.”

“God, I know. I’ve never thought otherwise. I would like to call you.”

Andi lifted a shoulder. “Okay. Only if you want to.”

Rachel smiled, meaning it this time. Andi just knew by the sparkle in her eyes. “I will want to.”

CHAPTER 8

ANDI STARED OUT AT THE WATER, HOLDING A CUP OF COFFEE AS THE WIND intensified. She was meeting Sally in a few minutes during their lunch break, and the thought of bringing Rachel up was beginning to terrify her. While everyone claimed they wanted Andi to be happy, she was having a hard time believing it. She didn't have Rachel with her to reassure her. She didn't have her wise words, or those beautiful eyes, or that calming presence. She could have had that...if she hadn't messed it up almost a week ago.

She hadn't imagined herself to be in this position just a few weeks ago, but life *had* changed for Andi since she'd met Rachel. She couldn't deny the connection she felt, nor did she want to, but the thought of never seeing her again weighed heavy on Andi's mind. They just clicked. They could hold conversations with one another as though they'd been friends for many years. Shouldn't that mean something? It did to Andi. She hadn't looked at another woman since the day she met Jane, but here she was...about to tell her best friend she was considering a relationship again. That was down to Rachel and her charm. Perhaps if she allowed herself the chance to explore, another Rachel may come along in the not-too-distant future.

Still, wasn't it too soon?

And again, *would* people judge her?

Andi guessed she was about to find out. Sally would tell her straight—she would work through this with her—and then Andi could decide based on that. As she turned and looked back at the city, Sally was walking towards her, that ever-present spring in her step.

“Hey,” Sally yelled as she rushed towards Andi. “You look different. Rested and happy.”

Yeah, Andi had been sleeping better lately. She couldn't possibly say why. And then she smiled as an image of Rachel at dinner almost a week ago flashed in her mind. Oh, if only things could have been different. "Getting plenty of rest."

"Good. I like seeing you rested. But your call implied that you needed to talk, and you had me worried for a moment."

Andi hoped Sally wouldn't worry, but she couldn't be sure how any of those close to her would react. "I do want to talk, but I'm okay. I was hoping for some advice from you."

"Advice? The ever-wise Andi Palmer wants advice from me?" Sally placed a hand to her chest, smirking. "I'm honoured."

"I went to dinner with someone last Friday night." Andi had to get straight to the point. Lingering on this would prevent her from being entirely honest. "And I don't know, I think I would have liked to see her again."

"Hang on!" Sally gripped Andi's wrist, her eyes wide. "You went on a date, and you didn't even tell me beforehand? And it's taken you what? Almost a week to spill the beans? I don't know whether to be impressed or offended."

"It wasn't a date. But it felt like one, and I'd be happy doing it again."

"Oh, Andi. This is huge. I'm so happy for you. And I'm proud."

Andi smiled as she turned back to face the water. Sally's initial reaction was exactly what she hoped for, but was that just the shock of Andi going to dinner? "It was with Rachel. The woman who bought the loft."

"And?"

"And I just want you to talk through this with me. I thought I'd feel terrible the next day. I thought I'd lock myself in the house and worry about what Jane would think."

"But you didn't..."

Andi sighed. Of all the things she felt, regret wasn't there. Not an ounce of it. "No, I didn't. Does that make me a terrible person?"

"Babe."

"I need you to tell me it doesn't make me a terrible person. Because I really wanted to see her again and not just *having something to eat*, as she called it." Andi swallowed. It was a shame Rachel wasn't interested. Mostly because she was always on Andi's mind lately, but also because Sally seemed to be on board with the idea. "It won't go anywhere with Rachel, she turned me down when I hinted at the idea, but I still took that step."

“Wait, she turned you down?”

“Yes. But that’s okay. I’m sure there’s someone out there for me.”

Sally wiped a tear away as it suddenly fell down her cheek. “Watching you lose Jane, and then watching you try to recover...I thought I’d never get my best friend back again. I know more than any of our friends how much you struggled before and after her death, and all I want for you is to be happy. If that is single or involved, then that is your decision. You know I’ll always have your back. And maybe you’ll have a few wobbles before you actually take that next step, but you’re thinking about it, and that’s the most important thing. It tells me that you’re moving forward.”

“There’s something I’ve never told you.”

Sally studied Andi’s face, a slight crease between her brows.

“I did a lot of my grieving for Jane in the years before she passed away. She wasn’t the woman I’d married. I mean, she was and will always be my wife, but I saw what was happening, and I had to start the process of losing her long before I did. It was the only way I could cope with looking after her and being her sole caregiver. I knew we weren’t coming back from it, so I started to slowly let her go during her final years.”

“I know. And I can’t blame you for that. You had to do what was best for you, Andi. How you deal with Jane’s death is your business alone. Forget about offending anyone and forget what people may think of you. This is your life, and you ultimately decide how to live it.”

“When we got together, I knew we wouldn’t be together forever. A twenty-year age gap makes that quite obvious. But I still love her so much that it hurts if I think about her.”

“Nobody is asking you to let your love for her go. I’d certainly never expect that. You two were so good together. But you can be happy again with someone else while still loving Jane. So long as the woman you meet understands that, you really should go out there and see what the world has to offer.”

“You don’t hate me for this?”

Sally dragged Andi into a hug so powerful that they almost toppled to the grass verge behind Sally. “I’ve never hated you. And I never will. Just...are you sure Rachel turned you down?”

Andi felt an unexpected calmness wash over her. Through her. Sally had always been the friend she relied on for the serious talks in life. She didn’t know why she’d felt so tense coming into this conversation. “She did. She’s

not in the right place for a relationship at the minute. I think maybe I bring too much baggage with me, too. That's understandable, though."

"That's a real shame."

Andi sighed as she lowered her eyes. "We can still be friends. It's not the end of the world." *She said she would call and hasn't. Take the hint and move on.*

"You don't want to *only* be friends with her, though, do you?"

Rather than admit to what she really wanted, Andi would focus on something else. "She's...only thirty-five."

Sally lifted a shoulder. "So?"

"So, I should probably have the same concerns Jane did when we first met. I'm fifty, Sally. If I meet someone significantly younger than me, it won't last forever."

"But for the time you may have with someone, you could be incredibly happy."

Sally was right. And if Andi was so concerned by their age gap, she never would have married Jane. That was a poor excuse to sabotage anything before it had begun. *If* something ever began. "I was thinking of inviting Rachel to Hillary's party with me. Granted, I was thinking of it before she said no to me, but she could still come as a friend. W-what do you think?"

"I think that's a great idea. Providing she likes Christmas, that is."

"She does. We spent the evening at the Christmas market with one another last week. The night after I was there with you."

"You kept that quiet." Sally narrowed her eyes, but she still had that playful look.

"There was nothing to tell. I was there, and she showed up. We didn't arrange it."

"Tell me all about it!" Sally demanded, tugging Andi towards a bench. They sat down, Sally with her legs crossed and hand fisted under her chin in waiting. "They can cope without me at work."

"It was just a really lovely evening. Then we met again for beers with one another. She's...I don't know." Andi puffed out her cheeks. "I kind of get lost in her eyes whenever we're together."

Sally grinned. "Yeah?"

Why was Andi doing this to herself? Rachel wasn't interested, but here she was, still daydreaming about her. "And it was nice to feel something normal again. Doing something I've always loved. Spending time at the

markets.”

“I’d like to meet Rachel. Properly this time. Perhaps I could have a little word with her and ask her if she’s *completely* stupid in turning you down.”

Andi would love Sally to meet Rachel, too. If she was going to be a friend who Andi thought a lot of, then it was important that they all got along well. “I’m not going to chase someone who doesn’t see us going anywhere, Sal.”

Sally sighed as she slumped back against the bench. “Who knows. Maybe things will change.”



Rachel kicked her heels off, throwing her clutch bag to the stairs in frustration. Tonight, she’d had the client from hell. Tonight...could have turned out very differently if Rachel hadn’t left when she did. She understood that people were only human, and it was only natural to be attracted to escorts—on some occasions—but to be almost forced back to a hotel room with someone? No, that wasn’t acceptable. Rachel didn’t appreciate it when clients changed the rules upon arrival, and that client was now blacklisted from Rachel’s contacts, as well as the agency. No meant no, and that was that.

She answered her phone when it started to ring in her hand. Rachel had texted Kelly when she was in the cab, so now it was time for Kelly’s meltdown to commence. “Hey.”

“What the hell is going on? Are you okay?” The worry in Kelly’s voice mirrored how Rachel felt before she’d hailed a cab in the city. “Rae?”

“I’m okay. I’m fine. It was just...a lot.” Rachel moved into her kitchen, slumping back against the counter. “I need a strong drink, but I’m okay.”

“Who the fuck was this woman? Do you need me to come over?”

“No, it’s okay. I’m absolutely fine.”

Kelly sighed. “These are the nights when I worry about that bloody job of yours.”

Rachel understood Kelly’s concern, but this was the first time in over a year that an evening had ended this way. It wasn’t her job that was the issue; it was the people who didn’t know when to stop. “It was a new client. I know the potential, and I recognised it with her before she could force me into the lift. This is why I hate having dinner with clients at the hotel they’re staying

at.”

“And people think it’s only men who don’t know the meaning of the word no!”

“Kelly, relax. I’m home, my heels are off, and I’m going to lie in the bath and soak this tension away. Tomorrow is a new day, and I’ll never see that client again.”

“Fucking bitch!”

Rachel didn’t enjoy hearing Kelly in this state. She knew people worried about her, she worried herself at times, but Rachel would never put herself in a situation where she could come to any harm. She’d done this long enough to know when to cut an evening short. “Have you finished ranting down the phone to me?”

“Maybe you should take the rest of the week off. It’s not like you need the money. Andi will be handing over the keys soon, so maybe you could start packing your things up.”

“I...already have,” Rachel said, looking at the boxes sitting in the corner of her kitchen. She hadn’t kept anything out that she didn’t absolutely need. The place looked pretty sparse as she glanced around. “Knowing my luck, it’ll be after Christmas now before I hear from her.”

“There’s no chain, and you’re ready to go as soon as possible. I doubt it’ll be after Christmas.”

Rachel flicked the kettle on, preparing herself a cup of tea. The first person she’d thought of tonight as she climbed into the cab was Andi. Rachel had been close to sending her a text message but had ultimately decided against it. “I hope she’s doing okay.”

“Why...wouldn’t she be?”

“I-I don’t know. I think maybe I’ve upset her by turning her down, but I didn’t do it to hurt her. She probably needs a friend around this time of year.”

“I’m sure she has friends. But if you’re missing her, you should call her, Rae.”

“I’m not missing her.” That was a lie. “We just got on really well with one another.”

“So, call her. Maybe see if she wants to meet up for a drink or something. I do have to say that she looked quite surprised to see you at the market the other night. I’m not sure she knew what to do with herself.”

“No, I know. And that’s my fault. I shouldn’t have run out the door last Friday. It wasn’t as though she was about to pounce on me. We should have

talked it through. *I* should have talked it through.” Rachel had chastised herself on many occasions since that night. Andi wasn’t the kind of woman you just cut ties with because you were worried about getting attached. She also didn’t seem like the kind of person who would try her luck down the line. No. Andi was respectful. Hadn’t she shown that just by being the very person she was? “You know what I think it is?”

“What?”

“How fine she seems to be with what I do for work. I told her that the second night we met, and she didn’t even flinch. She actually told me that she thinks it’s great...and not because she was eyeing me up *as* an escort.”

“I think you really need to consider if you want to leave her behind. She sounds like she could be good for you, babe.”

Oh, Andi *would* be good for Rachel. There were no two ways about that. But she still had reservations when she allowed herself to imagine the possibility for a single second. Juliet flitted into her mind, her client this evening too, and then Andi made an appearance...those kind, dark eyes calming Rachel unexpectedly. “I don’t know what to do for the best anymore.”

“You want to see her again, don’t you?”

“Honestly? Yes.”

Kelly giggled. “Then what the hell are you waiting for? Seriously, give me one good reason why you *shouldn’t* see Andi again?”

Rachel chewed her lip. “Because she’s grieving.”

“If she was, she wouldn’t have told you how she felt the other night. Try again.”

Rachel hated it when Kelly was in this kind of mood. She was insufferable. “Because it wouldn’t work out. I don’t even know how to be in a relationship, Kelly. It’s been a long time since I allowed myself to think about falling in love. And before you mention Juliet, she was *completely* different. That just happened without me realising it for the most part.”

“You don’t know that it wouldn’t work out. *Nobody* knows if their relationship is going to work out. So, try again...again.”

“Fine. I’m scared, okay?” Rachel hadn’t wanted to be brutally honest; it was easier to give simple reasons. But she was. She was terrified.

“Scared of what, Rae?”

“Getting my heart broken all over again. Juliet didn’t even see me as anything other than her escort, and I was still devastated when she said she

wanted to stop seeing me. To willingly go into something with Andi, I'd be a fool. And when the day *did* come that she decided I wasn't right for her, it would be my own fault. Why the hell would I put myself through that?"

"They're not all Juliet. Andi isn't even your client. Shouldn't that tell you everything you need to know? That she sees *you* and not what you do for a living."

Kelly made a good point. Damn it. "Maybe, I don't know."

"Except you do know. You know exactly what you want, and you can tell me until you're blue in the face that it's not Andi, but you've always been a terrible liar. It's one of the things I love most about you."

"Look, I need to get out of this dress. Can I call you in the morning? I think I will close my diary for the week." Rachel needed some time to herself. Time to think. "Maybe we can do lunch if you're free one afternoon."

"Count me in. Call me tomorrow. Love you, babe."

Rachel smiled. "Love you, too."

She ended the call, noticing an email waiting for her as she did so. Rachel frowned, and then her heart skipped a beat when she saw Andi's name.

Good evening, Miss Meade.

I'm contacting you to inform you that the keys to your loft are now available for collection. I will be there tomorrow morning making final preparations, so please let me know if you would prefer to meet me there or if you would like to collect them from the office at a time that suits you.

Kind regards,

Andi Palmer.

Rachel swallowed as she reread the message. Andi couldn't have been any more formal if she tried. While Rachel was thrilled by what the email contained, she knew she didn't enjoy speaking to Andi this way. They'd had such a good time recently—the idea that this was where it ended didn't feel right. *You told her you'd call and didn't.* Rachel felt terrible about that. Andi had tried to put it all behind them a few nights ago, but Rachel seemed to find it easier to avoid the situation altogether.

She opened a new text message, inputting Andi's number in the contact bar.

I got your email. Can I meet you there tomorrow? Also, I don't like how formal we are right now.

She sent it off, hoping Andi would respond sooner rather than later. Andi likely didn't know what to make of Rachel lately, given the way she had fled

from her house, then proceeded to ignore her at the Christmas market. She may have told Andi she would contact her towards the end of the week, but that didn't mean everything had returned to normal between them. Honestly, Rachel wasn't sure it would. Andi didn't seem like the kind of woman who would willingly be played around.

That's no problem. Does midday work okay for you?

Yes. Midday is perfect. And about the formal emails and stuff?

Rachel placed her phone on the counter and prepared her tea. If Andi shot her down, she wasn't sure what she'd say in response. Because Andi had been right in what she'd said the other night. Was this really worth falling out over? As Rachel had spent the last few days without Andi in her life, but with her firmly on her mind, it was a resounding no.

I'm doing as you asked. I would never do anything you didn't want. See you tomorrow at midday.

Rachel sighed, a slight smile working its way to her lips. Andi wouldn't do anything she didn't want. This woman was a stark contrast to the woman Rachel had shared dinner with this evening. Actually, as Rachel stood here right now, it was confirmed that Andi *was* the perfect woman.

CHAPTER 9

ANDI UNPLUGGED THE KETTLE, LEAVING IT BESIDE THE BOX CLOSE TO THE front door. This was it. Her last cuppa with friends in the only place she'd ever felt at home. Sally and Claire sat quietly on the other side of the island, their hands wrapped around their cups as they watched her. But she had nothing to say. She just needed a moment to feel whatever it was she was feeling.

Incredible sadness.

The fear of change.

Lost. Andi felt entirely lost right now.

As she turned her back and lifted her own cup, she paused and closed her eyes. This time had been coming for a while now; she thought she would be able to deal with it. Seemed she couldn't, though.

"Are you okay, love?" Sally asked quietly. "Do you want us to go so you can be alone for a while?"

"No. I'm okay." Andi plastered on her best smile and turned to face her best friend. "What are you two planning for the rest of the day?"

Claire shifted on her stool. "We thought we'd get some lunch when we finish here with you. Are you coming with us?"

"No. I...have to get back to work." That was a lie, but Andi knew the moment she handed over the keys, she would fall apart. That was best done alone in her new home. *It's not home. It feels miserable.* She turned her watch towards herself. "Rachel should be here soon, so we'd better drink this and get ready to leave."

"Andi, I...want to thank you and Jane." Claire reached her hand towards Sally's, covering it. "If it wasn't for you both inviting me over to the loft

warming all those years ago, I never would have met Sally.”

Andi cocked her head as she smiled. “Is it really fifteen years?”

“In January, yes.”

“We did have some brilliant times here, didn’t we?” Andi looked up to the ceiling, her eyes briefly cast on the mezzanine level. The very place she’d held Jane night after night. “Our parties were epic.”

Sally laughed. “They really were. I don’t think I ever suffered hangovers as bad as I did after a night here.”

“Well, we didn’t force the copious amounts of wine down your throat.” Andi winked, wiping the counter down for probably the tenth time since she arrived. She wanted everything to be perfect when she handed the keys over. “Okay, favourite memory here.”

Sally and Claire eyed one another, then grinned. “The day we walked in here to you choking.”

Andi rolled her eyes. “Maybe you could have led with the story first. It just makes you sound like cruel bitches otherwise!”

“I don’t know what possessed you to lie on the floor while Jane dropped Maltesers into your mouth from the mezzanine. What did you think was going to happen?”

“Well, I clearly didn’t expect to choke!” Andi couldn’t help but laugh. Poor Jane had thought she would lose Andi that night. “Remember Jane’s face?”

“I thought she was going to pass out,” Claire said, almost choking on her sip of tea.

“Don’t you start! I don’t want to clean any more than I have to.”

Sally looked over her shoulder. “Clean? The place is spotless.”

“It won’t be if your missus spits her drink everywhere.” Andi rested forward on the island, twisting her cup on the marble. “You know, of all the things I imagined happening, I didn’t think I’d lose her. I knew I would—of course I did—but we go through our lives thinking we’re invincible, don’t we?”

“We do, sweets.” Sally reached forward, taking Andi’s hand. “But think of all the amazing memories you have with her. You two were fortunate enough to travel the world with one another.”

Andi nodded slowly, staring off into space. “The greatest memories.”

“And you’re going to be okay. You have all of us...whether you want that or not.”

“I don’t know what I’d have done without you two over the last year or so.” Andi couldn’t begin to thank her friends for their love and support. She knew they’d be there for her, but so much? And without warning? No, she hadn’t expected that. They all had their own lives to take care of, but they’d come through for Andi time and time again. Before Jane passed away, and every day since. “I really do have the best friends around me.”

“So, what’s the next step?” Sally asked, climbing down from her stool and washing her cup out. “Do you have anything in particular in mind?”

“Not really. I thought the whole Rachel thing could have been exciting, but you know.” Andi shrugged. “I’m sure I’ll find something to occupy my time. Maybe I need to sit down tonight and make a list of what I’d like to achieve next.”

“It’s a real shame about Rachel. Sally was telling me all about you going for dinner together.” Claire eyed her wife. “Be a love and wash my cup out for me.”

Sally rolled her eyes at Claire but took her cup anyway. Andi loved their interaction; they reminded her of her own relationship with Jane. The four of them had been very similar in their mannerisms. “How’s Gemma doing with Alfie?”

“Not bad. Dean is still being the ultimate bastard and won’t look after him. You’d think Alfie landed on this earth out of thin air, the way he treats them. I’ve told her to stop trying. He’s a waste of bloody space!”

It was these moments when Andi only appreciated Sally and Claire more than usual. Here they were, being with Andi on the last day of the loft when Sally’s own daughter was having ex-boyfriend troubles. They should be focused on that, not Andi. “If you need to take care of things or help her out with Alfie, I’ll be fine here.”

“We said we’d be here with you until you wanted to be alone, and we meant it.”

Andi’s phone flashed on the counter, her alarm reminding her that she had twenty minutes until Rachel arrived. “Well, look at that. Right on cue.”

Sally frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I...thought I’d spend the last few minutes here alone. That was my alarm to tell me Rachel would be here soon, so you two should head off for that lunch you mentioned.”

Sally dried the cups and placed them to the side of the sink, offering Andi a smile. “Okay. Come on, love. Let’s give this one a few minutes to do what

she needs to do.” She placed a hand on Claire’s shoulder, encouraging her down from her seat. And then she turned her attention to Andi. “If you need us, you call us, okay?”

“I will. But I’ll be okay.” Andi leaned in and hugged them both, following them to the door. “Maybe we could get drinks at the weekend? Or you two could come over to my place. I suppose it’s time I made it look more like a home...and emptied the boxes.”

“You’ll do it when you’re ready. Call me tonight, okay?”

Andi kissed Sally on the cheek. “I will. Have a lovely lunch. And you know, behave yourselves. I know what you two are like. I’ll get a call tonight from one of you saying you’re in a karaoke bar and you’ve lost your keys or purse.”

“We would never.” Sally winked, taking Claire’s hand. “Right, sweetheart?”

“Oh, I can’t promise anything.”

Andi watched them walk away hand in hand, feeling tremendously loved even though she was alone. It was the people in her life who made it what it was—Andi knew that. But on the very odd occasion, she *did* wish she had someone to call her own again.

Turning back into the loft, Andi closed the door and rested back against it. She took in every inch of the decor and layout, but it would be forever in her memory anyway. She couldn’t forget this place even if she wanted to. *I don’t ever want to forget.* She wrapped her arms around herself, sighing as she pressed her head to the back of the door.

Say your goodbyes...and start again.



Rachel was struggling to contain her excitement. In the next ten minutes, she would walk into her new loft...as the owner. The sale seemed to have happened much quicker than Rachel thought it would, she was sure it usually took longer, but maybe Andi had managed to pull a few strings to get things moving. If that was the case, Rachel had gotten really lucky in meeting Andi. She grinned at the thought of seeing her today. Few things in life made her

feel this happy, but as she crossed the main road and strode through the huge gates on the dock, her palms tingled. Really, she was beside herself.

She'd tried not to be. Rachel knew Andi wouldn't be feeling an ounce of what she felt herself, but she would tone it down the moment she knocked on the door. Andi was leaving an entire life behind today, and Rachel had to remember that above all else. She could squeal and gaze around in wonder when Andi had left. Not a moment sooner.

As the building came into view, Rachel stopped on the cobbled side road. She looked up at it, the sun shining even though it was bitterly cold on the dock today. The wind had one hell of an icy chill, but inside, Rachel felt warm and happy. She felt...settled. It didn't matter if she hadn't brought her belongings with her; she would do that this evening. But this was a new chapter in her life, and she was sure as hell going to make it count. Andi had loved this place, and Rachel was already head over heels for it.

She shoved her hands in her pockets, strolling towards the main entrance. When she looked up, Andi was sitting on the bench to the side. She had her head down, twisting the keys in her hands, her legs crossed.

"Andi?"

Andi looked up, her eyes bloodshot and puffy. "Hi." She got to her feet and cleared her throat. "Here. It's all yours now."

Rachel took the keys from Andi's shaking hand, a reminder of that soft skin warming her instantly. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'll...email the finalised documents over to you if that's okay?"

"Oh, of course. There's really no rush."

Andi offered a single nod. "Okay, well, enjoy your new home. Take care." She stepped around Rachel and walked away, her head still down and her arms wrapped around herself.

Rachel hadn't expected Andi to be overjoyed to see her, but she hadn't quite expected the reception she received, either. Andi...was in a terrible state. While Rachel knew she shouldn't, she couldn't help but feel dreadful.

"Andi?" She called out, receiving nothing. Should she leave Andi be, or should she go after her? While things had been strained between them lately, Andi clearly needed a friend. "Andi!" She rushed after her, catching up with her across the street. "Andi, wait."

Andi turned around, frowning. "Is everything okay?"

"I think I should be the one asking you that."

Andi managed a tight smile. "I'm fine. Did you need something?"

“N-no.” Rachel shifted uncomfortably, shoving her new keys into her pocket. “Would you...like to get a coffee or something?”

“Why?” Andi stared back at Rachel, her eyes glazed over.

“Because...I don’t know. It seems like you may need a friend right now.” Wow, Rachel didn’t know how to approach this. Christ, she was used to striking up conversation with women, it was her bloody job, but with Andi, she felt out of practice. Out of place. “I think maybe we need to talk.”

“I don’t know what you want to talk about.”

“Then why don’t we find a coffee shop and figure it out as it happens?” Rachel dipped her head, holding Andi’s gaze before she could look away. “Hey, come on. You said it yourself...we don’t need to fall out.”

“Oh, it’s not about that. I never should have even entertained the thought. It was stupid on my part. Things just feel a little strange today, but it’s nothing a few hours at home won’t fix.”

Rachel chewed her lip, nodding. “Okay. I still would have liked to get coffee with you, though.”

“You should go and check out the loft. This is an exciting day for you; I don’t want to ruin that.”

Rachel’s heart broke at the look in Andi’s eyes. She appeared void of anything. “You haven’t, and you couldn’t ruin it. The loft will still be there when we’ve had coffee.”

Andi blinked back tears, her bottom lip trembling. “Okay. There’s a place just around the corner if that works for you?”

“That’s perfect.” As Andi turned and walked away, Rachel followed, chancing a loose arm around her waist. She leaned in ever so slightly, feeling Andi relax. “It’s going to be okay, you know. I promise you.”

“I-I know.”



“I’m sorry about this,” Andi said, her hand trembling as she lifted her coffee cup. “You really don’t have to stay with me. I’m okay.”

“Andi, you’re shaking. I’m not leaving you while you’re feeling like this.”

Andi looked up at Rachel. That was exactly the kind of thing Jane would

have said to her. She hadn't expected to be in this state leaving the loft, but here she was, being supported by a woman she barely even knew. A woman who had been avoiding her.

"Talk to me, Andi. Please."

Andi didn't know what to say. She was shocked at the position she found herself in. Of course she knew this day would arrive—Jane had been gone since last year—but she'd moved out of the loft *weeks* ago. This should have been far easier than it seemed to be. "I'm just a little anxious about the future. Where I'm headed, you know?"

"That's understandable."

"I don't want to feel this way. I can't change what's happened, so I don't want to feel like this. I hate it. Never knowing what each day will bring, if I'll ever be happy again..."

"You will." Rachel slid her hand across the table, placing it over Andi's. Warmth was the first thing Andi felt. Attraction was the second. But it was an attraction she would have to bury immediately. "Things take time. You know that."

"How much time, though?"

"Well, everyone is different." Rachel's hand remained over Andi's. It shouldn't feel right and safe, but it did. *Just friends*, Andi reminded herself. Andi needed all the friends she could get now that she spent most of her time alone. And new friends were always nice. "I know leaving the loft is a huge deal for you, but you do know you're always welcome to come over, don't you?"

Andi smiled, and then she lowered her eyes. "I'm not so sure that's true. I don't forget the conversations we've had lately."

"Forget about that conversation. Forget about the things I said at the market, too. Whenever you need to talk, or if you want to come over for a cuppa, you're more than welcome."

"Thank you." Andi wouldn't take Rachel up on that offer. It was clear that Rachel had wanted to cut ties once the sale had gone through, so she would allow that to happen. But she wasn't cruel enough to admit that right now. Rachel was trying to be a friend, and that was the most important thing.

"*I do* mean that. What you said last week threw me. I'm not sure even *you* expected to say what you did. But we can be friends, can't we?"

Andi considered it. She wasn't a teenager with raging hormones. She could be friends with Rachel. It may not feel that way today, she had so much

going on in her head, but she could. “We can. If you’re sure that’s really what you want.”

“I...know you pulled some strings to get the sale through quicker.” Rachel looked pointedly at Andi, but she was wrong. She hadn’t pulled any strings. She was simply trusting that Rachel wasn’t dodgy. “You didn’t have to do that for me, but it just shows the kind of person you are.”

“I didn’t pull any strings.”

Rachel laughed. “Of course you did. A house sale completion in two weeks? Even four weeks would be sheer luck.”

Andi lifted a shoulder, not meeting Rachel’s eyes. “The sale hasn’t gone through yet. I chose to hand over the keys to you so you could start to prepare for Christmas in your new home.” Andi did look up this time, not surprised by the shocked look on Rachel’s face. “And because I was sure you didn’t want to have to deal with me again. The plan is to have someone else from my office deal with your final paperwork.”

“O-oh.”

“Look, Rachel. We don’t have to pretend that you’re remotely interested in remaining friends. I know you’re not. I would have loved the chance to prove myself to you, but things are awkward and strained between us. I can’t live my life that way. I’m too old to wonder *or* care what people think of me.”

“I do want to be friends. I avoided you because I felt really shit about being at your place.”

“Why? If you’re not interested in me, you’re not interested in me.”

Rachel swallowed. “I *am* interested in you. The problem is that I *can’t* be.” Andi tried to remain neutral with her facial expression, but Rachel smiled weakly. “Surely you know I’m attracted to you, Andi. I may be good at my job, but I’m not that good when it comes to someone I genuinely like.”

“I-I...”

“So, I’d love to stay in touch with you. I’d love to spend the evening with you again at some point. But it has to be as friends. So long as you understand that it’s simply the way it *has* to be, then I’d really love to see you again.”

Andi saw how much Rachel was struggling with whatever was going on inside her mind, so she straightened in her seat and beamed a smile. “I...did want to invite you to a friend’s Christmas party.”

“Oh, I love a Christmas party. You can count me in. Just let me know the

date so I don't book in with any clients that night. Or...the following day, depending on the kind of friends you have."

Andi laughed for the first time that day. "Yeah, it's probably a good idea if you take the following day off, too."

"I like it. You have fun friends. I can't wait!"

"It'll probably be in a couple of weeks. Hillary usually hosts it about a week or so before Christmas."

"Oh. That's...a while away." Rachel frowned as she stared down at her hand. And then she pulled it away suddenly. "Sorry."

"It's okay."

"If you wanted to do something together before then, just let me know. I'm off for the rest of this week. Decided I needed a break."

"Oh. Is everything okay?"

Rachel cleared her throat, something in her eyes changing. "Yeah, fine. I...had a difficult client last night."

"Difficult how?"

Rachel shook her head. She clearly didn't want to get into it with Andi. "Nothing. It's okay."

"You may be here for *me*, but I'm here for you, too. Did something happen?" Andi didn't want the thought to cross her mind, but it was too late. If Rachel had been hurt in any way, she wasn't sure what she'd do with that information. "Rachel?"

"Could we talk about it another time? I'm trying to push it from my mind. They've been blacklisted from the company, and that's what counts."

Blacklisted? Jesus, what the hell had happened? "I... Okay. If you're sure?"

"I am." Rachel beamed one of her beautiful smiles, relaxing into her seat. "So, let's arrange something for before the Christmas party. No use in us both hanging around at home when we could be enjoying ourselves."

Something within Andi suddenly calmed. Rachel was right; they should be enjoying themselves. Living life. Wasn't that the very thing Andi had promised Jane once she got her diagnosis? To live life to the full and never take a single day for granted? "Yes. Let's arrange something."

Rachel got to her feet, eyeing Andi's coffee cup. "Another one?"

"Yes. Please."

CHAPTER 10

RACHEL CHECKED THE LOFT WAS CLEAN AND TIDY, RUSHING AROUND AND grabbing things before she shoved them into her bedroom and closed the door. Andi was coming over. Not for a social visit...but she would still be here. Rachel wanted the place to look presentable. Nothing less was good enough.

Her phone started to ring on the coffee table.

“Hello?”

“What’s wrong? Your message sounded like you were having a meltdown.” She heard the panic in Kelly’s voice. “And why are you out of breath?”

“Andi is coming over.”

“Okay, I don’t know if I want you to finish the rest of this conversation. Getting the pent-up tension out before she arrives?”

Rachel stopped dead, wrinkling her nose. “Did you just...imply what I think you did?”

“Look, I’m not going to shame you. Whatever works best for you before she gets there.”

“I...was not masturbating! I was tidying up. Jesus, Kelly!”

Kelly burst out into a fit of laughter. Why did Rachel fall into her trap time and time again? “Relax, I’m fucking with you. But tell me, why exactly is Andi coming over? I thought you wanted to rid her from your life...or whatever it was you were trying to do.”

“I didn’t say that. I said I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

Kelly sighed. “And now?”

Rachel rested against the back of the couch, dragging a hand through her

hair. “I’m *still* not sure it’s a good idea. But anyway, she’s not coming over to see me; she’s coming over to have a look at the boiler before I call out a repair company. I have no heating.”

“Oh. She’s flogged you a dodgy loft. Charming.”

“I’m sure she hasn’t.” Rachel rolled her eyes before checking the time. She had about ten minutes before Andi would arrive. “When she’s finished with the boiler, do you think I should ask her to stay? I wanted to kind of explain myself, you know?”

“Explain yourself?”

“Yeah. We were getting along so well before she mentioned the idea of a date. If nothing else, I owe her an explanation.”

Kelly cleared her throat. “I don’t believe you owe anyone anything, but I do think she would appreciate it. Maybe then you guys can move forward as friends. If...that’s what you want, of course.”

Rachel did want that. She really wanted Andi in her life in some capacity. Because since they’d gone to dinner last week—and subsequently seen far less of one another—Rachel had been miserable. Andi had been forthcoming; Rachel should have respected that rather than run away. Most women didn’t know how to handle Rachel or how to approach her, but Andi had felt comfortable enough doing so. Deep down, that meant a lot.

“If I knew without a doubt that I wasn’t making a mistake, I wouldn’t hesitate, Kelly. But I worry that Andi is just another Juliet for me. I know they’re entirely different people, but the way I’ve met them both is kinda similar. That should worry me, shouldn’t it?”

“I don’t know that you should be worried, Rae. I think that the fact Juliet was always a paying client is very different from what you have with Andi. Juliet *always* expected a particular service, it was the agreement, after all, but Andi met you as *you*. Not as an escort.”

“You know, she told me that an escort is the last thing she sees when she looks at me.” Rachel chewed her lip as she looked down at the pristine hardwood flooring. That had been the defining moment that night. It was the reason she’d left. Because as Rachel stood there being confident and unwavering, Andi had unravelled her within one sentence. Something she hadn’t expected for one moment. “Juliet never said that to me.”

“Because Juliet *did* only see you as an escort. Hence why she’s fallen in love with another woman.”

Yeah, Rachel didn’t need to be reminded of that. She was completely

over Juliet, that was certain, but it still stung a little when she thought about Paige being the chosen one. What had Paige had that Rachel didn't? "I know I fucked up by falling for her, but it's really messed with my head. I just...I don't know what I'm doing with myself most of the time lately. But that's not because of Juliet. It's all Andi. I can't get her off my fucking mind, Kelly. I sit here wondering what she's doing. I lay in bed, kicking myself for turning her down. But it was a shock, you know? I couldn't believe someone as sweet as her, someone who had what sounds like an incredible marriage... would want to date me."

"You're a catch, and you know it, Rae."

Rachel wasn't belittling herself. No way. Still... "I just hadn't expected it. I know what she thinks of me, and I really love that about her, but when we were alone, and she was saying all those things about me...things I've longed to hear from someone who I know I can be happy with, it threw me."

"Then you should do exactly what you've suggested, babe. Speak to Andi. Tell her about Juliet and how you're feeling. I do think she'd appreciate it, and maybe then you can stop thinking about it every minute of the day. Because you are, aren't you?"

"S-she's been on my mind *a lot* this week, yeah. Everything I do, she's just there. In my head." Rachel had no qualms admitting that. Still, she wasn't sure it would change anything. She could discuss this with her best friend all day and night, but unless Andi had the details, what was the point? "That's not a good sign, is it?"

"Honestly, I think it's a great sign."

Rachel frowned. "And how do you come to that conclusion?"

"Because I've said it before, and I'll say it again. This could be good for you. But in order for you to find out, you'll have to give it a chance."

"She's...invited me to a Christmas party."

Rachel would admit to her belly fizzing at the idea of a Christmas party with Andi. If she'd realised anything since they'd met, it was that Andi was very much into Christmas. Perhaps they were suited to one another after all.

"And it's just as friends?"

"Y-yeah. I think so."

"Bullshit. No way. Another woman...one who is attracted to you, doesn't invite you to a Christmas party as a friend. All it takes is for you to be standing far too close to the mistletoe, and *boom!* You'll be back at your place naked with her."

Rachel puffed out her cheeks, her brows raised. That image was now in her head, and it was the last thing she needed when she was about to come face-to-face with Andi. “Well, that escalated quickly.”

A knock at the door had Rachel suddenly panicking.

“Oh, shit. She’s here. I’d better go.”

“Okay. Just do one thing for me, Rae? Be yourself. Just...be you. Because I really love the real you.”

Could she really be herself? Yes, she could. She hadn’t been anything *other than* herself in Andi’s company. “I will. I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

“Bye, Rae.”

She threw her phone to the couch, rushed to the door, and pulled it open. Andi stood in the corridor smiling back at her, a stark difference from the last time they’d seen one another. Seeing her in such a state had been hard. Andi always seemed so put together. Rachel enjoyed seeing her smile. “Hi. Come in.”

“I’m so sorry about this. I must have done something to it before I left. But if it needs an engineer, I’ll cover the cost.”

Rachel closed the door when Andi was safely inside, turning to face her. Andi suddenly seemed flustered...nervous, perhaps. “No, you won’t. Maybe it’s something simple that we can fix between us.”

Andi shed her coat, hanging it up to the side of the front door. She had probably done that hundreds of times over the years; she seemed too comfortable as she rolled up her sleeves and walked towards the spare bedroom. Rachel followed, her hands shoved in the pockets of her jeans.

She watched Andi get to work, bent over as she shone the torch from her phone at the tiny display where the boiler was in the cupboard. “Oh, thank God for that. It’s just the water pressure that needs topping up.” Rachel stared at Andi’s *very* pleasant backside; her head cocked slightly. *She really is a vision.* What an idiot Rachel had been. A gorgeous woman who was actually interested in her, someone who was genuinely the nicest person she knew... and she’d fucked it up. She continued to stare, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth. *Wow.* “It’ll only take me a minute, and then I’ll be out of your way.”

“Oh, no rush.” Rachel caught the tone of her voice as that slid from her mouth, suddenly standing upright and focusing her attention elsewhere. “Cuppa?”

Andi shifted back out of the cupboard, blowing her hair out of her face as

she faced Rachel. “I’m sure you’re busy, but thank you.”

“Actually, I’m not. I didn’t have much to bring with me, to be honest, so I’m just here, feeling like a lost soul.”

“Rachel—”

Rachel held up a hand. “I wanted to ask if you’d stay for a while. So we could talk.”

“We really don’t have to do this. Please, let’s not put ourselves through it again.” She appreciated that Andi didn’t want to go over this again, she didn’t either unless absolutely necessary, but Andi seemed like the kind of person who would beat herself up about something that wasn’t her fault. Rachel wanted to be one hundred percent sure that Andi knew *all* the details. Maybe then, Andi would understand why Rachel was worried about going into something with her.

Rachel could only smile as Andi’s dark eyes stared back at her. “I’d like to talk. And I’d really appreciate it if you could give me a little time to say what I wanted to say.”

Tonight likely wouldn’t be the night when Rachel told Andi how stupid she’d been. She needed to get everything in order in her head first. But down the line, maybe a date wouldn’t be the worst idea in the world. And they had the Christmas party coming up, too. Maybe Rachel could test the water then.

“Okay.”

Rachel instantly settled at that. “So, cuppa...or wine?”

Andi snorted. “Wine. Obviously.”



Andi took the middle of the couch, sitting side on as Rachel got comfortable on one end. She had purposely sat in a different seat from where she usually would; it felt weird being here with someone else the owner now. “Sorry about the boiler. It’ll be because it hasn’t been used in a while.”

“Really, don’t worry about it. I’m just glad you knew what you were doing.”

“I’ve always made it my mission to know what I’m doing rather than pay someone else. Those bookshelves built into the office? Handmade and fitted by me. The bed frame on the mezzanine, also me. The kitchen? Fitted by me

and Jane.”

“Wow. Seriously? That’s impressive.” Andi noted how Rachel’s eyes brightened. But it was just one of the things she liked about Rachel. Her enthusiasm when Andi spoke about her past. It made everything feel less daunting moving forward.

“Anything a man can do, we can do.” Andi couldn’t recall the last time she’d paid for a service when it came to things around the house. Obviously, she wouldn’t touch anything related to gas or electric, she wasn’t certified, but if she was confident with other things...absolutely. “That’s the one thing I miss about this place. The kitchen.”

Rachel tipped her wineglass towards Andi. “It’s a very good kitchen.”

“Thank you.”

“And I have to thank you for offering me this place fully furnished. It made my life easier when it came to not needing to hire removal men.”

“You’re welcome. I didn’t want to take any of it with me. Fresh start, you know?” Andi *had* considered taking everything with her, but it only reminded her of a past life. And if she was being honest, it suited the loft perfectly. It would only look out of place in Andi’s new home.

Rachel smiled, lowering her eyes momentarily. “And how’s that going?”

“You know what, it’s going okay. Better than I thought after I left you at the coffee shop. I just needed a minute to grieve after letting go of my home, I guess.”

“I don’t blame you for that at all.”

“So, you wanted to talk?” Andi chose to get straight to the point. She didn’t want to sit around here all night. If she did, she wouldn’t want to leave. Her only hope for the end of this night was to be in a better place with Rachel. This friendship was important to her, even if friends was the last thing she wanted to be.

“Yeah, uh...” Rachel stared down at her wine glass as though she was gathering up the courage to speak. “I wanted to give you a real apology for the night we went out to dinner. And I know you’re only going to tell me that it’s okay, but please, I need to do this. To say this.”

Andi’s brow knitted together. Rachel seemed almost upset. “Okay.”

“You...remind me of her,” Rachel said, shaking her head slightly. “Juliet.”

“Oh, I...I’m sorry.” Reminded Rachel how? In looks, personality, what?

“You have nothing to apologise for. But it’s true. I met Juliet just before

her mum passed away. We were in a client/escort relationship at the time, and things tipped over once Juliet lost her mum. She became reliant on me, and I got far too attached. To the point I fell in love with her.”

“That had to be tough.”

“Honestly, it was. I saw how vulnerable she was. I was feeling lonely and questioning my future and where it was headed...and it was just a recipe for disaster. Juliet then fell in love with her new server at the bar she’d just opened, and I was no longer needed. And I know I’m *just* an escort. I also know that crossing the line can only lead to heartbreak, so it’s my own fault. But it still didn’t hurt any less.”

Andi shifted on the couch, placing a hand on Rachel’s knee. “You’re not just an escort, Rachel.”

“Sometimes it feels like it’s all I’ll ever be. To me, my friends, other women. Maybe that’s something I’ll have to live with—because of the career choice I made—but what’s done is done. I can be myself, risk my heart again, or I can do what I’m trying to do here...and avoid any kind of relationship or feelings.”

“I had a feeling my baggage would be too much.” Andi wrinkled her nose slightly. She didn’t have any baggage in *her* mind, but she could understand Rachel’s point now. She didn’t want to take on someone like Andi. “And I don’t know, maybe down the line I’ll find some kind of companionship, but I’m not holding my breath. People see a widow and run a mile. I’d like to say I understand why, but I don’t. I’d never put myself or anyone else through a relationship with me if I didn’t think I was ready.”

“It’s not your baggage—I swear to you it’s not. I don’t feel like you really *have* any baggage. It’s me and my issue with women I perceive to be vulnerable. I don’t know if I can put myself in that position again. You’re grieving, just like Juliet was, and I don’t think I can handle it a second time around.”

“Oh, I did my grieving a long time ago, Rachel.” Andi may have been hesitant in the days after she met Rachel, worrying about what other people would think, but that didn’t equate to grieving. It was simply Andi making excuses rather than accepting she wouldn’t find love again.

Rachel appeared confused by that. “I don’t understand.”

“Jane was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s five years before she passed away. Within two years of her diagnosis, she didn’t know who I was. Not even my name. While losing her physically may have only happened

recently, emotionally, that happened quite some time ago.”

“God, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

Andi lifted a shoulder. “It’s okay. I did everything I could to love her, to care for her, but I knew life wouldn’t go back to normal. I knew I’d lose her. But I was lucky to have fifteen perfect years with her before she started to change.”

“It takes a very kind soul to do what you did. But I knew you were kind from the moment I met you. You’re the only woman to have been upfront and honest with me. You’re the only one who hasn’t sneered at the idea of me being an escort. It may not seem like much to you, but that means a lot to me. I hope you know that.”

“I am sorry if I put you in a position last week. It wasn’t my intention. I felt I could trust you, and you wouldn’t have made me feel terrible about thinking of my future without Jane.”

“And then I blew you off.” Rachel scoffed, getting to her feet and refilling her wine glass. She brought the bottle and refilled Andi’s, leaving it on the coffee table as she returned to her seat. “I didn’t expect it. I *genuinely* didn’t think for one moment that you would say that to me. But that’s no excuse. Not really. I’m just scared for the future, you know?”

“You and me both.” Andi settled back against the couch, running a hand down her thigh. She didn’t know where they went from here, but Rachel opening up to her meant a great deal. It meant that Andi could understand her better. She reached out her hand and took Rachel’s. “Thank you for tonight. I know you have friends and your social life...when it allows, but I was upset at the thought of you being wary around me. I don’t know the kind of women you’ve associated with in the past, but I’m not like them. I give you my word that I’ll never do anything I shouldn’t. I put myself out there, and it didn’t quite go to plan, but that’s okay.”

“Andi—”

Andi held up a hand. “Please, it’s okay. This conversation tonight helps me to better understand. I thought I’d done something wrong.”

“You haven’t done *anything* wrong, Andi. Honestly, I’m a little bit worried that you’re perfect.”

Oh, if only Andi was perfect. Maybe then Rachel would be more interested. “Really, that’s not true.”

“Thank you for staying and talking.” Rachel squeezed Andi’s hand but didn’t let go. Andi chose not to draw her attention to that fact; they’d had

enough panic already. “I hope you’re going to finish this bottle with me before you even consider leaving.”

Andi rolled her eyes playfully. “Fine. You twisted my arm.”

CHAPTER II

ANDI WATCHED RACHEL AS SHE THREW HER HANDS UP AND WIGGLED HER backside. She couldn't recall ever playing crazy golf, but she was absolutely enjoying herself. Actually, it was more than simple enjoyment. After the rocky start she'd had with Rachel, Andi hadn't expected to be spending time with her on any given day. They may have cleared the air with one another, but she still hadn't imagined they would make it as far as planning an evening with one another so soon.

Yet here they were. Spending the evening together. The only issue Andi had was how striking Rachel looked this evening. She wasn't dressed up; casual had been the required dress code for tonight, but there was just something about the way Rachel carried herself when she let go and enjoyed life. Andi was far more attracted to *this* Rachel than the escort Rachel. Yes, they were equally hot—even if she hadn't quite been on the receiving end of that side of her—charming too, but this Rachel, the *real* Rachel, was a sight to behold.

“What?” Rachel approached Andi, wearing a frown. “Did I just make a dick of myself?”

“No. Quite the opposite.” Andi pressed the end of her golf club to the floor, casting her gaze on the artificial turf. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Yes. I haven't played crazy golf in years. Thanks for allowing me to live out my youth again.”

Andi lifted her gaze, enamoured by Rachel's eyes. This evening, the looks lingered longer than usual. Every time Andi looked up from concentrating on the ball, Rachel was watching her. Andi didn't understand. Nothing significant had happened when she was at the loft. Not even a hint of

flirting or anything similar. So once again, Andi had to wonder if this was just Rachel's personality. If that *was* the case, it was very off-putting in terms of Andi knowing what the hell was going on here.

"Thank you for inviting me. I'm a first-timer, so it's been great."

They stood at the end of the course, neither of them knowing what to say. Did Andi thank Rachel once again and head home? Did she suggest they get something to eat? She wanted to offer that, but the last time they'd had dinner together, it all turned a little sour. *Maybe if you don't put your foot in it, it'll be fine.*

"Do you have any plans for the rest of the night?" Rachel asked, taking Andi's golf club from her and slotting them into the stand. "I didn't think you'd be so good at this, so I thought we'd be here *all night* waiting for you to actually *get* a ball in the hole."

Andi splayed a hand across her chest, feigning offence. "Charming! I was about to offer to buy you dinner, but I don't think I will now."

Rachel pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, quite clearly failing to suppress the smirk she wore. "I'm sorry. I'm joking."

Andi cocked her head. She couldn't read Rachel at all. That unnerved her. "Come on. Let's head back out towards the bar."

They strolled along, side by side, the silence only unnerving Andi further. Rachel hadn't made a comment about the offer of dinner, so she supposed that was a no-go. Still, it didn't matter. Andi had enjoyed spending time with Rachel even if the night ended from this point on.

She shoved her hands in her pockets and turned to Rachel. "Did you want to grab a beer before we leave?"

Rachel beamed a smile, her own hands shoved in her jeans pockets. "Yes. I'd love to. I'll get us a table."

Andi ordered two beers, her eyes straying to Rachel as she watched her send off a text message. Should Rachel have been working tonight? Andi hoped she hadn't missed out on a client because of her. Perhaps that was the reason Rachel hadn't gone deeper into the mention of dinner.

Andi paid for their drinks and made a beeline for the table Rachel sat at. She cleared her throat. "Thanks again for this evening. It's been great."

"Any time." Rachel swigged her beer, watching Andi as she did so. "Thanks for the beer."

"I'm...not keeping you from anything, am I?"

Rachel's brows drew together. "Keeping me?"

“Work, you know...”

“Oh, no. I didn’t book any clients in tonight. I knew I was coming here with you.”

Andi appreciated that, really she did, but this was Rachel’s livelihood. “That’s very sweet, but you shouldn’t turn down work for me. I would have been happy seeing you again whenever you were free.”

“I work my own schedule. I work when it suits me. Tonight didn’t suit me, and I’d rather be here playing crazy golf and drinking beer with you.”

“Why?” Andi wouldn’t usually ask something like that, but as far as she was concerned...Rachel didn’t want to ‘blur any lines’. Being at her loft a few days ago made no difference to that. And maybe Andi was reading everything wrong, but it definitely felt as though there had been some kind of shift between them. Rachel...was different. More attentive. Less nervous or uncertain. Andi would consider her playful and flirty at times tonight.

“Why do I want to be here? Because I like you, Andi. You’re far more fun than boring dinners with a client I may never see again.”

“Well, thank you.”

“And I know I’ve been very hit and miss recently, I’m still mortified by the things I said to you at the market when I was with Kelly, but I like this. Us going out together.”

“Me too. I hope we can do it again whenever we’re free.” Andi picked at the label on her beer bottle, watching as water dripped from it. “I have to ask, though...are you comfortable, Rachel? I don’t want you to think that we have to do this just for the sake of it.”

“Does it feel like the sake of it to you?”

“No. But I think it’s probably best if I leave it at a simple no, and we move on with the rest of the night.” Andi smiled weakly, desperately wishing she knew what was going through Rachel’s mind tonight. If Rachel was so sure they couldn’t date, why was she looking at Andi differently? Why was her entire demeanour a huge contrast to the times before?

“I don’t understand.”

Andi laughed a gentle laugh. “No, me neither.”

Rachel reached a hand towards Andi, but she slowly retreated. She could do friends, but she couldn’t do...this. “Andi, talk to me.”

“Can we not do this? I’d rather be able to enjoy nights like this with you than put my foot in it again and end up with nothing at the end of it.”

Rachel lowered her chin to her chest and sighed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologise. I just can’t do the back and forth.” Back and forth was the last thing Andi wanted or needed. She was too old for games. She preferred to know where she stood with someone, and that was that.

“I’m sorry if it feels that way. I don’t want all this back and forth, either. But I *am* here if you need to talk. About anything.”

Andi shook her head. “I don’t want that type of relationship with you. I don’t want you to feel as though you’re working when you’re with me. You know, a shoulder whenever I need to talk. Because I don’t. I’ve done all the talking I need to do, and I just want to live my life now. I told you I didn’t have any baggage, and I meant that.”

“That’s...not how I see this with you. Fuck, you’re the only person in my life who *doesn’t* remind me of what I do. That’s why I love being with you so much.”

She loves being with me? Andi hadn’t expected that. “Well, then, that’s all that matters.”

“You mentioned getting something to eat. I’m up for it if you are?” Rachel finished her beer and slid from her stool.

Andi followed, placing the empty bottles on the bar. “I am up for it.”



Rachel held her focus on the couples around her, trying desperately not to meet Andi’s eyes. It was no secret that they’d continuously watched one another this evening. Rachel was sure Andi had caught her looking on several occasions, but she needed to stop and breathe for a moment. Tonight had been the first time that she’d allowed her mind to wander. To a place that included Andi and that devastating smile. To a scenario where they were here like this...only on a date, rather than hanging out. For the first time, Rachel allowed herself to understand that she could potentially have something special here with Andi.

Only, she’d already turned Andi down.

And told her it wouldn’t work.

So, here she stood. Feeling like a fool. Not because she didn’t want to feel what was building between them but because Andi deserved better than this. Andi deserved someone who was sure of what they wanted. She deserved to

be lavished with love and adoration. Rachel couldn't ask for anything more in a woman, so why was she so torn?

"I'm just going to use the bathroom. Keep your eyes on my burger." Rachel's head whipped around at that. She smiled when Andi stared back at her with rosy cheeks. But it was Andi's soulful eyes that Rachel found herself focused on. Those eyes told a million different emotions. They offered just a hint of the impressive yet sad life Andi had lived. God, she was sheer beauty without intending to be.

"I'll guard it with my life."

She watched Andi leave their table, that long dark hair cascading down her back. Rachel could only sigh lightly, knowing she likely wouldn't have a chance to make things right between them. If Rachel hadn't spent stupid amounts of time obsessing about her past with Juliet, perhaps they would have been on a date already.

Needing a pep talk, Rachel took her phone from her pocket and brought up Kelly's message thread.

I'm at a burger hut in the city with Andi. We've been to play crazy golf. You know, as friends! Tell me not to ask her on a date!

Rachel chewed her lip, startled when her phone rang in her hand.

"Hi."

"Why would I tell you not to ask her on a date?" Kelly laughed down the line. "You're thinking about it, so that's a good sign. And we both know she's into you, so you really have nothing to lose, Rae."

"Well, she *was* into me. I don't know if she still is, though." Rachel slumped against the table she was standing at. "Why is all this dating shit so difficult?"

"It's not difficult. You just choose to make it so."

Rachel rolled her eyes. Kelly was one to talk; she always complained about the dating scene.

"You know I'm right," Kelly said as Rachel glanced around the area. The last thing she wanted was for Andi to catch her during this call. "Rae?"

"I'm here. I just...what if she turns me down?"

"I'd be very surprised if that happened. I mean, considering you're 'just friends', you spend an awful lot of time together."

"Yeah. Like friends would!"

"No. Friends get together with other friends. Friends don't go to fancy, intimate restaurants alone, they don't sneak off to play crazy golf, and they

don't spend time at the other's place...knowing that there's something sparking between them."

"Something has changed for me tonight, Kelly. I'm not sure what exactly, but every time I look at her, I think about kissing her." Rachel's body tingled at the thought. "Fuck, I *really* want to kiss her."

"Mmhmm."

"That's not very helpful." Rachel caught a flash of hair moving through the crowd. She knew it was Andi; she would know her anywhere. "I should go. She's coming back."

"Do what makes you happy, babe. If you want to ask her out on a date, you should. Either it'll happen, or it won't. You can't worry about the unknown because sometimes the unknown is more than you thought you wanted."

"I'll call you tomorrow. Bye." Rachel cleared her throat as she locked her phone and slid it back into her pocket. Andi grinned as she finally made her way back to the table, shivering when she pulled her scarf a little higher. "All good?"

"Mm. It's much colder than I realised." Andi blew into her hands, shifting from left to right. "Did you want to see if we can find a seat closer to the heaters?"

Oh, thank God! Rachel thought for a moment that Andi was going to head home. Honestly, she wasn't ready for that yet. "Sure. I saw a couple leaving a few minutes ago. You grab the burgers, and I'll get the table."

Rachel rushed under the canopy, snagging the only free table. The warmth hit her immediately, but as she turned and found Andi almost pressed to her, she felt something else entirely.

"Here." Andi held out her burger. "Eat it before it gets cold."

"T-thanks." Rachel slowly eased herself into a seat, watching Andi do the very same thing. "Is that better?"

"Much better. I don't know how you go out to work wearing dresses. I'm cold just thinking about it." Andi tore part of the bun, shoving it into her mouth. "Do your clients tell you what to wear?"

"No. I may get a request now and then, but I generally decide how cold I want to be on any given night." Rachel clasped her hands on the table, her head cocked. "It's important that they don't feel *too* in control of me. That's when issues can arise."

"Mm. You mentioned an issue recently. Did you want to talk about it?"

Rachel lifted a shoulder. She wouldn't usually go into detail about clients, but she trusted Andi. "It was a new client I'd taken on. It was our first meeting. She...expected more from me."

Andi nodded slowly. "I'm going to assume that clients often want more from you. You're a very attractive woman."

Before Rachel continued, she savoured the feeling Andi's words elicited. Hearing Andi say she was attractive made her feel all kinds of ways. *Not now*. She cleared her throat. "Actually, it doesn't happen too much. This client was very insistent. She tried to force me into the lift at her hotel."

Andi lowered her burger to the paper plate. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm okay. I can tell someone like that a mile off. She tried to get a little handsy, encouraged me towards the lift by grabbing me by the elbow, but I think she took the hint when I used the heel of my stiletto to stand on her foot."

"I'm so sorry you had to deal with that." Andi's nostrils flared as she pushed her burger away. She'd mostly eaten it, but surely Rachel hadn't ruined her appetite. "If that happens again, call me, and I'll come to whatever hotel or restaurant you're at and pick you up."

"Oh, Andi. That's really sweet of you, but you don't have to worry about me. I've been doing this long enough to know when to take a step back from a client. Please focus on *anything* other than worrying about me. You'll drive yourself insane otherwise."

Andi slid her hand across the table, placing it gently on Rachel's wrist. The warmth spread through her, that soft touch causing her to pause for a moment. "I care about you. You *and* your safety."

"I know. But I'm okay." Rachel placed her own hand over Andi's. "This is why I prefer to be with you rather than working. You're caring and compassionate." Rachel switched from Andi's eyes to her lips. If she just leaned forward...

Andi smiled and lowered her eyes. "Could I...ask you something? And before I do, you *can* say no."

Rachel snapped out of her thoughts. "Of course. You can ask me anything."

Andi appeared apprehensive, her eyes darting around the burger hut as she chewed her lip. "Do you think maybe you could give me some dating tips? Or whatever it is women are looking for these days? I'd pay you, of course. It's just that I feel comfortable with you."

“You’d...pay me?” Rachel shifted until Andi’s hand fell away from her wrist. There went the idea of asking Andi out on a date. Andi offering to pay her said a lot about where this was going. Rachel should have known. Some things would never change. Andi had seemed so different...until she wasn’t. Story of Rachel’s life.

“Yes. I thought that maybe if I booked you or scheduled a...meeting with you? I hoped it would maybe ease me back into dating. It’s been a long time, after all.”

Disappointed by this turn of events, Rachel rested back in her seat and swiftly reinforced the walls she was allowing to weaken. “Right. You want to book me. Got it.”

“If you’d be available. I’m sure you’re busy enough without adding more clients to your schedule.”

Rachel almost gagged at hearing Andi call herself a client. Still, it seemed this was about to turn into business the way it did with everyone else. So, Rachel took a business card from the wallet at the back of her phone and handed it over. “You’ll find my availability if you follow that link. Feel free to book me at a time that suits you best.” She kept her voice level, but inside, she was quietly dying. “I’ll just wait to hear from you.”

“I really appreciate that.” Andi beamed a smile and loosened her shoulders. It seemed Andi had succeeded in doing what she’d set out to do, and now she could relax. “Right, so, another drink?”

Rachel turned her watch towards herself, wrinkling her nose. It was time to make an exit without allowing her disappointment to show. Andi didn’t need that in her life. After all, Rachel had been the one who put a stop to anything starting. “Actually, I should probably call it a night. I have a few things to take care of at home.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.” While Rachel loved Andi’s enthusiasm, she’d gotten what she wanted, so now she could dial it down a touch. “Can I walk you back to the loft?”

“I’ll be fine. You’ll be okay getting a cab?” Rachel gathered her belongings and got to her feet. She hated the thought of leaving Andi alone in the city, but this was about to turn into business, so business Rachel would step into that role.

“Of course, yeah.”

“Okay, well, I’ll see you around, Andi. Thanks for a lovely evening.”

Andi stood up, frowning ever so slightly. “Yeah, uh, I’ll call you.”

Rachel turned and weaved her way through the tables, holding her composure for another moment or two. She was sure Andi hadn't intended to insult her, but as she left what could have been a perfect evening, she felt exactly that.

CHAPTER 12

“I’M LEAVING NOW,” JEAN, ANDI’S CO-WORKER, SAID AS SHE POPPED HER head around the door to Andi’s office. “You should think about doing the same thing. The traffic is manic out there tonight.”

Andi smiled. “I’ll be leaving soon, too. I just have a few bits of paperwork to sign off on, and I’ll be out the door.”

“Okay, well, did you want me to wait and give you a lift home?”

Andi appreciated Jean. They’d worked together for the last ten years, and in those years, they’d grown closer than just co-workers. Jean had always been around for when Andi needed to offload. More so in the last year. “No, you go on. I...need to go into the city anyway before I go home.”

“You’re crazy. I don’t know why you do it to yourself.”

Andi didn’t need to go into the city, not really. But she did want to unexpectedly drop by the loft and hope Rachel was home. She’d tried contacting her for the last five days, but Rachel hadn’t returned a single call or text message. Andi didn’t know why, but something felt really off between them. Which was unusual given the fact that they’d had a great night with one another recently. “I’m visiting a friend, not shopping.” Andi eyed the clock. “Now, get going. You’ll hit the rush hour traffic yourself, otherwise.”

Jean held up a hand. “I’m going, I’m going. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You will. Safe drive home, Jean.”

Jean left her office, whistling a Christmas song as Andi watched her gather her belongings through the window that separated her from the rest of her staff. She rested back in her seat, baffled as to what had gone wrong between her and Rachel. Andi didn’t recall anything happening that shouldn’t have the other evening. What the hell had she done?

She cleared her throat and lifted her phone from the desk. She would call Rachel once more, and then she was heading over there. She hated not knowing where she stood with someone.

But the call went to voicemail after a few rings.

“Hi, Rachel. It’s Andi...again. I was wondering if you were around to talk at all? I feel as though something is up, and I’d like to clear the air if that is the case. If you could call me back or just send me a quick message to let me know you’re okay, I’d really appreciate it. Bye.”

Andi lowered her phone again, blowing out a deep breath. She supposed she couldn’t *make* Rachel talk to her, but she also couldn’t sit back and wait. They had arrangements to make for the upcoming Christmas party at Hillary’s. And not only that, Rachel meant a lot to her. She made Andi smile and laugh unexpectedly. And she made her feel far less hopeless when it came to her dating future. Rachel...brightened her days without knowing it.

It said a lot about who she was, too, when it came to offering Andi some of her time to help with the dating scene. She hadn’t wanted to ask Rachel such an embarrassing favour, but Rachel had been a sweetheart about it. Andi always knew she would be, though. It seemed she trusted Rachel more than she trusted her closest friends.

She stared at her phone, willing it to ring, but it remained silent...just like Rachel. Andi couldn’t bear this for much longer, so she gathered her things and powered off her computer for the night. She could take her paperwork home with her and work on it later. Right now, she had something to make right. What that was remained to be seen.



Rachel eyed her phone where it rang on the couch beside her. Kelly had been calling her for days, and so had Andi. Why was she suddenly in such high demand? She lifted the handset, chewing her lip. Did she really want to tell Kelly how her ‘friend date’ had ended earlier this week? Kelly wouldn’t stop harassing her if she didn’t.

“Hi,” Rachel said as she cleared her throat. “Everything okay?”

“I’ve been calling you!”

Rachel caught Kelly’s tone immediately. “Sorry, I’ve been sorting stuff

out here. The place looks like it belongs to me now, so that's nice."

"Yeah, lovely. Really happy for you! Now, tell me about Saturday night. Did you ask her?"

"Did I...ask who what?"

"Rach, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Andi. Did you ask *Andi* out on that date?"

Rachel smiled weakly, still hurt by the turn of events that evening had taken. "Oh, no. It's not something she would be into, I don't think."

"Oh, so you're a mind reader now, too?"

Rachel didn't appreciate Kelly's sarcasm. Not at all. "She wants to book me, okay? Are you happy now? Your best friend is only good for one thing, and that is looking pretty for all the women in the city."

"W-what?"

"Yeah. Andi has asked if she can book me. Something about easing her back into dating. And I just...I feel really miserable about it. I thought she was different, Kelly. But I guess they're all the same, really. With Juliet, I was only good for fucking. With Andi, it'll probably go that way, too, if I allow it. Which I won't. I'm *never* making that stupid mistake again."

"Oh, babe. You know that's not true."

At one time, Rachel would have slapped herself for thinking that way. She knew what she was capable of. She knew she could be happy in a relationship. But the longer this sort of thing went on—only being what someone needed when it suited them—the more she had to question whether she just wasn't what women wanted in a long-term relationship. "I think it is. I'm thirty-five, and there's absolutely no sign of me settling down. I know I fucked Andi around for a moment or two, and I know she had stuff going on, but the last thing I expected on Saturday was for her to consider herself a potential client."

"Are you going to go through with it? Are you going to take her on as a client?"

"I...thought I could," Rachel admitted as she slumped back on the couch. "But I don't think I can. She means too much to me at this point, and I'm worried about what could happen."

"I hate to say this, but I think you're making the right choice. I'm sure you'd have a lovely time with Andi, and it would mean you could see her *and* get paid, but you speak differently about her...and I know you're becoming attached."

Rachel would usually deny that, but Kelly was right on the money. “I am. Unfortunately.”

“So, what’s next?”

“She’s been calling me. I haven’t picked up yet. I don’t really know what to say to her right now.”

Kelly sighed. “You should be honest with her, Rae.”

“I know. But I fear that when I *am* honest with her, I won’t see her anymore. I feel so torn because the perfect way to ensure I *do* see her is to take her on as a client. But then I remember the times we’ve spent together and how often she’s *never* made me feel like an escort. I’m proud of who I am, and I’ll always be proud, but...she made me feel different until Saturday night. She didn’t look at me as though we had a contract in place. She didn’t check me out as I approached her table. Well, she did, but not like a client would. She appreciated me for me.”

“I’m sorry, babe. Really sorry. You’ve seemed a little less distracted since Andi came into your life. I hoped it would have worked out differently for you. But look, don’t tar everyone with the same brush. The right person *will* come along one day.”

Andi was the right person. Rachel pushed that from her mind immediately. Andi couldn’t be that person anymore, and the sooner Rachel forgot about her, the better. “I’m sure everything will be fine.”

“It will. Because it’s always fine. We move on, right?”

Rachel smiled. “We do. But I have to go now because I should really eat something. I’ve not been feeling like much, so while I have some kind of appetite, food would be a good idea.”

“Do you want me to come over?” Kelly asked, tapping away at her keyboard. “I can bring wine and chocolate.”

“No, but thank you. I think I’m going to eat dinner and then shower. Maybe an early night will clear my head. If not, at least it beats sitting around here going over everything again.”

“I’m going to call you in the morning, okay? I need to know that you’re not struggling, Rae. I never want to see you in the state you were in at the beginning of the year.”

Right now, Rachel couldn’t wait to see the back of this fucking year. It had to be one of her worst on record. While she was thriving in her career, the rest of her life was turning to shit quicker each day. She hadn’t known it could get any worse than it had when Juliet dropped her, but the ache in her

chest over the last five days said otherwise.

“I won’t let that happen. I’m okay.” Rachel *had* to be okay. Nobody else would look after her other than herself. “I caught this in time with Andi. That’s important.”

“You’ll call me if you need anything, won’t you?”

Rachel got to her feet and moved into the kitchen. She was still madly in love with this loft. “I will. Now, I’m going to eat some carbs and then wallow. Talk to you soon.”

“Bye, babe.”

Rachel placed her phone on the island and moved towards the fridge. She wasn’t sure she had anything in to make a substantial meal, but something was better than nothing. She hadn’t been lying when she told Kelly that she’d had no appetite. Since Saturday night, everything just felt off within her. Her sleeping pattern hadn’t been great. Her skin felt dehydrated. And her eyes... well, she was going to need sunglasses if she didn’t kick all of this into touch soon.

As she opened the fridge and sighed, there was a knock at the door.

Great! It was probably one of the neighbours coming to complain about the furniture she’d spent most of the afternoon moving. Rachel squared her shoulders and pulled her apartment door open.

“O-oh, hi.” Rachel squeezed the handle, taken aback when Andi stared at her from the corridor. “I... Is everything okay?”

Andi lowered her eyes momentarily. When she looked back up at Rachel, wearing a weak smile, she seemed wary. “I’ve been calling you.”

Rachel dragged her fingers through her hair. She would tell Andi the same lie she’d told Kelly. “Yeah, sorry about that. I’ve been moving things around here. It’s been a busy few days.”

“Right. Well, then, can I come in?”

Damn. That hadn’t been her brightest idea. “I mean, sure. Yeah.” Andi brushed past Rachel, her perfume sending a shiver down Rachel’s spine. When the door closed and she turned to face Andi, Rachel swallowed. “Are you okay, Andi?”

“I don’t know. Something feels off. Did I...do something wrong at the weekend?”

Yes. Yes, you did. “What makes you think that?”

Andi’s shoulders slumped as she ran a hand down her face. “Again, I don’t know. But have you really been too busy to pick up the phone, or are

you avoiding me?”

Rachel couldn't do this to Andi. She seemed tormented. "I'm sorry. But yes, I've been avoiding you."

"So, something *is* going on?" Andi exhaled a long breath, shaking her head. "I'd like to believe we're adult enough to talk through whatever it is, Rachel. I'm fifty; I can apologise when I'm in the wrong. Having said that, I don't know what it is that I've done to upset you, so I can't apologise until you communicate with me."

"You want me to be your escort, Andi." Rachel frowned, unable to comprehend how Andi didn't realise the issue they faced. "I thought I was your friend, but on Saturday night, it became quite apparent that I'm not. It seems that this has been your plan all along. But, I'm sorry, I can't do it."

With genuine shock now staring back at Rachel, she had to wonder if Andi was completely oblivious to her faux pas. "Excuse me?"

"Look, I get it, okay? I'm an escort, and I don't have any right to be offended when someone wants to pay me for my time. I just thought you were different. It *felt* different with you. And you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I've told you that on several occasions now."

"First of all, you have *every* right to be offended. Being an escort doesn't make you any less of a human being. It doesn't mean you shouldn't be treated with fucking respect. And secondly, if that's what you thought of me...what you *think* of me, then I'm truly sorry."

"You asked to book me, Andi. We were having a great night together, and you asked if you could book me." Rachel slumped back against the counter, her voice unexpectedly betraying her. She shouldn't be surprised by Andi's decision to book her; it was her job, after all. Yet here she was. "I know life is tough for you, and I completely understand your need to not be alone. For you to feel a part of something. Trust me when I tell you that you deserve the fucking world for how sweet you are, but...this, with me? No. I'm sorry, but you can't be my client." Rachel had finally said what she needed to say. If she'd hurt Andi's feelings, she would take it on the chin and deal with it. "I know a lot of great girls at the agency; I'll put you in touch with someone who will look after you. If you need more than just...you know, a dinner date, I can also arrange that for you." Rachel didn't particularly want to imagine Andi sleeping with someone else, but here she was...offering to put that plan in motion. Maybe this was why she would always be single. Because she put everyone else before herself.

Andi scoffed and held up a hand. “Have you just offered to book sex for me?”

“I... Yes. Everyone is different. Some people need things that others don’t. I just want to get this right for you. It’s important that the experience is tailored to *you*.”

With her head hung on her shoulders, Andi took a step towards the door. Rachel heard a snuffle, one which shocked her back to reality, but still, she continued to stare at Andi’s back.

“I...can’t believe you’ve just said those things to me.” Andi pressed her palm to the back of the door, her voice barely audible. “I’ve been nothing other than respectful, and you—” She shook her head. “It...doesn’t matter.”

“Andi.”

Andi turned. She had a look in her eyes that Rachel had never witnessed from her before. Hurt, pain, disappointment? It could have been all three... and then some. “Take care of yourself, okay? Whether it’s at work or in your downtime...just take care of yourself.” Andi opened the door and slipped out, closing it gently behind her.

Rachel rushed out behind her, devastated when she heard sobbing from the direction of the lift. “Andi, wait!” Fuck, she’d messed up. She didn’t know how, but Andi seemed to be genuinely hurt by something she’d said. “Andi, hold the door, please.”

Rachel made it to the lift, but the door closed, and the whooshing of the carriage only mirrored the whooshing in her stomach. Andi had left, but in turn, a million questions had landed in Rachel’s lap.

CHAPTER 13

ANDI STOOD IN THE KITCHEN AT THE OFFICE, MINDLESSLY STIRRING THE CUP of coffee she'd made five minutes ago. Jean was waiting on her morning cup of tea, just the two of them working today. She had one or two agents out on viewings, but they were mostly winding down for Christmas now. Well, Andi had given people the option to lessen their load. She was a good boss like that.

It's a shame I don't know how to look after myself!

"Are you ever going to bring me my tea, or do I need to be spitting feathers before you remember?"

Andi snapped out of her thoughts, turning to Jean. "I'm sorry. I didn't sleep last night, and I just about made it here this morning." She handed Jean her tea and followed her back out into the main area filled with empty desks. "How was the traffic this morning?"

"Usual rush hour," Jean said, shrugging as she took her seat. "And I know you need to talk, so please, spill."

"I'm...okay. Nothing that I can't figure out myself."

Jean lifted a brow as Andi sat down at one of her employees' desks. "You're not sleeping. It's coming up to another Christmas without Jane. You know I'm here for you, Andi."

Andi smiled at the mention of Jane. She'd dreamt about her last night during what little sleep she did get. Jane often visited Andi in her dreams, and it was always when she had things on her mind. Even in death, her wife continued to comfort her. "It's not about Jane. But thank you for being concerned."

"If it's not about Jane, then what is it about?"

Andi sipped her coffee, enjoying her first caffeine hit of the day. She'd been running so late this morning that she hadn't managed a sip of the one still sitting on the counter at home. "I met someone." Andi felt more comfortable talking about this with Jean than Sally. She didn't believe it was the right conversation to have with her best friend just yet. One hint of the word escort and Sally could potentially have a meltdown. "Rachel. She's lovely."

"You...met someone. Wow. I wasn't expecting that."

Andi shrugged. "It's not going anywhere. Especially not after last night."

"I'm going to need a little more." Jean shifted in her seat and crossed her legs.

"We met a few weeks ago at the Christmas markets in town. She's in the process of buying a loft...my loft. We went out to dinner, and I foolishly put my foot in it by hinting at a date with her, but we remained friends."

"Wait, she turned down a date with you?"

Andi appreciated everyone stroking her ego, but it wasn't necessary. "Yes. That's not the point, though." She rocked back in her seat, crossing her own legs. "Rachel is an escort. I knew that from the second meeting we had, and obviously, it's not an issue for me, or I wouldn't have kept in touch with her."

Jean narrowed her eyes. "Right."

"She thinks I want to be her client now. I stupidly suggested booking her on Saturday, and now she thinks I want her to be my escort."

"I mean, I can see why she thinks that, love. If you didn't want to be her client, why would you suggest booking her?"

Andi waved a hand. "I'm not getting into that. It doesn't matter." It did matter, but Andi didn't want Jean to know that she needed help when it came to dating again. She already felt humiliated enough. "We spoke last night, and she told me she couldn't do that but that she could book me someone if I...wanted to have sex."

"O...kay. And I'm assuming that's *not* what you want?"

"God, no. I'm not going to pay someone to sleep with me. Fuck, I'm not desperate, Jean."

"I know, I know. But surely you understand where she's coming from, no?"

Andi *didn't* understand where Rachel was coming from. Hadn't she been clear in her reasoning when she'd suggested what she had? Something to help

her back into dating? Part of her slightly understood that Rachel probably didn't trust many women when it came to their intentions, but to accuse Andi of this all being a ploy to work her way toward client status...then to suggest sex? Feeling thrown didn't quite do it justice to how she felt this morning. "No, I don't understand. I've never once hinted at seeing her as an escort. Never."

"Then I don't quite know what to say."

"No, me neither." Andi had wanted to explain last night. God, she'd wanted to tell Rachel none of those things were true, but she had been too shocked to stay in the loft for another moment. Shocked...and hurt by her accusation. Andi had always tried to show Rachel that her career didn't define her. To have it thrown back at her like that? She wasn't sure she could face Rachel ever again. But she would, at some point. When Andi felt strong enough and less embarrassed. "It's just a shame it ended like this. She's really great, and we've had so much fun together."

"See her again. Talk it through."

Andi shook her head gently. "I think it's best if I let her cool off and wait until I hear from her. Although, I don't expect I will. She's strong-willed and doesn't take shit from anyone. But that's okay. I'd like to set the record straight, but I respect what she thinks of me now, and I don't want to make things worse."

"I think she'll come around eventually," Jean said, offering a wink and a smirk. "You're too much of a nice person for it to be the end of your friendship. I have to ask, though. What does Sally think about it?"

"She knows about Rachel, but she doesn't know what happened last night. Or at the weekend. She loves the idea of me moving on and meeting someone, but I'm not ready for the potential backlash of her knowing Rachel is an escort."

"But nothing is happening with Rachel, right?"

"No, and I can't see it ever going anywhere, but small steps...you know?"

Jean nodded and brought her cup to her lips again.

"I'm only just coming to terms with the sudden desire to date. I think it's best if my friends know bits and pieces when I'm ready to tell them. They won't hate me for that. I'm simply doing what's best for me."

"I know."

"But thank you for listening. I really appreciate it."

“You know I’m always here. That’ll never change, Andi.” Jean swivelled in her seat and powered up her computer. “Now, I’m booking that viewing for 133 Raskin Road. Anything else you need from me before then?”

“No. I’ve taken up enough of your time, and I have plenty to keep me occupied in my office.”



Rachel pulled her scarf tighter around her neck, staring up at the sign on the front of the shop she stood outside. The windchill today was cutting through to her bones, but she was already numb for other reasons, anyway. She had sat with her phone in her hand until one this morning, but she hadn’t found the strength to call Andi. God, she’d wanted to. Hearing that one single sob as the lift doors closed had played on Rachel’s mind all night. It was the last thing she wanted to hear ever again.

Well, this looks like the place. She eyed the signage again. Palmer’s Sales & Lettings. *Huh. She owns the place.* Rachel would admit to paying very little attention to the paperwork she’d received from Andi for the sale of the loft. She hadn’t a clue which company she’d bought it through; she was too excited to own it to care. But that didn’t matter right now. What mattered was that she had taken the address from the header of the first piece of paperwork she had come across and made her way here. *Okay, do the right thing and sit down to talk.* Rachel swallowed down her hesitancy and pushed the door open. She was met with a smiling face, a woman immediately rising from her seat.

“Hi. Welcome to Palmer’s. Can I help you at all?” The woman rounded her desk. “Are you looking to buy or thinking of selling?”

Rachel looked around, disappointed that there was no sign of Andi. “Oh, sorry. I’m not here for either. I was hoping to catch someone who works here.”

“May I ask who?”

Rachel eyed the name badge the woman wore. *Jean.* She would be sure to put in a good word about her. She was lovely. “Andi?”

“Oh, of course. I’ll just see if she’s available for you. One moment.” Jean left the main area, knocking on the door of a room that had the blinds closed.

Rachel heard low voices, almost whispers, and decided to peruse the listings scattered across the walls. “Sorry, love. Can I just take your name?”

Rachel turned to the voice, smiling. “Rachel.”

“O-oh.” Jean turned back, slipping inside the office and closing the door.

Great. Everyone knew what kind of bitch Rachel had been. Had Andi told the entire office? She suddenly wanted to run out the door but decided against it. Whatever the issue, it ended now. Rachel wasn’t leaving until she’d apologised. They’d both messed up, and that was that.

The door opened, and Jean reappeared. “Come on through, Rachel. Andi is free.” She popped her head around the door. “Andi, I’ll see you later. I’ll get lunch while I’m out at the viewing. Text me with your order.”

Rachel stepped past Jean, offering an awkward smile. And then her eyes landed on Andi. A very *tired* and confused Andi. “Hi.”

Andi straightened herself in her seat, not making eye contact with Rachel for any longer than necessary. “Hi. Everything okay? Is there an issue with the loft? I’ve had correspondence from your mortgage company, and the sale should be complete within the next week.”

“N-no. The loft is great. But I think you know that already.”

Andi offered a single nod. She was closing herself off to Rachel. That didn’t surprise her, though. “Okay, then what can I do for you?”

“I hoped we could talk?” Rachel stepped towards the seat facing Andi’s desk, choosing to take it. Hesitancy wasn’t an option here. Not if she wanted Andi to really know she was sorry. “If you have a few minutes?”

“Okay.”

Hmm. Rachel wasn’t sure she liked this side of Andi. No, she was *sure* she didn’t. “About last night...”

“Oh, we really don’t need to do this. I feel humiliated enough without you landing another blow.” Andi lowered her glasses over her eyes, focusing on her screen. But Rachel could only watch her and admire how beautiful she was. She hadn’t seen Andi in a work setting before. It was kind of adorable... and perhaps a little sexy. *Not the time!* “Unless there was something else, I should get on.”

“If I was out of line last night, I’m sorry.”

“Out of line?” Andi’s brows rose. “You offered to find me someone I could fuck, Rachel.”

Another side of Andi Rachel hadn’t expected. She chose not to focus on the attitude, aware that Andi was only trying to defend herself. “I think

maybe I got that bit wrong.”

Andi exhaled a deep breath, their eyes meeting. “Actually, you got it *all* wrong.”

“I...did?”

“I asked if you’d give me some advice and tips on getting back into dating. At no point did I ask you to be my escort or hint at needing someone to sleep with.”

“You said you’d make a booking with me. That says all it needs to say, Andi.” They could dress it up however they liked. Andi had suggested the booking, and that was that.

Andi offered a sad smile. “I said that because I didn’t want you to waste your time with me when you could be working and making money. I offered to pay you so I didn’t feel bad. I know you said that you choose your hours, but you still need to earn a living.” Andi sighed, shaking her head. “I didn’t want you to feel obliged. That’s all.”

Oh.

Fuck.

“I know you take evenings off work so we can do things together, Rachel. While I appreciate that, it’s not something I *expect* from you.”

“I’m sorry.” Rachel reached a hand across Andi’s desk, but Andi immediately drew her own hand away. “Andi, please. I got it wrong and I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. It’s done now. I know how you feel about me, and I’ll deal with that in my own time.” Rachel caught Andi clenching her jaw, her eyes narrowed at the screen. But a single tear still fell down Andi’s cheek, almost tearing Rachel in two. “What was it? You know I need to feel a part of something. And to not be alone.” Rachel swallowed. She couldn’t believe she’d said that. “Well, I’ll tell you right now that I’m quite content being alone. I spent the last three years of my marriage nursing my wife until the day she died, so trust me when I tell you that I’ve spent *plenty* of time alone. And I don’t need to be a part of *anything*. Not if I’m not welcome there. So, please, have your opinion of me...however wrong it may be, and leave.”

Rachel’s bottom lip threatened to quiver, her eyes stinging as she fought back tears. “You know how I feel about you. You know how much I love spending time with you. You...*know*.”

“I thought I did. I thought we had an understanding of one another. But after last night and how you made me feel, I’m not so sure anymore. All I

know right now is that it's not what I need in my life. I asked you a simple favour, and you offered..." Andi chose not to finish that sentence. Her stone-cold demeanour had the hairs on Rachel's neck standing on end. "I'd come there to find out why you weren't returning my calls and to tell you the date and time of the Christmas party."

"Yeah, I'm beginning to realise that I kinda fucked up. It's just...I heard booking and client, and I thought the worst. Because that's not the kind of relationship I want with you, Andi. That's why I was so confused. Instead of just dealing with it there and then, I let it get the better of me."

Andi removed her glasses and sighed. "I thought you knew me better than that. I know we've only just met, and I know you probably don't trust me, but I still thought you knew me better."

Rachel chanced her hand again, this time relieved when Andi didn't shift away. "I *do* know you better. Please forgive me."

Andi cast her gaze on their hands, clearing her throat. "I never expected you to say those things to me. I asked what I did because I trust you. Not only with my past but with my future. People will probably tell me I'm out of my mind for that; we barely know one another, but it's true. Still...I...is that really how you feel? That this has been my plan all along?"

"No." Rachel could say with certainty that Andi had been nothing more than genuine. And to know Andi had so much trust in her, well, that would take a moment to sink in. "I didn't expect you to show up last night. When you did, I don't know...I tried to throw it back at you."

"Throw what back at me?" Andi frowned.

"How you'd made me feel at the burger hut." That was petty, Rachel knew that, but in that moment when Andi had said the word *client*...Rachel's stomach roiled.

"I never meant to offend you, Rachel. You do know that, don't you?" Andi had a pleading look in those big brown eyes as she focused fully on Rachel. In this moment, Rachel was lost in them. "Rachel?"

"Of course. We got our wires crossed, and I'm sorry for the things I said to you. Please, forgive me."

Andi slid her hand out from under Rachel's, placing it on top and squeezing gently. "It's okay."

"It's really not. It's not okay at all. But thank you for not kicking me out of your office."

"That's not me—you know it's not." Andi looked pointedly at Rachel.

“Do we have to meet all over again for you to realise the kind of person I am? Has that one stupid suggestion I made really caused you to question my character?”

Could they meet all over again? Perhaps then, Rachel could take back the time she had turned Andi down. “If...you want to? But not because I’m unsure about you. Because then I can change some of the things I’ve said or done.”

“I don’t particularly want to start again. I’ve enjoyed getting to know you so far. We don’t need to go back to the beginning.” Andi’s shoulders relaxed as she sat back in her seat. “So, about the Christmas party?”

“Just tell me the time and place, and I’ll be there.”

Andi lifted a pen and clicked the end of it. She scribbled down an address and a time and handed it over to Rachel. Their eyes met, and Andi wore a shy smile. “I like that about you.”

“What?”

“You realised you’d made a mistake, apologised, and now we move forward.”

Rachel grinned. “And I like that about you, too.”

CHAPTER 14

RACHEL STEPPED INSIDE THE WINE BAR, SCANNING THE ROOM FOR ANDI. THEY were meeting at six, and then they were travelling to the Christmas party together. As she worked her way through the crowd of people waiting for drinks, Rachel stopped, her breath catching. Andi was sitting on a stool at the far end of the bar, looking amazing. No, amazing wasn't the right word to use, but it was all Rachel could conjure up in the moment. Andi, God...she was stunning. She wore a navy, A-line cowl floor-length dress. From a distance, Rachel would say it was chiffon, but she couldn't be certain. It sat perfectly over the swell of Andi's breasts, her dark hair sporting a curl this evening.

If you don't get your act together soon, this woman may go looking elsewhere.

Rachel had done a lot of thinking as this week had slowly worn on, and she was *very* close to asking Andi if that mention of a date was still something she was interested in. She could deny the pull Andi had almost four weeks on since they'd met; she could pretend that she *wasn't* miserable as she sat home alone each night, but Rachel knew what was happening here. She knew that no matter how hard she tried, Andi was going to become someone who meant far more to her than she initially thought.

If Rachel had realised anything, it was that using Juliet was a poor excuse. Kelly had been right. They were two *entirely* different situations. Rachel had overstepped with Juliet but with Andi? She wasn't sure there was anything to overstep. They didn't have a contract between them, they hadn't met as escort/client, and well, Andi was just delightful in every way.

"Hi." Andi waved Rachel over, her bright smile almost blinding Rachel.

“I got you a glass of red.”

“Perfect.” Rachel sat on a stool facing Andi, her gaze briefly drifting to Andi’s toned legs, courtesy of the split up the side of her dress. “Been here long?”

“No. Just a few minutes.” Andi sipped her wine, pushing Rachel’s towards her along the bar.

Before Rachel reached for it, she appraised Andi once again. *One last look, and then keep your eyes to yourself.* “May I say that you look *truly* incredible tonight?”

“Thank you. I thought I should make an effort since I was missing last Christmas.”

Rachel wasn’t sure Andi ever needed to make an effort. She was naturally beautiful, and her huge brown eyes only added to her striking features. “Really. You look...gorgeous.” Rachel was lost for words this evening. Andi was gorgeous on any given day, but the dark eye makeup, the long, curled locks, and the dress... Mind-blowing. “Will there be any single ladies there tonight?”

“I have no idea.”

Rachel caught the slight frown Andi wore. “Sorry. I just think that tonight could be your lucky night.” *With me, hopefully.* Whoa! Where the hell had that thought come from? Rachel may have been considering a discussion, but to wish she would be leaving with Andi after the party? She hadn’t quite imagined that. Not...so soon, anyway. Perhaps it was time to face the music and allow what she was feeling to *really* take hold. So what if they’d only met a few weeks ago. So what if people had something to say about it. If they were into one another, that was their business alone. Fuck everyone else.

“Why so?” Andi propped her elbow on the bar, resting her head in her hand. She had a dreamy look in her eyes, one that Rachel wasn’t expecting and one that most definitely caught her off guard.

“Never mind.” There Rachel went again with her blushing. She didn’t know why it occurred frequently around Andi, but she was slowly coming around to the fact that it was going to happen whether she liked it or not. Only she *did* like it. Rachel enjoyed the effect Andi had on her more as each day passed. “So, how far away is this party?”

“Just ten minutes out of the city. Sally and Claire are looking forward to meeting you,” Andi said, pausing as she puffed out her cheeks. “So, I’m apologising now for *anything* she may say tonight.”

Hmm. What was going on here? Was Rachel *actually* welcome at this party? “What would she possibly say that requires an apology from you?”

“She has a heart of gold, and I think you’ll get along with her very well... her wife too, but she can be...vocal.”

“Okay.” Rachel’s brows drew together as she sipped her wine.

“Look, I told her about you and me. Well, the potential of you and I when we first met. She likely won’t say anything untoward to you, but she may joke about it. That’s all. Humour her, and then she’ll let it go.”

“What exactly did you say to her? You know, so I can prepare myself.” The last thing Rachel wanted was to go in there tonight without a single idea of anything Andi may have said. While she didn’t believe that Andi would say anything dreadful, she believed being on the same page was a good idea.

“I needed someone to talk to. That night, when we’d been out to dinner, and I said what I did, I woke up feeling less conflicted than I thought I would the next morning. I thought I was going to feel terrible—*guilty*—but I hadn’t. Sally has always been very good at talking through things with me, especially since Jane passed away, so I told her what had happened when you came back home with me.”

“I see.”

“You have nothing to worry about. I didn’t say anything out of turn about you. I...would never.” Andi reached out a hand, squeezing Rachel’s knee as she smiled. Warmth spread through her, but then Andi quickly retreated. “I only said good things about you.”

Rachel snorted. “Good things. Sure.”

“Oh, come on. Do you really think I’d be disrespectful about you? Just because you’re not attracted to me, I’m not going to say anything hurtful about you to my friends. That’s not who I am.”

Only I am attracted to you. It had never been about Rachel not being attracted to Andi. God, she’d noticed her beauty the moment she turned around and locked eyes with her at the hot chocolate hut. It had just been everything else she had going on in her mind. Only now, those thoughts had started to quieten. Could Rachel tell Andi that? Could she explain that she was beginning to wish she’d never turned her down? What a fucking idiot she had been to do that.

“I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned Sally. I don’t want you to change your mind about this evening. I’d really love it if you could still join me.”

She studied Andi. There seemed to be some kind of fear clouding her eyes now. “You don’t have to explain. I can handle people; it’ll be fine.”

Andi grinned suddenly. What a beautiful image to hold onto. “Of course it’ll be fine. Sally can’t wait to meet you. She texted me this morning to ask if you were still coming with me tonight. It’s going to be a great night. I promise.”

Rachel leaned in and placed her hand over Andi’s where it sat on her thigh. “I’m sorry you found yourself in a position that required talking it through with someone. That wasn’t what I wanted.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” Andi turned her hand over, lacing their fingers. “That’s just how I deal with the uncertainty of my future. Rather than dwell on it, I talk about it. I’m not afraid of my emotions, Rachel. You stirred something in me, so I have to *thank* you for that, *not* expect an apology.”

“I do regret it. Leaving that night.” Rachel cast her gaze on the sliver of space between them, shaking her head. “I lost my head a little bit.”

“Never have any regrets,” Andi said, relaxing back on her stool again. “There is a reason for everything we do in life.”

Either Andi was saying what she thought Rachel wanted to hear, or she was over the idea of them dating. Perhaps this evening would give Rachel a feel for what was going on in Andi’s head. If not, she’d have to confront it all and hope Andi didn’t blow her off in return. “Maybe, yeah.”

“Okay, well, I don’t want to bring the mood down or frighten you off, so...tell me how your week has been.”

“Quiet. I’m just getting used to life at the loft. Which, by the way, is *still* dreamy.”

“Mmhmm. It is. I did mean to let you in on a small secret, though. Since the potential of you meeting someone tonight is in the cards.” Andi lowered one leg and shifted her stool closer. Their thighs touched, but Rachel brushed it from her mind. Well, she tried to. “If you ever have...company, make sure you don’t have anyone staying over in the spare room. The mezzanine is open plan, so it can...be a little noisy, you know?”

Rachel burst out laughing. “You have first-hand knowledge of that, don’t you?”

“Yes. And it’s humiliating when you wake up the next morning to your guest looking at you funny. You know, because they’ve heard you having mind-blowing sex the night before.”

Oh, my. Rachel was now imagining things she *shouldn’t* be imagining.

Had the thought of her and Andi together crossed her mind? On more than one occasion, yes. *Stop!* She cleared her throat. “Yes. I kinda got that from the moment you started talking about it. But hey, at least your guests would have known you were having good sex.”

“You make a good point.” Andi nodded and smiled.

“I don’t think it’s anything I have to worry about for the time being. The chances of me having someone over while my best friend is there are slim to none.”

“I think tonight could be *your* lucky night and not mine, as you assume.”

Rachel narrowed her eyes over her wine glass, staring intently at Andi. She caught a hint of flirtation in her voice, but where exactly was it directed? Was Andi simply humouring Rachel and the idea that she could be leaving with someone tonight? Or was she thinking what Rachel was...and hoping they were leaving together. “Anyone in particular I should look out for?” She chanced her luck, asking a question she wasn’t sure she’d like the answer to.

“Well, since I’m not your cup of tea...anyone else in the room, really. Except for Sally or Claire. I think most of the guests are single if my memory serves me right.”

Since I’m not your cup of tea... Was that Andi’s way of saying she was still disappointed? God, Rachel didn’t know what to do or say for the best. This wasn’t usually how she responded to women. Juliet had shattered her confidence in some ways, so now, Rachel found herself completely unsure of herself or what she was capable of. “I’ll see how the night plays out.”

“I hope you know that when you *do* meet someone, I’m going to live vicariously through you.” Andi patted Rachel’s knee and winked. “Right. Finish your drink, and let’s get a cab.”



Why the hell had she avoided social situations for so long? Tonight, Andi was having the time of her life. Her friends had always known how to throw a party—Andi and Jane could match them back in the day—but being here tonight had only reminded her of the fun she could have been having. Jane never would have wanted Andi to spend Christmas alone last year, let alone the run-up to the big day. Andi may have told Rachel earlier to never regret

anything, but right now, Andi *was* regretting becoming a hermit for so long.

“How you feeling, love?” Sally sidled up beside Andi, where she stood out on the terrace close to a patio heater.

“You know what? I’m feeling really good. Tonight is just what I’ve been needing.”

“Good. I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.” Sally nudged Andi with her shoulder. “I forgot how gorgeous Rachel was, by the way. I know we only briefly met at the market that night, but yes...very well done.”

“Oh, don’t. I’m trying not to think about it. I’m actually glad she’s found some people to chat to because I’m struggling to be around her tonight.”

“I’ve...caught her watching you once or twice. She may be making new friends, but she’s not hearing a damn word they’re saying. Trust me.”

Andi turned and took Sally’s hand. “I know you want me to find someone, but Rachel isn’t interested, Sal. Do yourself a favour, and don’t get your hopes up.”

“Okay.” Sally held up her free hand. She had an unusual look in her eyes, but Andi wasn’t dissecting it tonight. She just wanted to enjoy herself...and then pine after Rachel when nobody was around. “But if things change, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Sal? You out here, love?” Claire called out from the back door.

“Coming in now, my love.” Sally embraced Andi, holding her close. “I’m really happy you came tonight. Come on, let’s get back inside.”

“You go on. I’ll be in soon. I just wanted some air.”

Sally pulled back. “You’re sure everything is okay?”

She nodded. “I promise. Everything is okay.”

Sally seemed to accept that, turning and walking back inside the house. Andi remained under the gazebo, humming lightly as she shifted closer again to the patio heater. She pulled out a seat and gave herself a moment to relax. Only this time, it wasn’t her needing a moment to clear her mind. No, she was just enjoying the fresh air while she listened to Hillary’s hugely popular Christmas playlist.

She closed her eyes and crossed her legs, holding her empty wine glass against her thigh. Andi had to prepare herself for Hillary’s speech later on this evening. Sally had already warned her that Andi would be getting a mention. While she appreciated her friends thinking of her, she hated the attention.

“Hey.” That soft voice had the hairs on Andi’s arms standing to attention.

She opened her eyes, smiling at Rachel. She wore a pair of leather pants and a lacey blue crop top. Andi briefly glanced at Rachel's taut stomach, and then she focused on those pretty blue eyes. "Hi. Enjoying yourself?"

"I am. Gina is a little full-on, I think she kind of asked me out for a drink, but other than that...it's been great."

"Gina is nice. She just knows what she wants and isn't afraid to say it." Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone could be more like Gina? Andi *wished* she had her confidence.

Rachel laughed. "Maybe I should take a leaf out of her book."

"Oh." Andi sat forward, weirdly interested in where this conversation was going. She didn't particularly want to know if Rachel had met someone, but the smile on her face hinted at exactly that. "Who is she?"

"Pardon?"

"You clearly have your eye on someone. So, come on, who is she?" Andi pulled out another seat, motioning for Rachel to join her.

"Andi, I—"

"Look, I'm happy that you may be interested in someone. You don't need to pretend that it's not happening for the sake of me. So, who is she?"

"Nobody. It's nobody. Really." Rachel cleared her throat and crossed her legs. "Why are you sitting out here alone?"

Andi lifted a shoulder. "I was just getting some air. When there's a million people inside Hillary's house, it gets a little stuffy."

"Right. If you're sure?"

Andi cocked her head. Why did Rachel seem concerned? "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I'm sorry. Tell me to mind my own business. It was just...I know this is the first time here on your own."

"I'm not on my own. I came here with you." *And what a fine choice you made in choosing your plus one.*

Rachel regarded Andi with a slight smile. "You know what I mean."

"Did you know that I agreed to come to this party about two minutes before you turned up at my table and apologised about the hot chocolate hut thing?" Andi sunk back in her seat, a brow quirked. "To me, that means something."

"Yeah?"

"Granted, I would have liked to have been here with you...under different circumstances, but I'm not sure I would have gone through with it if we

hadn't met. Having you in my life lately has been exciting for me. The Christmas markets, the mulled wine, the time we've spent together." Andi ran a hand through her hair, smiling. "Things may only be platonic between us, Rachel, but I believe we met that night for a reason. Whatever you see in your future, whoever may come into your life, I *would* like to remain in it, too. In whatever capacity I can."

Rachel stroked a hand up and down Andi's forearm. "I'd like that, too."

"Life is too short to appease people. To care what others think of you. I know the real Rachel, and she's wonderful. Beautiful, too." Andi studied Rachel's face for a moment or two, knowing this woman was way out of her league. But hey, God loved a trier. "I may well end up being *very* jealous of the woman you call your partner one day in the future, but I'm excited for you. Kiss the people you want to kiss, and enjoy *every* last second while doing so." Andi got to her feet, needing a large glass of wine. "Come on. Let's go back inside and have some fun."

Rachel held out a hand. "Any chance you can pull me up? Leather pants are *not* the best option when it comes to moving around freely."

Andi grinned, taking her hand and pulling her to her feet. "You look great. Really great."

"Thanks." Rachel blushed. Andi had to admit that she enjoyed seeing someone as sexy as Rachel blushing in front of her. Perhaps she still had it, after all.

Andi walked back towards the house, stopped by a hand on the wrist.

"Andi, wait."

She turned, her brows drawn together. Rachel was looking at her with a fire in her eyes. Wow, that was one hell of an intense look.

"I made a huge mistake the other week, Andi. The biggest."

Mistake? What mistake?

Rachel slowly inched closer, backing Andi up against the wall. Huh...not what she'd expected.

"I've been thinking...wondering if the reasons I gave were even real reasons. If I've learnt anything in the last week or so, it's that you're not the vulnerable woman I assumed you were. God, you're stronger than I am, if I'm being honest."

Andi lowered her eyes. "Rachel, you really don't have to say any of this to me. You've told me why we can't date, and I respect that. I'd never do anything to push it with you."

“I...don’t think there’s anything to push.” Rachel lifted a hand, stroking her knuckles against Andi’s cheek.

Andi’s frown lines grew deeper. What was Rachel saying exactly? Oh, God. Why was she touching her the way she was?

“Spending time with you has been...unexpectedly amazing. Better than I’ve had in as long as I can remember. Seeing you smile and laugh, how you light up the room, I just...I realised in the bar earlier that I’m in a little deeper than I thought.”

“Rachel, I don’t want you to think I’m leading you on in any way. Was it something I did? Or said?”

“No. You’ve been perfect. You *are* perfect. But when I walked in and saw you sitting there, God...I wasn’t expecting to feel how I did. I wasn’t expecting to be so floored by you.”

“By...me?” Andi almost laughed but managed to hold back. Rachel was floored by her? In what world? “H-how...why?”

Rachel pressed a palm to Andi’s chest, her stare not wavering. Those blue eyes had left Andi breathless on countless occasions tonight, but right now? Oh, right now, they were strikingly beautiful.

“You told me to kiss the people I want to kiss...”

“I-I did.” Andi swallowed, craving the lips so close to her own.

Rachel leaned in and smiled. “And if you’re the one I want to be kissing?”

Oh, God. This was actually happening. Andi didn’t know how to feel about that. She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, a shudder working its way through her as Rachel ghosted her hand higher and wrapped it around the back of Andi’s neck. She didn’t know what to say, so Andi lost the last of the distance between them and drew Rachel into a soft, only *slightly* hesitant kiss.

And that was all it took. Rachel stroked her fingernails down the back of Andi’s neck, kissing her a little harder. Then harder again when Andi moaned into her mouth. She hadn’t known how she would feel when this moment arrived, with Rachel or with anyone else, but her body was coming alive for the first time in so many years. It recognised the touch of another woman immediately, only encouraging Andi to swipe her tongue against Rachel’s.

“Oh, God.” Andi needed a moment to breathe. She pressed her forehead to Rachel’s, trying to suppress the grin she felt working its way to her lips. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Mm. Neither was I in some ways.”

“I...don't quite know what to say.” Andi suddenly felt flustered, her cheeks heating.

“I think maybe your kiss said it all, Andi.” Rachel leaned in again, slowly bringing their lips together. Andi felt her smile into the kiss, and her own smile quickly followed. “And now I think I need a drink before I get far too carried away.”

CHAPTER 15

“YOU LEFT SHARPISH LAST NIGHT.” SALLY SAT ON THE COUCH IN THE WINDOW of the local coffee shop, eyeing Andi over the rim of her cup. “Everything okay?”

Andi beamed. Oh, everything was more than okay. She couldn't recall the last time she'd had such a perfect evening. It would have been before Jane's diagnosis, guaranteed, but Rachel had really made her feel...special last night. “Fine. Yes.”

“*Fine* doesn't really cut it. You should know me better than that.”

“I don't know what you want me to say, Sal. I had a great night. Did you and Claire enjoy yourselves?” Andi was deflecting, she knew that, but she wanted to enjoy her coffee before they got deep into a conversation about Rachel. Because it *would* happen before this afternoon was over.

“I think Claire enjoyed herself a little more than she expected to. She looked a tiny bit pale this morning.”

“You'd think at our age we'd all know our limits by now.”

Sally's brows rose as she sat forward and placed her cup down. “You would. It doesn't happen often with Claire. I think she just likes to let her hair down now and then. We may be old, but we're not out yet.”

“No, we're not.” Andi had felt so much younger last night as Rachel backed her up against the wall and made her intentions known. To say it was a surprise would be an understatement. The *last* thing Andi expected was to find herself kissing Rachel. But she didn't regret it. She couldn't regret something that felt so right...and thrilling. “So, I started unpacking my boxes this morning.”

Sally narrowed her eyes, aware that unpacking was a huge deal for Andi.

“Why? What made you decide to do that?”

“I just think it’s time. The loft is gone, so it’s time to move on with my life once and for all.”

“I’m proud of you.”

Andi lifted a shoulder, the thought of kissing Rachel again flitting into her mind. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, but she wasn’t able to suppress the grin she wore.

“What’s that look?”

“What look?” Andi feigned confusion, knowing how much it annoyed Sally.

“The look you have. The grin. That’s not the kind of grin I’ve seen from you for a long time.”

“I just feel ready, you know? To explore and see what life has to offer. To be happy and enjoy time with friends. Last night was some kind of kick-start for me.”

“I’m happy you feel that way.” Sally rested her arm along the back of the couch, crossing her legs. “Rachel is lovely, isn’t she?”

Andi found that smile working its way to the surface again. Would she always feel that way when she thought about her? “She is. She has a great personality, and considering she’s significantly younger than me, it doesn’t feel that way. She’s mature, and she knows what she wants.”

“Is that so?”

Andi rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on. Are we really those people, Sal? You know what I’m saying. Rachel has her head firmly screwed on, and I enjoyed spending time with her last night.”

“I noticed she left when you did.” Sally wore a slight smirk. One that didn’t go unnoticed by Andi.

“Well, yes. We came together, so we left together. She didn’t feel comfortable sticking around because she was my plus one.”

Sally nodded slowly. “I see.”

“We kissed, okay? Is that what you needed to hear?” Andi lifted her coffee and sipped. Sally was forever giving her one of her looks, which in turn made Andi feel guilty about not spilling the beans. “At the party. When you left me in the back garden.”

“Tell me more.” Sally sat forward, elbows perched on her knees. “Did you go home with one another?”

“No. We didn’t.” Had Andi wanted to spend the night with Rachel? She

didn't know. Kissing was fun and exciting, but spending the night with one another was a whole other situation. She wasn't sure she was quite there yet. And besides, they didn't know each other well enough to take that step. *If* this happened, Andi wanted it to happen properly. She wanted to learn more about Rachel and build on their connection. She didn't need to take a woman home just because she'd been given a hint of attention, and she didn't suspect Rachel was that kind of person either. "We said we'd meet up when it suited us both."

"And when will that be? Because you may not see it, but the change in you when you talk about her is quite something."

"I wanted to invite her over tonight. I thought maybe I could cook dinner. But I don't know. Is it too soon? Does that seem desperate?"

"Desperate?" Sally frowned.

"I don't want her to think that I'm trying to sleep with her, you know? It's not like that between us." Andi couldn't deny how beautiful Rachel was, and sure...she could go too far too soon, but she wanted to do this right. "It really is as simple as enjoying being with her."

"So, tell her that. I know a lot of people like the thrill and the sexual tension, but many women also love to be told they're great company. I think Rachel falls into the latter."

Andi's pulse quickened at that. Who knew she would find a woman who didn't only want one thing from her? "Me too."

"I think you should call her or maybe send her a message. There's no harm in letting her know how you feel, Andi." Sally reached forward and took Andi's hand. "I know this may be difficult for you at times, but so long as you're honest with Rachel, I think very good things could be coming your way. And God knows you deserve it after the care and dedication you've put into other people's lives."

Andi eyed her phone where it sat beside her purse. "Should I? You don't think it's a little too forward?"

"Inviting someone over for dinner if they're available?"

"I wouldn't have an issue with it if we hadn't kissed last night." Andi lifted her phone and unlocked it. She opened the most recent message thread she had with Rachel and glanced back up at Sally. "If this goes wrong, I'm blaming you."

"It won't go wrong. So maybe she won't be available, but putting yourself out there shows her that you're interested."

Andi knew how relationships worked. Okay, she'd been off the market for the past twenty-odd years, but she still knew what the gist of it all was. "Okay. I guess she's either available or not."

Hi. I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner tonight if you're free? Andi.

Andi lowered her phone to the table, puffing out her cheeks. "She's probably working."

"You didn't say what it is that she does..."

Oh. Shit. Would Rachel want Andi to tell people that she was an escort? While Andi had no issue with it, she wasn't sure what the lay of the land was when it came to that discussion. *Think!* "She's like a therapist."

Sally lifted a hand. "Wait! She's not *your* therapist, is she?"

"I...don't have a therapist, Sal."

"Okay, okay. I didn't know if you'd booked yourself one and then kind of fallen for her, you know?" Sally offered an uncertain smile. "You never know these days."

"She's not my therapist. Don't worry."

Andi's phone lit up on the table, her stomach flipping as she stared at the screen.

Hey. I'm sorry but I'm working tonight. Maybe some other time?

Sure. I had a feeling you might be unavailable. Let me know when you're free and we can make some plans.

Disappointed, Andi locked her phone and placed it on the couch to the side of her. She wouldn't show that disappointment to Sally—it wasn't the end of the world—but she had secretly hoped she would see Rachel sooner rather than later. "She's working. We're going to arrange something for another time."

Her phone lit up again.

Definitely. Thank you for the perfect evening last night.

Andi smiled at that. Rachel had enjoyed herself, and that was what mattered most.

You're welcome. Thank you for being the perfect plus one.

Andi's disappointment had been replaced with a tingling sensation throughout her body. Rachel often made her feel that way, and she couldn't quite put her finger on why. Perhaps it was because something new and exciting was coming into her life, or maybe it was just who Rachel was. There was no denying that she had some kind of pull when it came to Andi.

“At least you’re arranging something with one another.” Sally got to her feet and looked down at Andi. “Another coffee?”

“Go on then. I don’t have anywhere to be anytime soon.” Andi exhaled a contented sigh when Sally left the table. As she opened her handbag to put her phone away, she found a message waiting for her on the screen.

I’ve managed to switch a client around. Does 7 work for you tonight?

Andi’s brows rose with surprise. Rachel had changed her work plans for her?

Don’t go out of your way to change clients. I can see you when you’re not busy.

Too late. And if I’m being honest, I wanted to see you anyway. So, 7?

With that sensation fizzing throughout her body once more, Andi grinned and responded.

7 is perfect. Looking forward to it!



Rachel stepped through Andi’s garden gate, a bunch of flowers tucked under her arm and a bottle of wine grasped in her hand. She wasn’t sure flowers and wine was the right way to go about this, dating wasn’t Rachel’s specialist subject, but flowers and wine were always appreciated. Right?

She cleared her throat and knocked on the door, checking she didn’t have any creases in her dress. She’d rushed here in a cab after finishing with a client, and if anything, she felt under-prepared. It had only been a two-hour cocktail booking, and it really had been a beautiful evening, but she just felt out of sorts. Unsure of what this even was.

Before she had time to think about it, the door opened, and Andi stood staring back at her. “Hi. You look...wow.” Andi checked herself out, wrinkling her nose. “I didn’t realise it was *that* kind of date.”

“I’ve come straight from work, sorry. I didn’t have time to go home and change.”

“Oh, that’s okay. Come in.” Andi stepped aside, smiling when Rachel brushed past her.

She stopped and offered Andi a kiss on the cheek, lingering at her scent. “Hi.”

Rachel felt Andi smiling as she turned her head and kissed Rachel's cheek in return. "It's good to see you." She guided Rachel through to the kitchen, pulling a chair out at the dining table.

"These are for you," Rachel said, holding out the flowers and wine. "I wasn't sure what to bring."

Andi reached for the flowers, smiling. Andi's smile was the one thing Rachel adored. Though she was sure she could add to that list eventually. "They're beautiful. Thank you."

"It's not too much, is it?" Rachel hoped Andi would disagree, but she had to prepare herself to be taken down a notch if necessary.

"Not at all. Really. Now, sit down, and I'll pour the wine."

Rachel took a seat—her feet aching from her new heels—and watched Andi move around the kitchen. She set two glasses down as she turned back to Rachel. Rachel could only admire Andi in her sweats and hoodie, her hair pulled back and off her face. "Busy day?"

"Not really. I met Sally for coffee at midday, and then I came home and finished unpacking my life."

Rachel's eyes scanned the kitchen. "Yeah, it looks less...empty in here now. I like it."

"It was time. The boxes weren't going to unpack themselves."

Rachel relaxed, crossing her legs. "No, and it's a shame they don't unpack themselves. It would save us a lot of time. I don't know about you, but I'm terrible at deciding where to put things in a new house."

Andi held up her hands. "Also guilty of that."

"By the way, whatever you're cooking smells really good."

"I hope you're hungry. I couldn't decide what you'd like, so I went for braised beef in red wine sauce."

Rachel's stomach tumbled at the thought. It also explained why Andi was dressed down and looking far more comfortable than Rachel. She'd planned ahead with the idea of being stuffed in mind. "Sounds perfect. I'm beginning to wish I'd gone home first to change."

Andi turned her back and gave her attention to the stove. She lifted the lid on the casserole dish as she removed it from the oven, those scents only overpowering Rachel's senses this time. "I have something you can borrow if you'd rather slouch when we've eaten."

"Usually, I'd decline, but I think I may have to take you up on the offer."

"Let me put dinner out, and I'll grab you some clothes once we've

finished. Then...maybe we can open the wine you brought?"

Rachel watched Andi from across the kitchen, her pulse picking up ever so slightly. "I'd really like that."

Andi locked eyes on Rachel, lowering the spoon in her hand to the casserole dish. "Thank you for coming over. I know it was short notice, so I really appreciate it."

"I was surprised to hear from you." Rachel cast her gaze on the hem of her dress as she toyed with it. "I wasn't sure how you'd feel today, and I didn't want to push."

"How I'm feeling today? I'm feeling great."

Surprised, Rachel's eyes lifted back to Andi's. "Yeah?"

"I told you I wouldn't put myself or anyone else in a position if I wasn't ready."

"No, I know. But sometimes people say those things hoping it'll change the outcome. In your case, it worked. I just didn't know you really meant it."

Andi approached Rachel empty-handed and stopped in front of her. She leaned down and cradled Rachel's chin, smiling into a kiss. God, she tasted good. Better than last night. When she drew back, she stroked a thumb against Rachel's cheek. "One thing you should know about me is that I say what I mean. If I wasn't ready, I wouldn't have kissed you."

"O-okay." Rachel swallowed when Andi continued to stare into her soul. "Good to know."

"Dinner?"

Rachel nodded slowly as Andi turned her back. She watched on, grinning as her eyes landed on Andi's arse, any remaining tension leaving her body. "Dinner. Yes."



Andi settled back on the couch, feeling at home here for the first time. Perhaps having someone around helped, she didn't know, but she wasn't allowing it to invade her thoughts. Things felt good, positive, and that was all she needed to focus on.

Rachel was upstairs, changing into a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie, while Andi gave her food the chance to digest. Who made such a hearty meal

for the woman they were interested in? Maybe next time, she would opt for a chicken salad or something much lighter. Though, judging by how Rachel almost licked the plate clean, she'd won with her choice for dinner.

Footsteps in the hallway caught her attention, and as Rachel walked into the living room, Andi's breath almost caught. Who knew the sexy escort could pull off comfort so well. Rachel had pulled her hair up into a bun, her makeup still present, her hands not visible and covered by the cuffs of Andi's hoodie. "Does it fit okay?"

"Yeah. It's comfy. That's the main thing."

"Have a seat." Andi nodded next to her, hoping Rachel chose the seat beside her.

Rachel sunk down into the couch, bringing her knees up to her chest. Andi caught her inhaling the fabric of Andi's hoodie, smiling to herself. It had been some time since anyone wore her clothes. She had to say she enjoyed seeing it again.

"Have you heard anything from that client you had trouble with?"

Rachel toyed with the cuff. "No. Thank God. As you know, they've been blacklisted, so it's not likely that they'll contact me. Or the agency, for that matter."

"Good."

"I'm always wary when I take new clients on. I guess she just slipped the net this time."

Andi slid a hand to Rachel's knee. "So long as you're as safe as you can be."

"Always. It's my number one rule. If I don't feel safe, the meeting doesn't go ahead. I don't care how much they're offering me."

Andi admired Rachel for what she did. She appreciated that she could hold conversations with anyone and everyone. She was sure Sally and Claire would have something to say about Rachel's profession, but she could only hope it was something positive. Either way, it didn't really matter. Andi was fond of Rachel, and this was her life alone. She didn't care for people's opinions anymore.

"When we met, you said that you'd been the younger woman before. Obviously, I know about your past now, but I wanted to ask how that was for you?"

"After a little while, it wasn't something I worried about anymore. I don't believe Jane did, either. Why do you ask?"

“Just curious, I guess. You’ve been there before.”

Andi nodded slowly. While she would love to know Rachel on a deeper level, she also wanted to be sure Rachel felt okay with all of this. “I’m not expecting you to want a relationship with me. I’d love to date and see where it went, but if you have reservations, I understand.”

“No, that’s not it. I don’t go around kissing women for the sake of it, Andi. I *am* interested in you.”

That settled Andi a little.

“I guess what I wanted to ask...was how you *now* feel being the older woman?”

“Again, it’s not something I’ve really thought about. I will admit that I did at first, when I realised I was attracted to you, but Sally quickly helped in that department.”

“You were worried?” Rachel asked, turning on her side to face Andi better. She curled her legs to the side of her, her wine glass sitting on her thigh where she held it.

“I think I’m just aware of the potential complications of an age gap relationship. I know I’m a lot older, which means you and I could very well find ourselves in the same position I found myself in with Jane.” Andi cleared her throat. “Having said that, either one of us could be gone tomorrow, so the worry and uncertainty is kind of pointless.”

“I agree.”

“It’s important that I know you’re comfortable. And it’s important that you know I wouldn’t hold it against you if you decided this wasn’t for you. If you’re here tonight to let me down gently, that’s also okay.”

“Oh, I’m not.” Rachel shifted on the couch, placing her wine down. She smiled in Andi’s direction, moving closer. “The last thing I’m here to do is let you down gently.”

“Really?” Andi narrowed her eyes.

“Mmhm. Really.” Rachel brought her hand to Andi’s cheek, caressing her skin. “You’re so beautiful. I hope you know that.”

Andi flushed, her eyes switching from Rachel’s to her lips. “Right back at you.”

“And I don’t care about ages, people’s opinions on our ages, or anything else. I just care that this is really what you want, Andi. That you may one day want me...”

Rather than use her words, Andi drew Rachel into a kiss. It was soft,

Rachel's lips quite something when they were giving Andi all of the attention, her mind spinning as her tongue glided against Rachel's. "I *do* want you. Now, tomorrow, whenever *you* feel ready."

"When *I* feel ready?" Rachel pulled back, frowning.

"I don't pretend to know what you went through with your ex...your client, but I see the hesitancy in your eyes. I can wait until you feel ready to date, Rachel. I don't need to rush into anything. I'm not going anywhere."

"That...may be the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me."

Andi brushed the wisps of hair from Rachel's face. God, she had stunning features. And her eyes? Oh, her eyes were something else. Andi suspected this woman couldn't lie even if she tried. That said a lot about a person in Andi's mind. Kind eyes...kind soul. "Do you have to leave any time soon?"

"No. I can stay until you kick me out."

"How do you feel about watching a Christmas movie?"

Rachel settled against Andi, her hand on Andi's chest. "I'd love that. It's not something I've done before."

"You've never watched a Christmas movie?"

"I have. Just...not with someone I enjoy kissing."

Andi grinned at that. Still, she found it hard to believe that Rachel was always on the market. This woman in her arms was off-the-scale gorgeous. She surely had a relationship history. "Then I will make sure you enjoy it for a long time to come." She dipped her head and kissed Rachel's forehead. "Whatever comes of this, we watch Christmas movies together. Whether that is as friends or something else..."

"As something else," Rachel said, palming Andi's thigh. "Definitely as something else."

CHAPTER 16

WITH A HAND WRAPPED AROUND HER COFFEE CUP, DAYDREAMING IN FULL swing, Andi stared out of her office window at the mostly empty desks. Jean was still working, but she often did work until the last minute. Jean was a widow too, her husband suffering a massive heart attack at just forty-one. Perhaps that was why they got along so well—they knew what the other was going through—but Jean just had that genuine nature about her anyway. Andi couldn't recall a time when they'd had a single bad word between them.

“Are you just going to sit there all day looking at nothing?”

Andi shook herself out of her daydream. “Maybe. I haven't decided yet.”

“What's going on? Are you still having issues with that...escort?”

Oh, no issue here. Andi smiled. “No. Far from it.”

“Oh?” Jean rested against the doorframe, a brow lifted. “Care to tell me more?”

“I don't even know where to begin, Jean. Rachel is just...” Andi paused, smiling as an image of them snuggling with a movie flitted into her mind. “She's great. Really great.”

“I love this. I'm so happy you've found someone you can spend time with.” Jean chose to take a seat facing Andi instead. “You seemed really upset when you thought it wasn't going anywhere.”

“To be honest, I can't believe it *is* going somewhere. I certainly never expected her to kiss me at Hillary's Christmas party. Not at all.”

“Oh, this is perfect, Andi. I'm so happy for you.”

Andi's phone buzzed on her desk, catching her attention immediately.

Hi, pretty lady. I just wanted to drop you a message and thank you for the weekend again. I had a great time, and I'm hoping we can do it

again soon.

Oh, swoon. Andi giggled to herself. She hadn't giggled in a long time. "I don't know what the hell is happening to my life all of a sudden, but I'm going to make the most of it."

"Good on you. As you should. You've had more than your fair share of heartache, sweetie. I know that Jane would only want you to be happy. Now is your chance."

Jane. Andi would always look back on her marriage with the most wonderful memories. Jane had been her life for so long, but Andi's life was changing day by day. Jane *would* be happy for her. That hadn't really been a question Andi asked herself a lot. Her wife had been more than forthcoming with what she expected of Andi when the time came. "You know, I never knew what to expect whenever we spoke about this kind of thing. Jane always got right into the conversation, but I always felt uncomfortable. Perhaps because she was the older of the two of us, I don't know. But she always spoke so animatedly about it, encouraging me and whatnot, and now here I am...moving on. It's the strangest feeling because I feel as though Jane is still here. Like, she's rooting for me somewhere."

"Jane had the biggest heart of anyone I know, Andi. She wouldn't begrudge you this happiness. And you're right. She *is* still here. In the little things and sometimes the big. Like this. Your new relationship. I'm a firm believer in those that have passed looking out for us, down on us, and I just know Jane was always that kind of person."

Andi's eyes welled with tears, but it wasn't a sadness that anchored in her chest. It was...a second chance, perhaps? It was hope, and it was exciting. "I know."

"So, what does Christmas look like for you this year?" Jean asked, crossing her legs. "Does Rachel have plans?"

"Oh, I have no idea. It's not something we've spoken about. I'm sure she has plans, though. With friends or family."

"And you?"

Andi cleared her throat. "I...don't know yet. But I'll be doing something. For sure. Sally has invited me to hers for dinner, so maybe I'll do that. You're off to your sister's down south, right?"

"I am. She puts on a wonderful spread."

"Well, then, I guess we're all set for Christmas." Andi wasn't, she had no idea where she would be, but she had people around her who cared, and that

was what mattered. If she did end up spending Christmas alone, then so be it. But it wouldn't be as alone as it had been last year because the way Andi felt right now, she couldn't possibly be alone. "I have some calls to make, and then I think we could probably have an early dart if you felt like it?"

Jean turned her watch towards herself. "An hour early? I like it. I'll beat the traffic then."

"Perfect. Let's get cracking so we can get gone."

Jean smiled and got to her feet. As she left Andi's office, Andi lifted her phone and responded to Rachel's text.

Thank YOU for a great weekend. I'd love to do it again soon. You just let me know when you're available. I'm always around in the evening. Andi x

She rocked back in her seat, exhaling a contented sigh.

Are you busy after work tonight? x

Oh, Rachel potentially wanted to see her tonight? Perfect. Andi wouldn't turn that down.

I'm not. And I'm planning to leave early since we're winding down x

Andi gathered the paperwork to the side of her and piled it on the desk in front of her. If she could get things signed and sealed sooner, she would be out the door with plenty of time to spare.

This is probably a long shot, and I completely understand if you don't want to, but I wondered if you'd like to come to my place and decorate the tree with me? I know that may be a tough thing for you to do, so there's really no hard feelings if you can't. I just thought I'd ask. Sort of because I could do with a hand, but mostly because I'd love to see you x

Decorate the tree? Oh, wow. Andi hadn't decorated a tree for two years. She would love to be involved in that. She appreciated that Rachel understood the worry about Andi being at the loft, but she was learning to appreciate it...while no longer owning it. And like Rachel, she would love to see her, too.

I'd like that. What time? x

Andi signed off on the paperwork, adding it to the relevant envelopes.

Whenever you'd like to be here. I'm home now and not planning to leave the loft again tonight. x

Hmm. Should Andi offer to bring dinner? Or drinks? Of course she should.

Can I bring anything? x

Just yourself. I have everything else we need. See you soon! x

And just like that, Andi was spending another evening in the run-up to Christmas with a beautiful woman. Simple, but perfection.

See you soon x



“What do you think of this colour?” Rachel held a mass of tinsel in her arms, almost a sage green colour. Different, but very pretty. “Is it too non-Christmas?”

“I don’t think there’s such a thing as non-Christmas.” Andi beamed a smile from where she stood at the other side of the coffee table, detangling silver tinsel. “It’s a great colour. It’s different, I like it.”

Rachel wrinkled her nose, not quite sure. “Really? You’re not just being polite?”

“Nope.” Andi dropped the tinsel onto the coffee table, rounding it and taking the pile from Rachel’s arms. She lay it next to the silver pile and reached out a hand to Rachel. “And before I forget, I wanted to say thank you for inviting me over tonight. And for being mindful of the possibility I could say no.”

Rachel lowered her gaze between them. “I know how tough it must be. I don’t want to do anything you’re not ready for.”

“You know, I thought the same thing coming into this. Only very briefly, but yes, the thought was there. And I think we have the same fears. I don’t want to do anything you’re not ready for, either.” Andi held Rachel’s chin gently and smiled. “But in my case, I do believe I’m ready for practically anything, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I wouldn’t say that to you if I didn’t mean it. I told you there was no rush, and there really isn’t. We enjoy this, we explore whatever is happening, and we appreciate the moments we have together. That’s really all I can ask for, Rachel.”

Rachel groaned, wrapping her arms around Andi’s waist. “Why are you so perfect?”

“I’m really not.”

She narrowed her eyes as Andi blushed, adoring that look from her. A flustered Andi was a strikingly beautiful Andi. “I think you are. You don’t know how much I’m looking forward to this.”

“I’m happy to hear that. It could have been *very* awkward if you were dreading it.” Andi drew Rachel into a gentle kiss, those lips holding so much hope for a positive future.

Rachel wrapped her up, holding Andi against her, and allowed her mind to wander towards the possibilities. With Andi, Rachel knew she could have a happy relationship. Looking back, that wasn’t something she had imagined with Juliet, but with Andi? It all felt different. It felt fresh and invigorating whenever she had the chance to spend time with this woman. And her lips? Well... “You could have told me how much I’d enjoy kissing you back when I blew you off.”

Andi laughed from deep within her belly, shaking her head. “God, that feels like forever ago. And it was what? Well, not very long ago at all.”

“I know. A lot has happened since then.”

Andi brushed Rachel’s hair from her face, her head cocked a little. “Are you happy right now? Truly, hand on heart, happy?”

“With you? This?” Rachel asked, receiving a nod. “God, yes. And I realise I could have been happier for a little while longer if I hadn’t allowed my own fears to get in the way.”

“Our fears are what make us human, Rachel. If we didn’t have fears, if we went into everything blindly and confidently, then we wouldn’t have very good experiences in life. Fears allow us to adjust to new surroundings and new people in our own time. Fears...are important.”

God. It was true. Andi really was perfect. It didn’t matter if she disagreed; Rachel was calling it fully and officially right now. “I still gave you the runaround.”

“You did no such thing. You explained why, and being the adults that we are, we understood one another...and figured it out.” Andi touched her forehead to Rachel’s. “We should finish up here because I’m ordering in once we’re done.”

Rachel wanted to devour Andi. She wanted to get lost in every scent, every touch. But she would wait until Andi made that first move. Only the longer she looked into those expressive deep brown eyes, she found it harder to actually do that waiting. She pulled back reluctantly. “I’d love that.”

“Me too.” Andi smoothed a thumb against Rachel’s cheek, sending a shiver through her.

“Y-you have to stop doing that,” Rachel whispered, her world spinning at knowing she was in someone’s arms. Someone who wanted her, who appreciated her. Someone who didn’t bring drama or turmoil. Just...Andi.

Andi frowned as she lowered her hand. “I’m sorry.”

“No. Don’t apologise. *Please*, don’t apologise.” Rachel squeezed Andi’s hip. “It’s just...it’s very easy to get lost in your eyes, Andi. Very easy. And that makes taking this slow so much harder to handle.”

“Then we can either spend our time together with me keeping my eyes closed, or we can *not* worry about where this is going, at what speed it’s going, and just live.” Andi kissed Rachel again, this time with a little more oomph behind it, and smiled. “I also don’t recall mentioning the need to take anything slow. I said there was no rush, but that doesn’t quite mean the same thing. At least, not in my book.”

Rachel slid her hands beneath Andi’s hoodie, that warm, soft skin so delicate. “You really shouldn’t have said that.”

Andi moaned lightly, but it only had Rachel more involved in where this could be going. “I believe it’s important to be honest. Especially if I want something.”

“Oh?” Rachel grazed her nails against Andi’s stomach, receiving the reaction she expected. There was something incredibly arousing about the way a woman’s stomach contracted and rippled at such a gentle touch. “And what is it that you want?”

“Many things. But right now...” Andi fell silent, her lips parted when Rachel chanced a hand, slipping it down the front of Andi’s jeans. “O-oh.” She jerked her hips when Rachel cupped her, drawing her back into a heated kiss. Andi wasn’t playing around when she said she was ready, and Rachel knew that just from the heat she felt beneath her palm.

She guided Andi back towards the couch, laying her down and resting above her. Something told Rachel that feeling this woman was going to be the greatest of satisfactions. She pulled her hand from Andi’s jeans, popped the button, and tugged them down her legs. Andi didn’t protest, and she didn’t hesitate; she kicked them off the rest of the way and dragged Rachel back down on top of her.

“I need to feel your skin,” Andi whispered against Rachel’s lips. “I’ve been dying to feel you against me.”

Rachel forced herself up, shedding her own hoodie in record time. She had never been more thankful that she was wearing sweatpants than in this moment. Another thing gone before Andi had time to blink. Andi sat up and unzipped her hoodie, sliding it from her shoulders. Rachel could only pause and admire everything about this woman.

But it was Andi who spoke first. "So beautiful."

"Right back at you." Rachel made herself comfortable on the couch beside Andi, the cool leather a brief relief from the heat her skin produced. Every curve, every dimple...Rachel needed to get this show on the road. Andi, in all of her glory, was fucking gorgeous. She parted Andi's legs, stroking her inner thigh. "If anything doesn't feel right for you, you say the word, okay?"

Andi smiled, wrapped a hand around the back of Rachel's neck, and kissed her with an urgency that Rachel hadn't expected. It was devouring, enlightening, it was...everything. "I want you, okay?"

With one hand, Rachel managed to slip Andi's underwear off. As she looked into those beautiful eyes, she knew she needed more. So much more. Rachel simply nodded, and then she kissed Andi's neck, lowering her mouth to the swell of her breast. "I want you, too." Rachel quirked a brow when Andi suddenly forced her bra lower, exposing those hardened nipples Rachel was dying to tease. "Oh. You're really not playing around now, are you?"

Andi fisted her hand in Rachel's hair, smiled into a kiss, and whispered, "I may have been lying when I told you we could just be friends."

Oh, Andi was everything Rachel needed. She knew it. From her voice, to her smile, to those fucking lips. Rachel was in a lot of trouble here. But she liked trouble. Especially when it came via someone so gorgeous. "Friends. Yeah, that was never going to work out."

"Depends what kind of friends we wanted to be." Andi grinned, shifting further until she was flat on her back. "With benefits, I could have managed. But I think you know that's not what I want."

Rachel gently circled Andi's clit, those adoring eyes staring back at her. Her lips parted as Rachel applied a little more pressure, the cutest gasp barely audible. "I think I know what you want."

"Mm." Andi buried her head in the cushion, rocking her hips slowly. "I-I think you do."

Lowering her fingers, Rachel was met with so much wetness that she had to wonder how long Andi had been wanting this. While they could have

danced around one another for far longer, Rachel was very happy with the turn of events tonight. “Well, it’s not to decorate the tree. That is *quite* clear by now.” Before Andi could respond—that sweet smile spread on her lips—Rachel eased two fingers inside her, overwhelmed by Andi’s warmth. “Fuck.”

“Y-yes.” Andi buried her head deeper and took her bottom lip between her teeth. “Oh, God.”

“You feel so fucking good.” Rachel rolled her tongue over Andi’s nipple, sucking it into her mouth as she sunk her fingers deeper. Rachel released Andi’s nipple slowly, enjoying every last whimper and shudder from the woman laid out for her. “Mm. Amazing.”

Andi lowered her hand, wrapped it around Rachel’s wrist, and pushed deeper again.

Oh, wow. Such a dark horse, Rachel thought, enamoured by Andi Palmer. “Tell me what you need, Andi.”

Andi arched her back. “M-more.”

Mhmm. My kind of woman. Rachel eased a third finger inside, moaning when Andi squeezed her. Whatever came of this, Rachel would remember this moment for a long time. Because this moment... It was like no other. Was this really what being with someone felt like? Someone who cared about you and wanted to be with you? Could it really feel so euphoric? Andi let go of Rachel’s wrist, bringing her fingers to her own clit. The moan from that single movement had Rachel trembling. She didn’t care that she was still wearing boxer briefs and a bra; she hooked one leg over Andi’s thigh, desperately craving friction, and rocked back and forth.

“Oh, Rachel,” Andi whispered, lifting her head and locking eyes. “I-I...”

“Let go, Andi.”

And Andi did. Oh, she really let go. Rachel could only watch—admire—as Andi rode out her orgasm, her chest heaving. She gripped the back of the couch when Rachel coaxed everything she could, her body jolting as Rachel eased out of her and rolled her fingertips over Andi’s sensitive clit.

“Oh, God.” Andi brought her palm to her forehead, breathing deeply.

“You,” Rachel said as she leaned up on her elbow and smiled down at Andi, “are *definitely* welcome here whenever you want.”

“I wonder why.” Andi smirked when she sat up on her own elbows and beckoned Rachel closer. She kissed her slowly, Rachel’s fingers still working her clit, and then she drew back and smiled. “I think we have time to explore

some more before we finish that tree.”

Yeah. The tree. The one they’d barely started...and would *never* finish tonight. Not if Rachel had anything to do with it.



Andi frowned as she focused on the ceiling. She needed a moment to come around from the comatose sleep she had just woken from while understanding that she was at the loft...and not her own bed. Wow, it felt strange. Not concerning but strange. As though the last year or so of her life hadn’t happened and she had never left this place.

But she had, and she had to remember that.

She felt Rachel shift beside her, her soft breathing calming considering Andi had slept next to another woman last night. And...been intimate with that same woman. How did she feel about it? Exhilarated. Hopeful. Happy. She didn’t regret it, nor did she want to rush from this bed and run out the door. Andi felt surprisingly content and grateful for her evening with Rachel.

This had to be the most perfect morning she’d had in a long time.

“Hey,” Rachel spoke low beside her, the sheet sitting just above her breasts. “Did you sleep okay?”

“I slept very well.” Andi turned and faced Rachel, that uncertainty evident in Rachel’s eyes. “I...didn’t expect to still be here this morning, though.”

“I...didn’t think you would be here, either. But you looked too comfortable to wake up when I got up for some water around midnight. I hope you don’t mind that I made the decision not to wake you.”

Andi smiled as she shifted closer to Rachel. “Do I look like I mind?”

“No. But you’re too sweet to show it.” Rachel inched her hand closer and took Andi’s. “Thank you for last night.”

“We...didn’t quite finish decorating the tree.” Andi felt her cheeks heat, knowing she was blushing. It had all happened so quickly, but Andi had wanted it. Oh, Rachel knew exactly what women wanted. “Maybe we could finish it this morning if you don’t have to work.”

“I don’t have anywhere to be.” Rachel’s gravelly, sleepy voice sent the hairs on Andi’s arms upright. “And...I just wanted to say that I appreciate

you for being you. Part of me expected you to get up and leave at the mere thought of my job, but you're here."

"I'm sorry?"

Rachel stroked the back of Andi's hand and inhaled a deep breath. "The only time I ever wake up with another woman is when I've been duped into thinking that someone cares about me...is interested in me. Then we sleep together, and I never see them again. One once told me that they'd managed to have the escort experience without paying a penny."

That horrified Andi. "You're not serious."

"I am. Women can be brutal when they want to be. But you? You're like nobody I've ever met before. You're real...you make me feel normal."

"You are normal. And *very* good with your hands...and mouth." Andi smirked when Rachel eyed her. "Oh, come on. You know exactly what you're capable of. Escort or not, you're hot in all kinds of ways."

Rachel sat up on her elbow and propped her head in her hand. The sheet fell away, exposing her naked chest, and Andi was ready to go again. She suspected that wouldn't lessen any time soon. "Andi, you *are* okay with who I am, right?"

"I know you've had bad experiences in the past, and I can understand why you question my intentions, but...I've never lied to you, and I never would. I'm here because I like all of you, and if your job makes you happy, then *I'm* happy."

"You see. Perfect!"

If Rachel told her she was perfect once more, she was going to struggle to leave this bed at any point today. "I don't have to be at the office today. If you don't have any plans, I'd like to take you to lunch."

Andi's phone buzzed on the floor. She reached for it, giving Rachel a moment to decide if she wanted to have lunch with her.

Christmas party round 2 at my place this Friday. Be there! Hillary.

Rachel beamed a smile, then nuzzled into Andi's chest. "I'd love to go to lunch with you."

"Then maybe we should finish the tree later. Again, only if you have no plans." Andi locked her phone and dropped it to the floor. She grazed her nails up Rachel's naked back, hoping they could go to Hillary's together. "Also, Hillary is having another Christmas party this Friday. I'd love it if you could make it, but I know it's short notice."

"I have no plans today, and I'd love to come to the party with you again,"

Rachel said as she stroked her fingertips up Andi's thigh and towards her hip. "You have the softest skin." She dipped her hand towards Andi's stomach, then lower again. "You just feel really good."

Oh, my. It had been so long since Andi had spent the morning in bed hearing those things. Did she want to stop this? Absolutely not. What was the harm in a little morning fun? As she opened her mouth to speak, Rachel pulled back and pushed Andi down onto the mattress. "Rachel."

"Mm?" Rachel quirked a brow, her lip between her teeth.

But Andi only dragged Rachel on top of her, surprised by the wetness coating her thigh. Rachel was ready for another round in the morning, and that was something Andi would keep in mind for future sleepovers with one another. "I don't know where this is going, but it all feels *very* good."

"Oh, yeah?" Rachel lowered herself down Andi's body, kissing her skin as she went. Andi could only grip the sheets and enjoy another round with this woman while trying to come to terms with where her life was headed. "Then I should make sure it stays that way."

CHAPTER 17

“HOW’S YOUR NIGHT GOING?” ANDI DIPPED HER HEAD TOWARDS RACHEL’S ear, inhaling her perfume as she lingered. “You look stunning tonight.”

Rachel smiled as she turned her face towards Andi’s breath. That shyness in her eyes was present—a look Andi cherished. “Much better than the first time I was here. Even if that night ended far better than I expected it would.”

Ah. A night Andi wouldn’t forget in a hurry. The night she kissed Rachel. “Mm. Unexpected, but *very* good.”

“I...did want to make you aware of the fact that a lot of your friends keep watching us together. I don’t want you to think I’m avoiding you,” Rachel said, inconspicuously stroking the back of Andi’s hand where it hung between them. “But I also don’t want you to feel as though you’re on the spot, you know?”

“I appreciate that. Still, they can watch all they like. I believe it’s quite obvious that you and I are dating.”

Or maybe it wasn’t. Andi hadn’t given much thought to telling her friends individually. Sally and Claire knew, and that was the main thing. After all, Sally and Claire were her closest and dearest friends. Everyone else was simply in Andi’s life for one reason or another.

“Unless you wanted me to set the record straight with everyone?” Andi had to consider how Rachel felt in this. She never wanted her to think Andi was avoiding public displays of affection around people. That was so far from the truth. She had just been pulled in all kinds of directions since they had arrived at Hillary’s. She hadn’t had much of a chance to speak to Rachel so far this evening. Although Rachel had spent thirty minutes dancing and chatting with Sally and Claire when they’d arrived. Andi loved seeing the

woman she was dating being welcomed by her best friends. “You do feel comfortable, don’t you?”

“God, yes. Of course I do. I just wanted to make you aware of it, that’s all. No need for either of us to be caught off guard suddenly.”

As Andi opened her mouth to respond, she caught sight of Sally out of the corner of her eye. She was headed right towards them.

“I’m prepared. Don’t worry.” Andi shifted closer to Rachel, dying to lean in and kiss her. “I did want to discuss something with you, though. Not tonight, and it’s nothing overly important, but I wanted to talk...if that’s okay?”

“A-about what?” Rachel frowned.

“Can we do this later? Sally is coming over, and it’s not something she needs to hear.”

“O-okay.” Rachel visibly swallowed.

Andi looked towards Sally, thankful that somebody had caught her on the way over to them. It gave Andi a few more minutes to calm Rachel down. “Hey, it’s nothing to worry about. I just wanted to discuss your...job title with you.”

“My job title?”

“Yes, but as I said, can we do it later?” Andi couldn’t care less what people knew about her personal life. Still, she wanted to know how Rachel preferred to be known by other people. While Andi was comfortable with the truth, Rachel may not be. Even if she was proud in front of Andi, that didn’t necessarily mean Rachel wanted complete strangers to know about her line of work. “Baby,” Andi said, entwining their fingers. “Relax. It’s *nothing* important, okay?”

“Okay.”

Sally appeared beside Andi, nudging her shoulder. “You do realise where you’re standing, don’t you?”

Andi’s brows drew together. She was standing between the kitchen and the conservatory. “Um, I’m sorry?”

“You and Rachel.” Sally grinned, then looked up between them.

Andi followed her line of sight, laughing when she realised they were standing directly under the mistletoe. Could this be any more predictable...or romantic? Andi smirked in Rachel’s direction, gauging her reaction to the realisation she was potentially going to kiss Andi in front of all of her friends, but all she found staring back at her were those blue eyes, soft and gentle.

Andi took a step closer, cradling Rachel's chin in her hand. "I guess they're all about to know."

"Andi, you don't have to do this if you don't want to. I don't care what 'tradition' says."

"Oh, I want to. I've been dying to kiss you all night." Andi leaned in and captured Rachel's lips as though she was kissing her for the very first time. She tasted sweet, familiar...she tasted perfect. She touched her forehead to Rachel's, smiling as she stroked her thumb against Rachel's cheek. "I hope you know how much I enjoy kissing you."

Rachel's lips parted as she closed her eyes. Andi never thought she would have that effect on another woman again, but here she was, very much having some kind of effect on Rachel. "God."

"Stay with me tonight."

Rachel simply nodded, blushing when Andi's friends started to clap and cheer. "I'd love to."

"Do you...want to step outside for some air? My friends can be a little full-on when they want to be." Honestly, Andi was the one who needed air right now. She hadn't known how freeing it would feel as she kissed Rachel under the mistletoe. She also hadn't anticipated how a positive reaction from her friends would make her feel. "Come on." She took Rachel by the hand and guided her out of the patio doors. As they stopped on the decking, she turned Rachel to her again. "Are you okay?"

"Me? I'm great. Are *you* okay?"

"Mmhmm. I'm just perfect. Though, I've felt like that *a lot* lately."

"You don't know how much it means to me to hear you say that." Rachel seemed to breathe a sigh of relief at that. Had she been waiting for this to fall apart?

"You...seem relieved."

"I am. But let's discuss it another time. Maybe when we have that other discussion you want to have."

"Okay." Andi smiled into another kiss, swaying Rachel out on the decking. "If that's what you want to do, then okay."

"I...wondered if you wanted to call it a night here soon, too?"

Andi caught that glint in Rachel's eye as she asked that. "I think that's a very wise idea."

"Good. Finish your drink so we can get out of here unscathed. I love your friends, but I'm not in the mood for a million questions about us right now."

I'd rather be alone with you...and naked."

Andi's entire body lit up at that. Knowing Rachel wanted them to be alone, well, it made Andi feel very good about herself. She had always felt positive about her body and her age, she knew she could give another woman what they needed, but with Rachel, it felt different. She hadn't felt so wanted in a long time, and Andi was going to lap it all up. Occasionally menopausal or not.

There's plenty of life left in you yet!



Rachel stumbled through Andi's front door as they giggled and held one another close. This night had been the perfect blend of making new friends while admiring Andi at any given opportunity. She had tried to admire her at the last party, but Rachel hadn't felt as though she was in a position to freely do so. Not until she'd backed Andi up against that wall and made her intentions known. Once she had felt that bravery deep within her, she knew there was no going back, and right now...she wouldn't want to change anything since the moment they'd met. Why? Because everything had led them to this very point.

"Drink?" Andi asked as she kicked off her heels and moved towards the kitchen. But Rachel held her back, turning Andi in her arms. "I like this side of you," Andi whispered into a kiss. "The 'I can't keep my hands off you' side."

"In case you didn't know it already, I *always* find it hard to keep my hands off you, babe."

"Oh, yeah? Maybe you should make it obvious more often."

Rachel took her bottom lip between her teeth, her eyes straying to Andi's cleavage. "I fear that we'd never get anything done if I did that."

Andi laughed. "I have *plenty* of time on my hands."

"Then I will bear that in mind. But first...what did you want to talk about?" Rachel hated to break this moment, but whatever Andi wanted to say had been playing on her mind since she had mentioned it back at Hillary's. "Sorry to be a turn-off."

"A turn-off? Oh, I'm not sure anything could turn me off you." Andi took

Rachel's hand and guided her through to the living room. They fell down onto the couch with one another, wrapped up in an embrace. "Your job..."

"Mmhmm. The same job I've had for a long time." Rachel swallowed, aware that this conversation could go many ways. She just hoped it wouldn't be the same way it usually went. Then the idea it could go *exactly* that way dawned on Rachel. "Are you...going to ask me to quit my job?"

"What? No. Why would I ask you to do such a thing?"

Rachel lifted a shoulder. She'd been here before. "Because that's why it never ends well for me."

"Rachel, I don't want you to quit your job. I just...wanted to know what you would prefer I tell people. If someone asks what you do, what do *you* want me to say?"

"Oh, um...I don't really care. If you're not comfortable telling them I'm an escort, then I'll leave that part up to you. Just make sure whatever you decide is something believable. Don't imply that I'm a brain surgeon...you know?"

"I'm more than comfortable." Andi squeezed Rachel's hand. "The reason I ask is because the first time Sally asked me about your job, I wasn't sure what to say. So, I told her you were some kind of therapist. That wasn't because I didn't want her to know, but because it's your business as to who knows what."

Rachel melted for this woman. Andi had to be the most considerate living soul on this earth. "I appreciate that."

"I want us to be on the same page, that's all. I have absolutely no reservations when it comes to anything we share. You should know by now that I'd never ask you to quit your job. I came into this knowing who you were...and I adore every last thing about you, Rachel."

A tear slid down Rachel's cheek at Andi's admission. How the hell had she been lucky enough to be given a second chance the day she met Andi? "You have no idea how much you mean to me." Rachel placed a hand on Andi's chest and leaned in, kissing her. "I can't believe I found you. I really can't."

Andi wiped Rachel's tears away, that smile melting her. "Back at Hillary's, you had a moment."

"I just find it hard to believe that I could be so lucky. After the whole Juliet thing, I never thought I'd find the right person for me. I never thought I'd have the chance to meet another woman who could take me as I am. She

was my client and couldn't even take me as I am. You know?"

"I'm...glad she couldn't. I don't ever want to imagine the pain or hurt you felt in those weeks and months after she turned her back on you, but I am glad that you were available when we met."

"We're here with one another, and that's all I want to focus on. Us."

Andi drew Rachel into another kiss, smiling against her lips. "Me too."

"Is it wrong that I just want to spend every waking moment with you, Andi? Do you feel as though that kind of thing could be an issue?" Rachel hated worrying about things she couldn't change, but she wanted to make sure she got it spot on with Andi. One hint of her becoming too much and she would be devastated. "I don't really know how the relationship thing works, so I don't want to get this wrong."

"Trust me, you're getting everything right." Andi eased Rachel down onto her back, resting above her. Those dark eyes pierced her soul and stole her breath. "Knowing you want to spend so much time with me makes me happy, Rachel. And since I feel the same way, I guess we can't really get this wrong."

Rachel slid a hand between them, stroking her fingertips up Andi's thigh. She felt the heat, the want, craving to lose herself in Andi's wetness. "I guess we're done talking then."

"If you move that hand any higher, talking will be the last thing on my mind for the rest of the night."

"Well, then," Rachel said, stroking her fingertips against Andi's lace-covered lips. "I guess you should be quiet while I remind myself of how fucking good you feel."

"O-oh, fuck. I-I guess I should."

CHAPTER 18

WITH THEIR FINGERS LACED TOGETHER, ANDI AND RACHEL WALKED SLOWLY around the Christmas markets. They would soon be closing until next year. While Rachel had the chance, she wanted to be here with Andi in a different capacity. So far, it had only been as friends, but Rachel wanted to be one of the many couples enjoying themselves. She had the honour of being in that position now. Even the atmosphere had dramatically changed now that she was dating Andi. The way they walked together was different, too. Rachel didn't know if she'd ever walked hand in hand with another woman. And if she had, it hadn't been memorable.

"Did you need anything while we're here?" Andi asked, squeezing her hand.

"I needed some bits and pieces, but it depends if anything catches my eye."

Andi smiled, the tip of her nose red. "Well, then we should have a look around so you don't miss out on anything."

"Could we get a hot chocolate and sit for a minute before we do?" Rachel asked, wanting to mention something to Andi. "I promise not to be a bitch to you as you wait in line."

Andi laughed as she stopped and turned to face Rachel. She leaned in and kissed her, lingering, and then touched her forehead to Rachel's. "Only if you're buying to apologise for that night. Since I didn't take you up on the offer there and then."

"You're on." Rachel felt her cheeks heat. Nobody had ever kissed her in public before. And not someone like Andi. Rachel wanted more, but the hot chocolate queue was growing by the second, so she tugged Andi towards it,

waiting in line. “Do you feel different lately?”

“Different, how?”

Rachel smiled when Andi let go of her hand, instead wrapping her arms around her waist from behind, her chin on Rachel’s shoulder. Who knew Andi could be so adorable? “I don’t know. But things like this...make me feel different.”

Andi almost pulled away, but Rachel settled her hands over Andi’s where they rested on her stomach.

“No. Stay there. I don’t mean I feel uncomfortable. I just...you know how I said to you weeks ago that I didn’t think Christmas markets were for me? Because it’s full of couples and families...”

“Mmhmm.” Andi turned her face inwards, kissing Rachel’s neck. “I do remember.”

“Well, now it feels right. Because I’m here with you...like this.” Rachel lay her head back on Andi’s shoulder. The icy wind was biting tonight, but she didn’t care. She was warm in Andi’s arms. “I know it’s early days, but I hope we can do this again in the future, you know?” Early days...but Rachel felt as though she had known Andi for a lifetime.

Andi tightened her arms around Rachel’s waist. “I do know. And I’d love to be doing this with you next year, too. I know that’s what you’re trying to say, so I said it for you.”

“Next!”

As they shuffled forward, the woman who worked the hot chocolate hut grinned back at them. “Ah. I wondered if I’d ever see you two again.”

Rachel frowned. “I’m sorry?”

“You’re the one who told her to mind her own business back in November. I’m glad you changed your tune because you look bloody great together.”

Rachel wanted the ground to open up. “Yeah, that was me. Uh...two hot chocolates, please.” She felt Andi’s silent support in her touch, but Rachel still hated the reminder of that day. She turned her face towards Andi, smiling weakly. “I am still unbelievably sorry about that day.”

“I know. But it doesn’t really matter anymore. Look at us now.”

Rachel turned in Andi’s arms, studying her face. “I don’t want to sound too overbearing, but I wouldn’t want to be here like this with anyone else.”

“Hey,” Andi whispered as she leaned in and brushed her nose against Rachel’s. “One thing you’re *not* is overbearing. And I wouldn’t want to be

here with anyone else either.”

Rachel couldn't believe just how straightforward Andi was. Given the fact that she had once been married—for over twenty years—it said a lot about who she was and where she saw her future going. Rachel had read this woman entirely wrong in the beginning.

“Here you go, lovebirds. Two hot chocolates...and they're on me.” The server placed their cups down, winking as she moved on to the next customer. “Next!”

They took their drinks, joined their hands together again, and smiled when the server caught Rachel's eye. She mouthed ‘thank you’ and guided Andi away from the hustle and bustle. “Get that table by the heater. It's friggin' freezing tonight.”

Andi offered Rachel the seat closest to the heater and then sat down beside her. “What does your work schedule look like for the days leading up to Christmas?”

Rachel only had two more clients booked in. She had a few booked between Christmas and the new year, but she was mostly quiet until the holiday was over. “Not much on really. When do you close?”

“I have three days left. We shut down the day before Christmas Eve.”

“Plans?” Rachel asked, knowing she wouldn't be fortunate enough to spend any of Christmas with Andi. “Do you visit family?”

“I don't. Well, I haven't done for a long time. My sister and her husband leave tomorrow for a cabin in Scotland. He's Scottish, and it's something they've always done. They don't come back until after the new year. The boys join them when they can, but it depends on what's what with university and stuff.”

“So, where are you going?” Rachel frowned.

“At the moment, not over the doorstep. Sally has invited me over to hers, but I always feel a little bit out of place. It wasn't so bad when Jane was alive, but I chose not to go last year because I didn't want to feel like a spare part, and I don't really plan to go this year, either. It's lovely that they offer to have me there, but Christmas is still a little bit of a funny time of year for me. I think it's all the family gatherings and things. That's when the last couple of years really hit the hardest for me.”

“Andi, can I ask you something? You can say no, of course, but I wanted to ask anyway.”

Andi reached out a hand and placed it on Rachel's knee. “You know you

can ask me anything.”

“Would you...like to spend Christmas together?”

The smallest smile threatened on Andi’s lips, but there was a hesitancy in her eyes.

“You don’t have to. I’m sure I’m the last person you want to see on a day like that, but if you’d consider it, I’d really appreciate that.”

“Rachel, I’d love to spend Christmas with you. I couldn’t think of anything better.”

“R-really?” Okay, Rachel hadn’t expected that. She thought Andi would promise to think about it, but for her to come right out with a yes and to be so enthusiastic? *Wow.*

“Absolutely. We can sort out the details nearer the time, but yes. Count me in.”

Rachel lowered her eyes, smiling as she stared down at her hot chocolate. “I can’t believe you said yes.”

“Did you...hope I wouldn’t?”

“God, no. I was praying you would say yes. I just didn’t expect you to want to actually spend Christmas with me.” Rachel usually spent it with Kelly and a few friends, eating a Chinese banquet. But this year? Oh, this year was about to become the best Christmas she’d had since she was a child.

“Don’t you spend it with family?”

“No. I have a very...difficult relationship with my parents. We talk on occasion, but I couldn’t tell you the last time I was invited over for Christmas.”

Andi cocked her head, sympathy in her eyes. “The escort thing?”

“You’d think so. But no. The lesbian thing.”

“I’m sorry. I was fortunate to have understanding parents. Neither of them are here anymore, but I think they would have really liked you.” Andi sipped from her cup, leaving Rachel mesmerised as she poked out her tongue and licked the chocolate residue from her lips. “And *I’m* very grateful that you’re a lesbian. Obviously.”

Rachel burst out laughing, shocking the people at the next table. She leaned in and held Andi’s chin in her hand. “I wonder why.”

“I’m not quite sure. I guess I’ll have to keep seeing you so I can figure it out.”

Mm. That was a great plan. Rachel would love to see Andi every day if she was able to. “I think we should finish up here, get our bits and pieces, and

head back to either my place or yours.”

Andi closed her eyes when Rachel stroked a thumb against her cheek. “I think you have some of the best ideas.”



“So,” Sally said as she rounded the back of Andi’s couch and made herself comfortable. “You’ve been to the markets with Rachel?”

“Yes. We needed a few last-minute gifts, and she wasn’t working, so we decided to spend some time together.”

“And...how is spending time together going?” Sally crossed her legs and sipped her wine, her eyes narrowed. Andi knew she was waiting to be given all the information, but she wasn’t the type of woman who laid out the specifics. Not now and not when she was younger. “Have you spent the night together yet?”

“We have.” Andi offered a simple nod, nursing her own glass of wine. “Rachel has been wonderful, Sal. She really has. She’s so attentive and careful about how she approaches things, you know?”

“That’s sweet. I know you’re ready, but I do appreciate her respect for your marriage.”

Andi wasn’t sure Rachel had any disrespect in her. Everything had just gelled so well once they’d decided that it was worth a shot with one another. Andi didn’t worry about the length of time it had been since she dated, and Rachel didn’t worry about how Andi was feeling. Well, most of the time. “She’s a breath of fresh air.”

“I really enjoyed getting to know her at the party. She seems like exactly what you need right now. Someone who can keep you on your toes.”

Huh. Andi didn’t need that. And Rachel *wasn’t* that. Sally had no idea the comfortable and snuggled-up times they’d spent together. Rachel may look a particular kind of way, but she absolutely wasn’t a ‘keep you on your toes’ kind of woman. “She’s perfect for me. And while I know she has a certain appearance about her, she’s quite content with spending the evening at home with a film or a glass of wine.”

Sally shifted a little, reaching out and placing her wine on the coffee table. “And how is it being back at the loft?”

“How...is it?” Andi frowned.

“Yes. You don’t own it anymore, and it *was* the place you spent fifteen years with Jane.”

“Oh, it’s been fine. It’s actually nice to be there.”

Sally nodded slowly. “So long as you’re okay with it. I’m sure Rachel would be happy to come here whenever you’re seeing one another.”

Andi smiled as she looked around her living room. “What do you think of it? It feels huge, but I have plenty of space to hide all my crap.”

“I think it’s gorgeous. It may be a little big, but it’s yours, and I know you’ll feel at home here eventually.”

Andi really hoped that would happen. Her fresh start was going well so far; she would prefer if the home she was living in felt like it belonged to her. “I think it will, too. In time. And I think it’s important that I remember I don’t have to do everything at once. The house, the relationship, you know?”

“Well, I’d usually agree, but you *have* done it all at once. Still, it looks very good on you. You’re glowing lately, and I couldn’t be any happier about that.” Sally reached out a hand and placed it on Andi’s knee. “You know we all want the best for you. Rachel is a very good start.”

“She’s...asked me to spend Christmas with her.”

Sally’s brows rose. “Oh.”

“What’s that look? Do you think it’s a bad idea?” Andi didn’t particularly care what people thought. She would be alone, and Rachel would be alone, so why not be together instead?

“I don’t think it’s a bad idea. I just wasn’t expecting you to say that.”

Andi lifted a shoulder. “I don’t have any concrete plans, and I think it would be nice to spend Christmas together. It may be soon, but isn’t life for living?”

“It is. Absolutely.”

“Then I’m going to spend Christmas with Rachel and go from there. I just don’t know whether to do it here or at the loft. She probably wants to have her first Christmas there, don’t you think?”

“I think she would understand if you didn’t want to do Christmas there.” Sally squeezed her knee. “I know you’re comfortable there now, but Christmas could be a whole other situation. The last thing you need is to feel unsure about it and then cancel. So, I would say have the discussion with Rachel and see what comes of it.”

Andi would do that. While she enjoyed being at the loft, she wasn’t sure

Christmas there with another woman was appropriate just yet. “I will. Either way, I’m sure she’ll be great about it.”

“Maybe you could do Christmas here and New Year’s Eve at the loft?”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Andi said as she tipped her wine glass towards Sally. “I suppose you’d like an invite should we do something for the new year?”

“Obviously.”

“Well, then. I guess I should have that discussion with Rachel sooner rather than later. Christmas isn’t far away, and if you and Claire join us, it’ll take me the best part of a week to get all the alcohol in.” Andi winked, receiving a slap to the knee for her comment. “I’m joking. Maybe...only slightly.”

“I like the new Andi. She’s fun again. Just the way she was way back in the day.”

Andi beamed a smile. “I like the new me, too.”

CHAPTER 19

RACHEL SMILED AT A SERVER AS SHE PASSED THEM BY, HEADING FOR THE bathroom. She had another fifteen minutes with her client, and then she was going to Andi's to surprise her. They hadn't planned to see one another, but Rachel was beginning to understand that Andi was up for just about anything. She had a fire in her eyes lately. That smile Rachel loved so much was far more prominent than usual, and the sex? Well, Rachel enjoyed *that* very much.

She moved into a stall and took her phone from her clutch bag. She would never sit at a dinner table with a client—or anyone for that matter—and text, so she would do it here instead. She didn't even need the bathroom. She just wanted to say hi to Andi.

Hi. How's your evening going? I'm with a client right now and we're at a new restaurant. I have to bring you here. The food is divine!

Rachel smiled when Andi started to respond. Was she sitting around waiting to hear from Rachel? In some way, she really hoped so.

Very quiet and boring. I'd love to try a new restaurant. But dinner is on me next time! Be safe getting home tonight.

God, could this woman be any more adorable? Rachel sighed, smiling as she stared down at her phone. It was almost Christmas, and she had someone very special in her life. Cloud nine was an understatement!

You know, I won't be much longer here.

Rachel came out of the stall, checking her makeup in the mirror.

If you're hinting at what I think you are, then you know I'd love to see you. But please don't go out of your way to do so. You've been working. I understand if you want to get home and put your feet up.

So Andi *did* want to see her. That was certain. Rachel quickly washed her hands and replied to Andi.

Maybe I'll see how I'm feeling once I've finished work. I'd love to see you too.

Rachel would leave it at that. But before this night was over, she would find herself kissing Andi.

She quickly washed her hands and left the bathroom, clearing her throat as her client walked towards her. "Everything okay?"

"Of course. I've taken care of the bill. I have to unexpectedly call into the office and pick up some paperwork. I hope you don't mind." Rachel was fond of this particular client. Amanda was respectful. She didn't overstep. Rachel had been seeing her now for the last five months or so since Amanda's pretty intense break-up. Her ex-wife had really done her over.

"I don't mind. I understand."

"Come on. Let's walk out together." Amanda placed her hand on the small of Rachel's back as she always did, offering her a gentle smile. "Thanks for a great evening again. I can always count on you to make me smile."

Rachel nodded. "It's what I'm here for."

"I know. But it must get to be tedious at times. I hope I'm pleasant enough that you enjoy your evenings with me as much as I enjoy mine with you..."

"I do. You know I do." Rachel hailed a cab for Amanda. "So, I'll wait to hear from you?"

"Yes. I have a hectic week coming up at work, but I will be in touch." Amanda leaned in and kissed Rachel on the cheek. She held her hand, slyly putting a hefty tip in her palm. "If I don't see you before Christmas, that's a thank you from me."

Rachel frowned. Amanda always tipped well—a few hundred here and there. But this felt much bulkier. "Thank you. Have a great Christmas, okay?"

"I will. I'll check your schedule online." Amanda jumped into the waiting cab and waved as it drove off.

Before Rachel hailed a cab of her own, she put her tip away safely in her bag. Whatever the amount, she was always appreciative. Rachel knew how lucky she was to enjoy this line of work so much.

"Rachel?"

She turned around and found Andi's best friend looking back at her, wearing a frown. "Sally, hi. How are you?"

"Are you... Was that... You're involved?" Sally stepped closer, a hand on her chest. "She...was very handsy. You're not...you know?"

"I'm not what?"

Sally sighed. "Oh, Andi is going to be so upset when she finds out about this. She does nothing but talk about you, and I really enjoyed getting to know you at the party."

"Sally, everything is fine. Andi knows about this. She...knows I'm here tonight."

"Does she know that women have their hands on you?"

Rachel offered a lopsided smile. Andi hadn't told Sally about her job. "Yes. She does. Well, not the way you make it sound, but she does know that I do this."

Sally shook her head. "I don't understand. Why would Andi be okay with you having another partner?"

"Oh, she's not my partner. Not at all. Everything you saw then was very platonic. She was my client." Rachel would have to be honest if she had any hope of Sally not going out of her mind. She would explain everything to Andi later. Yes, Sally probably had an opinion on escorts—most people did—but it wasn't her business. She wasn't the one sleeping with Rachel. "Sally, I'm an escort."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm an escort," she said matter of factly. "She was just a client. I'd never do anything to hurt Andi."

Sally scoffed. "Never do anything to hurt her? What the hell do you think will happen?" She threw up her hands and backed away. "I have to go. I can't believe I'm hearing this!"

"Sally, wait!" Rachel sighed, aware that this wasn't ideal. It didn't matter to her and Andi, but Rachel knew that Andi's nearest and dearest wouldn't like this. Perhaps that was why Andi hadn't said anything to them yet. Maybe she never would... "Sally, please?"

But Sally was gone, rushing across the road while the pedestrian crossing was flashing.

Rachel's shoulders slumped, the cold air seeping through her skin, the hustle and bustle of Christmas shoppers rushing around her.

Well, I guess it's time to hear what people think of me via Andi's

friends...



Andi held the phone away from her ear, wincing as Sally started to yell down the line.

“I’ve no idea what you’ve just said. Calm down, take a breath, and try again.” Andi put her call on loudspeaker to save her eardrums. “What’s wrong?”

“Rachel! I’ve just bumped into her in the city, and I just...couldn’t believe what I was hearing.”

Andi frowned. What the hell had happened. “Is she okay?”

“Oh, she’s fine. With another woman’s hands all over her!”

“I’m sorry?” Andi couldn’t have heard that right; Rachel wasn’t intimate with clients. “What are you talking about?”

“Outside a restaurant. Saying goodbye to someone.” Sally took a breath. “She said you know about it. T-that she’s an escort.”

“Well, yes. I do know about it.” Andi had been meaning to tell Sally more about Rachel, but life had been a little bit hectic recently. She was far too busy enjoying her time with Rachel. And really, Rachel’s job was entirely irrelevant. “You said something about hands all over her?”

“Mm.”

“Could you...be more specific?” Andi knew Rachel wouldn’t do anything to hurt her, but Sally often got way ahead of herself when it came to relaying information. “You make it sound as though they were hiding down an alleyway doing things they shouldn’t be doing.”

“First of all, this woman kissed her on the cheek. Then she’s chatting to Rachel with her hand on her back. *Very close* to Rachel’s arse.”

Andi rolled her eyes. “Oh, stop being so bloody dramatic.”

The doorbell sounded, giving Andi the perfect opportunity to end this call. She moved towards the door and opened it, her smile spreading wide when Rachel stared back at her. She mouthed ‘come in’ and closed the door.

“I can’t believe you know about this. Or that you’re okay with it. I know you’re exploring Andi, but fucking hell. Explore with someone else. Please, I’m begging you.”

“I’m not dealing with you right now. I have things to take care of.” Andi eyed Rachel, a now familiar wetness between her thighs as Rachel leant heavier on one foot, those heels drawing Andi in. God, she looked so good tonight. The dress...well, it would be on Andi’s bedroom floor soon. “I’ll call you tomorrow.” Andi ended the call, her gaze not wavering. “Hi.”

“Andi, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what Sally has said, but the likelihood is that she’s blown it out of proportion. I know she’s your best friend, but—” Rachel cut herself off when Andi stalked towards her and placed her phone on the nearby table. “Andi?”

“Mm?” Andi wrapped an arm around Rachel’s waist, pulling her in.

“Shouldn’t we talk about this?” Rachel asked, a sudden moan slipping out as Andi placed kisses along her jawline and towards her ear. “Oh, God.”

“We can talk...or we can *not* talk.” Andi knew which she preferred, and as she pulled back and looked into Rachel’s eyes, she knew the answer. “Not talking sounds like a good idea to me.”

Rachel grazed her fingertips across Andi’s lower stomach, eliciting a moan. “I can think of other things to do than talking.”

“Oh, me too.” Andi guided a hand between Rachel’s legs and slipped it up her dress. “You look so good tonight.” It wasn’t often Andi got to see this side of Rachel. Dressed up for some expensive dinner. Andi would have to insist on it more often. Her fingertips teased Rachel’s lips through her underwear. “And you feel even better.” Andi nipped at Rachel’s bottom lip, smiling into a kiss. “Tell me you can stay the night.”

Rachel pulled back, a brow quirked. “You want me to stay?”

The ache between Andi’s legs confirmed exactly that. As she kept a slow rhythm between Rachel’s gorgeous, smooth thighs, she nodded, her eyes closed. “Yes. *Please.*”

Rachel simply agreed with a nod, guided back and up against the wall by Andi. She felt Rachel tremble, her breath quickening with every roll of her fingertips. “Andi, please.”

But Andi could only smirk against Rachel’s lips while removing the lace barrier keeping her from what she so desperately wanted. As Rachel stepped out of her underwear, her palms pressed to the wall, Andi lowered herself and pushed Rachel’s dress up her stomach. Her tongue slowly—teasingly—traced a line up one thigh, then lavished the other.

“Fuck. Andi.”

Andi looked up at Rachel, separating slick folds and taking her clit

between her lips. “Mm.”

“O-oh.” Rachel’s hand found the back of Andi’s head, urging her for more. “Yes. J-just like that.”

Andi sucked a little harder, dragging her nails down the back of Rachel’s thigh. Rachel quivered, her moans grew louder, and all sense of where Andi was slowly drifted away. She drew back, sunk two fingers inside Rachel, and then watched with delight as her mouth fell open. “You’re close.”

“S-so fucking close.” Rachel panted, her hand clawing at the wall beside her. Andi rolled her tongue around Rachel’s clit, savouring the very taste of this woman, and sunk a little deeper. “Y-yes!” Rachel’s legs shook, bending more as she neared the edge, and then her orgasm roared through her, Andi’s name erupting from her mouth. “F-fuck, oh God. Y-yes.” Andi slowed, her bottom lip between her teeth as she flicked her thumb over Rachel’s clit. Sensitive and so wet. “Andi, I-I.”

Andi got to her feet, her fingers still working Rachel’s clit, and leaned into a kiss. God, she could really get used to this kind of sex again. New, fun, exciting. “You...should surprise me more often.”

Rachel’s chest heaved, but that gorgeous smile was present. “You think *you’re* the one who got the surprise?”

“Maybe we both did.”

With her hand placed on Andi’s chest, Rachel looked her in the eye and said, “Thank you for trusting me tonight.”

“Without trust, this is a waste of time, Rachel.” She allowed Rachel’s dress to fall back into place and took her hand. “Come on. I’d like you naked on my bed.”

CHAPTER 20

“ANDI, WE REALLY DON’T HAVE TO DO THIS. I UNDERSTAND THAT PEOPLE don’t agree with what I do, and it’s okay. You don’t need to stress yourself out about it.”

Andi stopped outside the coffee shop. Sally had ‘demanded’ she meet up with her, so here she was, ready to put an end to anything Sally thought of Rachel. Best friend or not, she wouldn’t have *anyone* making Rachel feel uncomfortable. “Hey, I’m not stressing.” She reached out a hand and brushed Rachel’s blonde hair from her face. “Nobody is stressing. I’d just like to make sure that Sally understands her role here.”

Rachel frowned. “And what is her role?”

“To be the friend she has been to me all these years...while keeping her opinions to herself.”

“Babe.”

Andi smiled at that. She always would. “Listen to me. I won’t have *anyone* making you feel anything other than good. Not a stranger and not my friends. I’m the one who has the pleasure of being with you, not anybody else.”

Rachel nodded as Andi took her hand and strolled through the entrance to the coffee shop. “Maybe I could get the coffee?”

“Perfect.” Andi scanned the room, her eyes landing on a very wary Sally. She hadn’t told Sally she would be bringing Rachel with her. “Looks like Sally already has coffee, so just get ours.” She leaned in and kissed Rachel’s cheek, smiling as she lingered around her ear. “In case I forgot to tell you, you look beautiful today.”

“Stop it. I don’t need to blush in the middle of a coffee shop.”

“Ah. Yes. You have a reputation to protect.” Andi winked and moved towards Sally. She sat down and cleared her throat, forcing a smile. “Rachel will be over now. She’s just getting us coffee. Would you like a fresh one?”

Sally frowned, switching from Andi to Rachel. “No, thanks.”

Andi sat forward and lowered her voice. “I don’t know why you feel the way you do, but whatever you saw yesterday is *not* what was happening.”

“What I saw makes no difference.” Sally grit her teeth. “You’re dating a sex worker, Andi!”

Before Andi could respond, Rachel lowered one cup of coffee to the table. She didn’t sit beside Andi—she didn’t sit anywhere. She just stared down at the table.

“Hey, come here.” Andi patted the couch beside her.

“I...won’t. I shouldn’t.” Rachel smiled, but Andi knew it was false. She would know Rachel’s genuine bright smile anywhere, and that was not it. “I’ve just had a call, and there are some things I need to take care of.”

“O-oh.” Andi got to her feet and blocked Sally’s view of Rachel. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No. It’s okay. But...I hope I’ll see you at some point soon.” Rachel kissed Andi’s cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Andi pulled back. What was Rachel apologising for? “Rachel, talk to me. Please.”

“It’s just...this is what my life is like. Always being judged. Always having to listen to someone’s opinion of me. I know you don’t feel the same way as those people, but I don’t want to sit here and listen to it.”

Andi hung her head, her shoulders slumped. She should have thought about this before she brought Rachel here. “Then *I’m* sorry. I should have been more sensitive to the situation.”

“Look,” Rachel spoke quietly as she took Andi’s hand. “Whatever happens here today, I understand. If you talk this through with Sally, and she convinces you that I’m not right for you, then I understand. All I ask is that you go home and consider it all before you break things off with me. That you sit and wonder if the time we’ve spent together recently is something that felt false or forced. Just...make the right decisions for you, Andi. I’ll respect whatever that is.”

Andi opened her mouth to speak, but Rachel turned and walked away.

She wanted to go after her, but she also wanted to put this to bed once and for all with Sally. She wouldn’t allow it to become something that hung over

them. No way.

Andi turned back and returned to her seat. Why did she suddenly feel so emotional? Why did she feel as though she was going to burst into tears if she dared open her mouth?

“I take it she had a client or something?”

Andi lifted her eyes to Sally, wondering when her best friend became this person. “She left because she knows what you think of her.”

“Oh, well. That saved us an awkward conversation.” Sally reached for her cappuccino and offered a little shrug. “So, now I will ask... What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I’m sorry?” Andi’s brows drew together.

“Have you been paying her all this time? Just to be with you?”

Wow. Andi couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “I haven’t paid Rachel a penny for her time.”

“Oh, give me a break.” Sally laughed and shook her head. “You’re telling me you two just met, hit it off, and now you’re strolling hand in hand with one another?”

“Hang on. Before you knew Rachel was an escort, that’s *exactly* what you believed. Why the change of heart? Why, all of a sudden, do you find that so unbelievable?” Andi’s brows drew together. And then the realisation hit her. “Are you...implying that I couldn’t interest someone like Rachel?”

“Are you having some kind of midlife crisis, Andi? Is that what this is?”

“Answer my question. And just remember that depending on your answer...we may no longer be friends after today.”

“Excuse me? You would choose *her* over your friends?” The sheer look of disgust from Sally had Andi’s heart pounding. Sally had always been protective, but this? No, this was something very new.

“I’m not choosing anyone. Why should I have to choose? You’ve been my best friend for so long, Sal. But I don’t know why you’re behaving this way. You *know* Rachel. You spent time with her at the party. Don’t let your opinion on something you know nothing about overshadow what you initially thought of her. Please.”

Sally sighed. “Andi, I don’t think I can get on board with this. I love you to death, but I don’t think I can.”

Andi nodded slowly. She hadn’t come here today anticipating this. Yes, she knew Sally was confused and expected answers, but this was so far from what she thought would happen. “Then I’m sorry you feel that way.” Andi

considered picking up her coffee, but she wasn't sure she could stomach it. Everything felt alien now that Rachel had left and Sally couldn't be supportive. "You always promised to have my back. You were the one who told me everything would be okay when I started dating again. You've just shattered that for me, and I don't know where we go from here now."

Sally reached out and took Andi's hand. "I *do* have your back. That's why we're having this conversation. This...isn't normal behaviour, Andi. This isn't you. Dating an escort? Really?"

"I'm not dating an escort. I'm dating Rachel. Her job plays no part in our relationship." That emotion Andi had felt as she watched Rachel leave was beginning to rear its head again. She closed her eyes and breathed through it, something she'd done many times since Jane passed away. "I think I should just leave. I'm not justifying myself to you or anyone else. I can't help who I'm attracted to, and so...I'm just going to leave." Andi stood and straightened her jacket. "I...take care, Sally. I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas with one another."

"Andi, wait!" Sally looked back at her with tears in her eyes. "Just sit down. Please."

"Is anything I say going to change your mind?"

Sally swallowed, her silence saying everything it needed to.

"Bye, Sal."

Andi did turn and leave the coffee shop this time. How had her day begun so beautifully, and now it was continuing like this? Why did it feel as though everything was unravelling at a speed she couldn't comprehend?

Rachel. I need to find Rachel.



For the first time since she'd moved into the loft, it felt bitterly cold in here. Rachel leaned back against the kitchen island, staring at the tree she had decorated with Andi. As the lights glimmered, she wondered if Andi would show up here ever again. She wondered if she was about to have her Juliet moment all over again.

Only it wasn't the same thing.

Rachel was far more into Andi than she had been with Juliet.

Her phone started to ring in her pocket. It was probably Andi calling to tell her she didn't want to see her anymore. Disappointing but understandable. Andi had been through more than enough. She didn't need to lose friends over this. Over...Rachel.

She took it out and checked the screen. Rachel's heart settled when she saw Kelly's name rather than Andi's. "Hi."

"Hi, babe. What are you doing this afternoon?"

Rachel scoffed. "Probably nothing. I should be out with Andi right now but...well, never mind."

"Uh, no. Why aren't you out with Andi?"

Rachel crossed the room and flopped down on the couch. She felt the tears start to flow, even if she didn't want them. "Her best friend hates me."

"Not sure what her best friend has to do with anything. She's not in the relationship with you."

"I know, and I appreciate that. But Sally has been through *everything* with Andi. The loss of her wife, the grief, all of it."

"She sounds like a remarkable friend, but I still don't know what that has to do with you, babe."

"She found out that I'm an escort. Before that, we got on really well. I'd only met her properly once, but at the Christmas party, we were even dancing together. I guess I just got carried away and forgot who I was for a moment. I should have known this was coming."

"Hold on. You forgot who you are? What the fuck does that mean?"

Rachel's bottom lip trembled. She never thought she'd be having this conversation today. God, she was supposed to be spending Christmas with Andi in just a few days' time. That was seeming less likely right now. "You know what I mean. I let myself get carried away with Andi and completely disregarded the fact that people would be bothered by who I am. What I do."

"No, I'm not having that. Surely Andi doesn't care. If she did, she wouldn't have asked you out on a date in the first place. Because correct me if I'm wrong, but she's *always* known what your job is."

"This isn't about Andi. Andi has been amazing, she *is* amazing, but her friends are all she has, Kel. There's no way I'd ever expect her to keep dating me if they're so against it."

"Have you spoken to her about it?"

"No. I went to meet Sally with her, but while I was getting coffee, I heard some things I didn't want to hear. So, I bought Andi coffee and left."

“What did you hear?” The anger in Kelly’s tone was clear, but people didn’t need to be angry about it. This was who Rachel was, and that had always been true. With her job...came judgement.

“She called me a sex worker.”

As Rachel said that, there was a gentle knock at her door. God, she hoped it was Andi.

“Kel, I have to go. Someone is at the door.”

“If it’s Andi, please figure things out with her.”

Rachel smiled, wanting to do exactly that. “I will if I can. If she wants to. I’m not getting my hopes up, but I can’t bear the thought of her ending things with me.”

“I think you’ll be okay. Both of you.”

“I’ll call you,” Rachel said as there was another knock. “I have to go. Bye, babe.”

“Bye, Rae.”

Rachel threw her phone to the couch and rushed to the door. She opened it, her pulse quickening. It was Andi, and Rachel couldn’t read the expression on her face.

“Hi.” Andi remained out in the corridor, her knuckles white where she held the strap of her bag. “Do you have a minute?”

Rachel stepped aside, choosing not to say anything. Before she poured her heart out, she wanted to get a feel for what Andi was thinking.

“Thank you. I...won’t keep you long.”

So, Andi had no plans to stay. That said a lot. Far more than Rachel wanted it to. All she wanted for the rest of this day was to get comfortable with Andi, hold her, and appreciate the trust she was putting in Rachel. But she knew friends always came first. “That’s okay. I’m not busy.”

Andi lowered her bag as Rachel closed the door, standing awkwardly in the middle of the loft. “I wasn’t sure if you’d want to see me or not, but I had to come over and check that you’re okay.”

Don’t cry. Rachel smiled. “I’m okay.”

“Really? Because you look as though you’ve been crying.”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice that.” Rachel motioned towards the coffee machine. “Did you want coffee?”

“Only if you’re absolutely certain you want me here, Rachel. I know what I want...where I want to be, but I have to apologise for Sally back at the coffee shop. I should have taken into account how it may have made you feel,

and I didn't."

Rachel waved a hand. "I'm used to it."

"That doesn't mean it shouldn't bother you. Sally was way out of line, and I...potentially lost a friend today." Andi's voice broke as she said that. Rachel spun around, frowning. Andi and Sally were no longer friends? No, Rachel couldn't let that happen. "I don't know why she said the things she did, but I don't want that in my life."

"Andi, you have to work things out with her. She's your best friend." As Andi slumped against the island, she placed her head in her hands and sobbed. Rachel rushed to her side, wrapping an arm around her waist. "Hey, come on. Don't be upset. You'll figure it out together. Don't let someone like me come between you."

She buried her face in Rachel's neck, her shoulders shaking.

"Andi, please. I know you think that you're doing the right thing in walking away from her, but you've been through so much together. Sally has been there for you when you needed her. Don't fall out, please."

Andi lifted her head and wiped at her cheeks. "It's too late. She said she can't get on board with this. With us."

Rachel sighed. Right now, she wished Andi had told everyone who she was before they'd gotten in too deep. Her heart tightened at the thought of never seeing Andi again. As friends simply wasn't good enough for her. "While it hurts to know that, I only want the best for you. Sally is far more important than I am, and we both know that."

Andi's brows drew together. "N-no. That's...no."

"Andi."

"I want to be with you. I want to keep doing this, *us*, and enjoy every moment of it. Please, don't ask me to walk away because my friend can't deal with something. That's not the kind of person I am."

"God, I know." Rachel placed her hands on Andi's chest, her head cocked. "I know exactly who you are, and I know you need your circle around you. Rightfully so."

Andi lowered her head, scoffing lightly. "So, you want to end this."

"The last thing I want is to end this. Being with you has been amazing, and I really don't want us to end. But...what's the best way forward for you? Not for me, but *you*?"

"To be with you, Rachel. It's really that simple." Andi took Rachel's hands and brought them to her lips. She kissed her knuckles and smiled.

“Sally can deal with her feelings herself. I’m a woman in my fifties...I have no reason to do anything other than choose myself. And in doing that, it means I choose you. You make me happy, and if my friends can’t understand that, then I feel sorry for them.”

Rachel could only smile at that while leaning in and kissing Andi. “You really mean that?”

“Of course I mean it. Sally will either come around to it, or she won’t.”

Rachel rested her head against Andi’s chest, her eyes closing when Andi kissed her hair.

“Please don’t worry about any of this. What will be will be.” Andi took a step back, her deep brown eyes soft...and a little puffy. “Now, how about you make us that coffee, and we decide on our Christmas Day plans?”

“I’d love that.”

CHAPTER 21

ANDI LOOKED AROUND THE KITCHEN, LOCATING EVERYTHING SHE NEEDED before she left the house. Keys, purse, flowers. She felt as though she was forgetting something, but it was likely her fried brain today. It was Christmas Eve, and she wasn't supposed to be heading out alone, but that looked like the plan. Andi had considered calling Rachel, but she wasn't sure it was the right idea at the moment.

In the next hour, she was leaving for the graveyard.

Sally and Claire had gone with her last year. This year was supposed to be the same, but she hadn't heard from either of them since she had walked out of the coffee shop two days ago. Andi had hoped Sally would have called before now, she wished things were far less complicated, but it was quite clear that Sally was struggling with this. Andi didn't know why; Sally didn't need to concern herself with such things. It hurt, and she felt a little more alone than before, but she had Rachel, and everything was truly wonderful in that department. They just worked so effortlessly. Perhaps it wouldn't always be that way—Andi and Jane had once had their fair share of troubles—but it felt positive and exciting.

She took her phone from the counter in the kitchen and checked the screen. Still nothing from Sally. If it was going to be this way, then Andi would step back and give her friends whatever space they needed. She moved into the living room with her coffee, smiling when she saw Rachel's hoodie thrown over the arm of the couch.

I can't believe this is my life now...

Andi sunk down onto the couch and took the hoodie. She brought it to her nose, smiling as Rachel's scent calmed her, and sat back. She felt a little bit

lost today. As though she didn't know if she was coming or going. She had finished work early, locked up for Christmas, and now she sat here...waiting to visit a cold and miserable graveyard alone.

The plan had been to visit Jane's grave and then go for dinner and a couple of drinks at the local pub in the village. Andi could still do that, but she didn't particularly want to sit at a pub on her own on Christmas Eve. Not when it would likely be filled with families celebrating early. But that was okay. She didn't have to follow on from last year. She could make her own plans and prepare for seeing Rachel tomorrow.

Another coffee, and then she would head out.

As Andi stood up and draped Rachel's hoodie over her shoulders, the doorbell rang. She wasn't expecting anyone, not that she recalled. Maybe it would be Sally. Regardless of what had happened recently, Andi still needed a friend during this time of year. She opened the front door, surprised to find Rachel grinning back at her.

"Hi, babe."

Andi stepped aside. "Hi. I...wasn't expecting you."

"Work finished earlier than it was supposed to. Client had to hit the motorway early so they could make it to family in time for Christmas." Rachel stepped over the threshold, kissing Andi. "I went home, showered and changed, and thought maybe I could help you prep for tomorrow. Saves us doing it all at once and running around like headless chickens."

Andi beamed a smile. "As great as that sounds, I'm heading out in the next hour or so."

"Oh. Well, maybe I could come back when you're home later?"

Closing the door, Andi guided Rachel through to the kitchen. She flicked the coffee machine on and pulled out two stools. "I was going to have another coffee before I left. Sit with me?"

"Love to." Rachel got comfortable, her elbows resting on the breakfast bar top. "So, where are you off to? Have you heard from Sally yet?"

Rachel had spent the last two days asking if Andi had heard from Sally. "No. Nothing. I guess she just needs more time, I don't know."

"She will come around. She doesn't have to go out of her way to be friendly with me. I'm okay with not sharing those moments with you all. I can...be around for you, but when they're not available. You know?"

"That sounds like a terrible idea, Rachel. Why would I want to spend time with my friends...without my girlfriend?"

Andi immediately turned her back and winced. She hadn't meant to say that, even if it was the outcome she hoped for in the end.

"Girlfriend, huh?"

"I'm sorry." Andi braced her hands against the counter, her head between her shoulders. "It's been a long day, and it just slipped out. I know it's far too soon to even have that kind of discussion. Just...never mind me. I'm not having the best day."

"Hey." Rachel placed a hand to the small of Andi's back, soothing her. "Girlfriend sounds pretty good to me. You *are* wearing my hoodie, after all."

Andi turned, resting back against the counter. Rachel was absolutely girlfriend material in Andi's eyes. "It sounds good to me too."

"Then that's that settled." Rachel drew Andi in, bringing her hands to either side of Andi's neck, and kissed her slowly. She smiled as she pulled away. "Go and have a great afternoon, and call me later if you want me to come over."

"No great afternoon for me, unfortunately. I'm taking flowers to Jane's grave."

"O-oh. I'm sorry. I had no idea." Rachel shook her head. "Me and my stupid mouth."

"I happen to be *very* fond of your mouth." Andi pulled Rachel back in by the waist. "And don't worry about it. I didn't want to bring it up because it inevitably brings the mood down."

"I hope you know you can talk about Jane whenever you want to, Andi. I'm not so insecure that I'm worried about those things. If talking about her helps to remember her...the memories, then please do that."

"I'm okay. I just feel out of sorts today." Andi trailed her fingertip down the side of Rachel's neck, enjoying her soft skin. "Sally and Claire came with me last year. We were supposed to do it this year, too."

"And she hasn't been in touch about it." Rachel nodded slowly.

"Look, it's fine. If Sally isn't comfortable around me, then it's okay. I can't force someone to see what I want them to see."

"And what do you want her to see?"

"You. How happy you make me. The fun we have together. She knows it deep down, but if she thinks it's best to cut me off, then I can't change that."

Rachel lowered her eyes, toying with Andi's necklace. "I hate that she's doing this to you because of me. All I want is a normal relationship with people around me who actually want to breathe the same air as me. Why does

it have to be so complicated?”

“You and I don’t feel complicated...”

“Oh, we’re not.” Rachel’s blue eyes brightened as she said that. “You’re the most uncomplicated thing in my life, Andi.”

“Good.” Andi offered Rachel a peck on the lips. “Everything will work out how it’s supposed to.”

“Andi?”

Andi turned and prepared their coffee. “Mm?”

“Would you like me to come to the graveyard with you?”

Oh, Andi’s heart melted at that question. She looked over her shoulder at Rachel and smiled. “While I really appreciate that, I’ll be okay. I want to separate this from my past. And I don’t want you to feel as though you have to tiptoe around anything either.”

“No, that’s...not going to happen. I understand that you’ve had an epic love story, and I really love that for you. I’d like to come with you if...if you’ll have me there.”

“You would?” Andi handed Rachel a coffee, determined to hold back the emotion she felt around this woman. Every day seemed to bring another surprise. Rachel nodded. “Then I’d love it if you came with me.”



“Thank you for driving me here.” Andi settled a hand on Rachel’s knee, squeezing lightly. “I wasn’t expecting you to be so open to the idea. I’m sorry I didn’t bring it up earlier.”

“I get it. It’s okay. I just hope you know that I can be wherever you need me to be.”

Andi appreciated that far more than Rachel knew. Honestly, the thought of coming here alone was daunting, but she hadn’t wanted to show it. Through the year, Andi enjoyed visiting Jane’s grave, but on Christmas Eve...that was a different matter. That was when the grief really hit. She hoped it wouldn’t be so severe this year, but until Andi woke up the next morning, she couldn’t possibly say. “I’m a little worried about tomorrow.”

Rachel turned in her seat, unbuckling her seatbelt. “Why?”

“I don’t want to get upset or sit around reminiscing when we’re supposed

to be enjoying Christmas with one another.”

“Andi, babe.” Rachel took her hand and brought it to her lips. She kissed Andi’s skin, smiling as she drew back. “Whatever happens tomorrow, I’ll be there for you. Okay?”

God, Andi adored that about Rachel. Yes, being neutral came with her job, but this wasn’t her job. It was a relationship. “I know you will. But I’m going to try to put it to the back of my mind if I can. Jane would understand.”

“Hey, no. That’s not what we’re doing. I know you have a past. I know that life has been really tough for you lately. You take it one step at a time, and we go from there. All I ask is that you talk to me if you need to...or want to. Please don’t think I don’t want to hear it. How you’re feeling is hugely important to me. Tomorrow more so.”

Andi leaned over the console between them, hooking one finger under Rachel’s chin. She smiled into a kiss, not wanting to stop. “Thank you.”

“Come on. I think it’s going to rain soon.” Rachel climbed from her car and popped the boot. Andi followed, taking the bouquet of flowers from Rachel. “You okay?”

Andi exhaled a breath. “Yes. I’m okay.” Rachel took Andi’s hand as she locked the car, but Andi could only watch her. Admire her. There was something about Rachel that held her intrigue. “I...am proud to call you mine.”

Rachel dipped her head, a shy smile working its way to her mouth. “That means a lot.”

“I don’t care what people think of you. Friends included. I only care that you and I are moving forward, discovering more about one another while grabbing life with both hands.”

“That sounds like the perfect plan to me.”

“Come on.” Andi cocked her head and guided Rachel along the short footpath. When Jane had chosen her burial plot, she had done so with Andi and their friends in mind. *I don’t want you lot traipsing across a graveyard in the middle of winter. Don’t be bloody stupid. You’ll be criticising me in death!* Andi could only smile. Jane had planned every last thing down to the final detail. They’d worked things out together—funeral plans and finances—and Jane had left Andi needing nothing at all. “She used to say to me that she was glad she got the diagnosis she did rather than something rapid and unexpected.”

Rachel listened, nodding slowly.

“It gave us the chance to plan and arrange things. It also meant that we could do a lot of things together before she forgot who I was entirely. We travelled, we ate at the fancy restaurants we’d always promised to book a table at, and we did anything at all that we wanted.”

“I’m glad you both had the chance to do those things together.”

“She had three life insurance plans active. I had no idea they existed. When I questioned her about them—when she finally told me she was paying into them—she said that she’d taken them out when she knew she was in love with me because we wouldn’t be together forever. That unless something went drastically wrong, she would be gone before me. Me, being who I am, told her not to be daft. That I could go before her. But as ever, Jane was right.” Andi laughed. “She always did like to prove she was right about anything and everything.”

“I don’t know how you move forward from something like that, Andi. I really don’t.”

“Well, we have to adapt to a new life. What use is sitting and wallowing when I have a lot of life left in me? I owe it to Jane to move forward and make the most of the life she can no longer be a part of.”

They stopped at Jane’s grave. Andi crouched down, reading the card on another bouquet of flowers that had been left. The card was pristine, as though it had only just been placed on the flowers. And the arrangement? Well, Andi knew exactly who had laid it, with or without the card.

Sally and Claire.

She shook her head, determined not to be angry. “Sally and Claire have visited already.”

“O-oh.”

Yes. Oh, indeed. “It’s fine. If Sally can’t share these moments with me, that’s her choice.”

Rachel lay a supportive hand on Andi’s shoulder. “Hey, don’t think about all of that right now. You’re here to visit Jane. Don’t let her behaviour take away from that.”

Andi laid her own bouquet towards the top of the grave, directly under Jane’s headstone. She brought her palm to Jane’s picture, closed her eyes, and allowed herself to be in the silence. It didn’t matter where Jane was, which ground she lay in, Andi would always feel her close by. Even with Rachel in her life, she still felt Jane by her side and cheering her on. But that was Jane through and through. Always there to guide other people—in life

and in death.

As Andi got to her feet and stepped back, she felt a secure arm around her waist. Rachel's warmth spread through her, the silence of the graveyard reminding Andi that everything was calm. It was all she wanted lately. Calm...serene...quietness. "Thank you for being here."

Rachel leaned in and kissed Andi's cheek. "Always."

CHAPTER 22

ANDI HELD RACHEL'S HAND AGAINST THE CONSOLE AS THEY TURNED INTO her street, a light drizzle beginning to fall. They had plans this evening, mostly prep work for tomorrow's Christmas dinner, but right now, she just wanted to lie on the couch...while the log fire roared in front of them.

Perhaps they could do a little of both?

"Okay, so I'm going to drop you off and then pop to the supermarket for some last-minute things. I know I'm out of my mind going now, but I want to make sure we have everything."

Andi smiled. "Okay, but I won't expect you back for at least five hours. Please, no fighting with those women who have their trollies mounted up with everything in sight. You know, because they behave as though the shops are closing for the next fortnight."

Rachel snorted and squeezed Andi's hand. "Trust me, they wouldn't *dare*."

"You'll call me if anything changes and you can't make it over?" Andi asked as she placed her hand on the door handle.

"I *will* be here."

Andi reached into her pocket and took her keys out. She unhooked one from the ring holding it in place and handed it over to Rachel. "Let yourself in. I'll start the veg prep."

"Are you sure?" Rachel's brows drew together as she looked down at the silver key.

"Of course. Don't worry. It doesn't have to mean anything." Oh, it was far too soon to be sharing one another's keys, but Rachel was coming back, so it just made sense for her to take Andi's spare. Once Andi was busy in the

kitchen, she usually ended up in a world of her own. “Let yourself in and come and give me a hand, okay?”

“Okay.” Rachel leaned over and offered Andi a kiss that she readily accepted. “I’ll see you soon.”

Andi climbed from Rachel’s car, waving as she drove off down the road. She stopped for a moment, smiling at the memory of Rachel holding her at Jane’s grave, and then she shook her head. *Things are just too perfect.* She approached the front of her house and pushed the garden gate open, jumping ever so slightly when a car door slammed shut. She glanced over her shoulder, frowning when Sally and Claire stood behind her. “H-hi.”

“Can we come in?” Sally asked, taking a few steps closer.

“Sure. If you want a cuppa, you’ll have to give me a minute. I’ve been out all afternoon.”

Sally and Claire remained silent as Andi invited them inside. The air was tense; it wasn’t something she was used to with this pair, but Andi was certain everything would be okay. They had made the effort to come here, so it *had* to be okay.

Still, neither of them spoke a word.

“So, did you want a cuppa or not?” Andi shed her coat, turning the thermostat up a little for Rachel’s arrival. If they ended up naked, she didn’t want Rachel to complain about the temperature. “Sal?”

Sally shook her head. “You know we had plans today, right?”

“Well, I thought we had plans. But I didn’t hear from you, so I assumed those plans were no longer happening.”

“You’re too busy shackled up with your escort that you forgot we were going to Jane’s grave.”

If Andi hadn’t anticipated some kind of remark, that one would have knocked her off her feet. She glared back at Sally, jaw clenched, and decided to take a moment before she responded. “I know exactly where I was supposed to be today. Don’t come into my home and try to insinuate that I’ve forgotten about Jane. Don’t fucking dare, Sally!” Well, there went the idea of keeping things calm.

Claire stepped forward. “Now, hold on a moment. Let’s not get into a row about this.”

“I suggest you take your wife home, Claire. If she’s going to make ridiculous comments like that, she’s not welcome here!”

Claire smiled weakly. “Sally is...struggling to get her head around this.”

“Why? She isn’t the one sleeping with Rachel.”

Sally visibly shuddered. “Have you...made sure she’s been tested and things?”

Of all the things she expected Sally to say, *that* hadn’t been it. Andi needed her to leave right now. Actually, she was beginning to wish she hadn’t invited her in at all. “I think you need to leave.”

“Andi, you have to allow me time to digest this. You can’t expect me to just be overjoyed that you’re dating an escort. It’s not that simple.”

“Answer me one thing,” Andi said, resting against the wall, her arms folded across her chest. “What part of me dating Rachel is any of your concern?”

“All of it. I know you don’t see it, and I know this is an exciting time for you, but she *is* an escort. Whether you met her because you were paying her or not, it doesn’t change what she does.”

“You think she sleeps around.” Andi nodded slowly.

“Of course she bloody sleeps around! She’s. An. Escort.” Sally shed her own coat and hung it over the banister. “And I’m not leaving until I’m absolutely sure you know what you’re doing.”

Andi looked to Claire and frowned. Claire’s face was red with embarrassment. “Fine. Sit your arse down, and I’ll make the bloody drinks!”

“I’ll help,” Claire said, giving Sally a knowing look. “Go and sit down. And friggin’ relax, will you.”

Sally huffed, choosing to do as her wife said. Andi wasn’t particularly bothered by what either of them had to say, but Claire had always been far more laidback than Sally. If she could talk some sense into her wife, Andi would appreciate it.

As Andi dragged her feet towards the kitchen, Claire followed and closed the door. “Andi, I’m so sorry about Sally.”

“Don’t apologise for her. If that’s how she feels, she’s entitled to her opinion.”

Claire cleared her throat and stepped up beside Andi. The kettle drowned out their conversation, but only a little. “She sobbed when she came home from the coffee shop the other day. She’s worried Rachel is going to hurt you, and I think she’s focusing on the fact she’s an escort to justify it.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not good enough for me.”

“I know. And she knows that what she’s saying is downright rude and disrespectful, but I’m trying to make her see sense. Jesus, she came home

from Hillary's the other day and spoke so highly of Rachel. She can't just change her opinion like that."

"Look, Claire. I don't want you two to fall out over this. You never row, and I don't want to be the reason that you do. I...can't change how I feel. And I'd hope you and Sally wouldn't expect me to. I'm a grown woman; I can make my own mistakes."

"And do you think Rachel is going to become one?"

Rachel. Just the mention of her name made Andi smile. "No. I don't."

Claire busied herself, making cups of tea while Andi rested against the edge of the dining table. She was confident that Claire could make Sally see where she was wrong, but it may not happen this side of Christmas.

"Come on. Let's sort this out."

Andi stopped Claire before she carried two cups through to the living room. "Rachel is due here soon. Unless Sally is willing to act like an adult, I don't want her here. I won't have anyone making Rachel uncomfortable."

Claire nodded. "Don't worry. We'll figure it out."

Andi snorted as she took her own cup from the worktop. She didn't *have* anything to figure out. This was all Sally's own issue. Still, she would give Claire the opportunity to help her wife to see things more clearly. Andi took a seat on the couch, far away from Sally, and crossed her legs. "So?"

"How do you know she's not sleeping with people?" Sally asked, sitting forward with her elbows perched on her knees. "Seriously, how?"

"Because she told me she doesn't sleep with people, Sal."

"Oh. I see. So, you're just going to take her word for it?"

Andi laughed and shook her head. "Why wouldn't I take her word for it? I have no reason to question what she says. Jesus, she's swapped clients around just so she could see me."

"Aww, love at first sight."

Andi sat forward. "Look, if you're just going to sit here making smartarse comments, you can leave. If you're so dead set against this, *why* did you come here? I didn't ask you to, and right now, I couldn't care less if you stay or go!"

"I don't understand any of this, Andi."

"What is there to understand? Rachel and I want to be together. It's very simple."

Sally looked back at Andi with some kind of sympathy in her eyes. She didn't need or want sympathy. Rachel wasn't dating her for the sake of it or

to make Andi feel better. No, it was quite clear what Andi meant to Rachel... just based on the way she touched her.

“You can’t answer it, can you? Because you and I both know that this has nothing to do with Rachel. You always told me you’d love to see me move on, but now that I am, you’re scared. You’re worried that I’ll fuck up in some way, and you’ll have to pick up the pieces.” Andi relaxed back, sighing. “If you want to use Rachel’s job as an excuse, be my guest. But we’ve known one another long enough to deal with this kind of thing and get it out the way.”

“She really isn’t sleeping with clients?” Sally asked, clasping her hands under her chin. “You’re sure that she’s as genuine as she claims to be?”

Andi felt a presence beside her. As she looked towards the door to the living room, Rachel was standing there. She hadn’t heard the front door over Sally’s rambling. “Hi.”

Rachel threw a thumb over her shoulder. “Should I just go?”

“No.” Andi shot to her feet, taking Rachel’s hand. Their foreheads touched as Andi whispered, “Please, don’t leave. Stay. I want you here.”

“And I want to be here, but it’s probably not a good idea while you have friends over.”

Andi tugged on Rachel’s hand and pulled her into the living room. She returned to her seat, guiding Rachel down beside her. “So, where were we?”

“H-hi, Rachel.” Sally regarded Rachel with an awkward smile. “About the coffee shop...”

“We don’t have to do this, Sally. I know what you think of me.”

Andi held Rachel’s hand tighter in silent support. She *could* step in, but Rachel was capable of holding her own. It was one of the things Andi loved about her.

“And for the record, I’m not a sex worker. Many escorts are...but I’m not.” Rachel relaxed into Andi’s couch and crossed her legs. “Not that it matters. But since it seems to be an issue for you, I thought I should clear that part up.”

“Y-you told me she was a therapist,” Sally turned her attention to Andi. “That day when we met for lunch, you told me she was a therapist.”

“I believe my response was that it was something along those lines. Because, in my mind, what Rachel does *is* therapy for a lot of clients. You have no idea the people she sees. Nor do I. You also have no right to judge anyone for how they choose to make a living, Sally. I thought you were better

than that.”

Sally lowered her eyes. Claire sat beside her, still looking embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I know what I say has no bearing on how you choose to move forward, but I was worried. I saw you outside that restaurant,” Sally said as she eyed Rachel. “And then I saw red.”

“Mm. You did.” Rachel sighed, dragging a hand through her hair. “But you know what, it’s fine. I don’t generally waste my time trying to convince people that I’m a good person. Andi is the only one here that matters to me. How *she* feels is what’s important. While it would have been really nice to have the support of her friends, your lack of it isn’t going to stop me from trying to make her as happy as I possibly can.” Rachel entwined their fingers, her thumb stroking the back of Andi’s hand. “I know you’ve had the fairytale already. I know you’ve lived an amazing life before me. I’m not here to replace Jane or try to better what you both had. Life isn’t about comparisons; it’s about taking what you can and making it count.”

That’s my girl, Andi thought, her heart so full of adoration. “Hey, you don’t have to try to convince me of *anything*. I know the person you are.”

Rachel lifted Andi’s hand and kissed her knuckles. “Then I really don’t have anything else to say about all of this.” She got to her feet, calm and collected, as she turned to Sally and Claire. “Moving forward, I’ll stay out of your way. I won’t expect to be invited to lunches, or parties, or whatever it is you all get up to. But I *will* be in Andi’s life whether you want that or not.”

God, that was painful to hear. All Andi wanted was a normal life again. She hated the thought of her friends being disrespectful towards the woman she knew she was falling for.

“Rachel—”

Rachel lifted a hand and cut Sally off. “I promised to be here to help with the prep for tomorrow. So, here I am...and now I should probably get in the kitchen and make a start.” Rachel leaned down and kissed Andi, her hands braced on the arm of the couch. “I’ll take care of all the prep. You enjoy some time with your friends.”

Sadness anchored in the pit of Andi’s stomach as she watched Rachel leave the living room. And then a single tear slid down her cheek, one that Sally noticed as Andi stared through her. “I don’t want to have this conversation with you anymore.”

Sally nodded slowly, nudging Claire. “Come on, we should be heading back anyway.”

Claire rose to her feet as Andi slowly did the same. She hated this. The atmosphere and tension between her and her friends. This wasn't the woman she was, and it wasn't what she expected from those closest to her, either.

Sally approached the living room door and shrugged her coat on, but Claire remained in front of Andi with tears in her eyes. She pulled Andi into a hug and sighed. "Merry Christmas, love. Have a beautiful day with one another."

"Thanks, Claire. I hope yours runs smoothly." Andi pulled back, a faint smile on her lips. "I'm sorry it's come to this, but...I don't know. Maybe in time, things will change. I wish people could be happy for me, but I understand that Jane was everyone's friend and not just my wife. It's hard, but Rachel makes me happy, and I have to see where this goes."

"I'm happy for you. Don't ever forget that." Claire squeezed Andi's shoulders and turned to leave. She stopped and looked up at Sally, then shook her head. "You've made a mess of this, haven't you? Get in the car. We have things to talk about."

"Hey, Claire." Andi smiled when Claire turned back. "Let it go. It'll figure itself out if it's supposed to."

Claire scoffed ever so slightly. "I don't know how you're so okay with this. I'm not."

"I've spent the last several years grieving. Before I lost her, and since. I don't want either of you to walk out of here tonight on bad terms with one another because we don't know what's around the corner. I may be slowly losing two of my closest and oldest friends, but I'll never forget the help you've given me, the love and support you've shown me, or the times you've dropped everything to be what I needed. You have a wonderful heart, Claire. And you too, Sally. Go home, have a beautiful Christmas, and just love one another. For me, at least. That's all I need from both of you. To be happy together."

Sally sniffled, staring down at the parquet flooring in Andi's hallway. "I'm sorry, Andi. I had no right to say the things I did to you. I feel like a fool."

Andi knew Sally would be feeling that way. Her quietness confirmed it. "If it's how you feel, then don't change that for my sake."

"Only...it's not how I feel. Not really. Rachel is great; she's exactly what you need. But I am worried about you going into this...and I'm not sure it would matter who it was with or what their career is. Talking about moving

on is easy—anyone can do that. But to see it...and to watch it happen so quickly, it *does* terrify me. Because if this goes wrong, I'm not sure how much more you can take."

Andi appreciated that. If Sally could have just spoken those words from her heart, then they wouldn't be in this situation. "I know how long you've spent taking care of me, but I'm feeling really good, Sal. I'm feeling the best I've felt in a long time. And maybe this won't last, but I don't know that unless I try. If that day *does* come, I'll deal with it then. And I'll be perfectly fine in the process."

"You're sure?" Sally asked, wariness in her eyes. "You promise me that you'll be okay?"

"I always am. Because I have a strong support network around me. But I don't think you're going to have anything to worry about, Sal. Rachel is..." Andi sighed, wrapping her arms around herself and smiling.

Sally smiled. "I know. I can tell by the way she looks at you."

"Yeah?"

"Mmhmm." Sally chanced a step forward, opening her arms. "Come here. I'm so sorry."

Andi accepted the embrace, the tension in her shoulders falling away.

"You know I only want the best for you. I promised Jane I would always look after you, and I meant that. If Rachel is your future, then I look forward to everything you have to come."

Andi sniffled, holding Sally at arm's length. "Thank you for the flowers on Jane's grave. They were beautiful."

Sally's brows drew together. "How did you—"

"You really think I didn't go there today? When you arrived—all guns blazing—that was where I'd been. Rachel offered to take me and stay with me."

"And then I came here and opened my bloody big mouth."

Andi held up a hand and shook her head. "No. This stops now. You two are going to go home and probably get drunk on wine instead of getting things ready for tomorrow, and I'm going to go and help my girlfriend before she leaves me for someone who *actually* helps out." Andi exhaled a breath. "You owe Rachel an apology, but I think for the time being, it's best if you head home. We can meet up after Christmas, and you better be prepared to grovel."

"I will. I promise you that." Sally held Andi's face in her hands. "Merry

Christmas, my love.”

“Merry Christmas. Both of you.” The three of them hugged one another, not letting go, allowing the atmosphere to dissipate once and for all. Life didn’t need to be this way, and if Andi had learnt anything in recent years, it was to never hold a grudge. Life could be over in a flash. “Now piss off. I have a million and one things to do.”

CHAPTER 23

ANDI WRAPPED A HAND AROUND HER COFFEE CUP, STARING OUT AT THE frosted lawn through the kitchen window. Today marked her second Christmas without Jane, but life compared to last year was vastly different. The grief continued to fade day by day, but that wasn't to say she didn't miss her wife. Andi would always miss Jane. Her cheeky smile, her rip-roaring personality, her love. She would always wonder 'what if' had Jane never been given the diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's. The 'what ifs' had kept her awake for a long time, but as of this morning...well, the last several weeks, life was on the up, and Andi knew she couldn't hold onto those thoughts anymore. If she wanted to enjoy life and make the most of it, she had to let the 'what ifs' go.

It was hard to believe that she had a woman sleeping soundly upstairs. A woman who was quickly coming to mean an awful lot to Andi. And as she stood here this morning, Andi knew exactly what was happening here. She was falling for Rachel. Without a doubt. At a time in her life when Andi was questioning her future—the chance of ever finding love again—Rachel had shown up and reminded her that she had a lot left to give.

There was no need to question any of it. There was no reason to hold back, or worry, or slow down. Life was good, Rachel was quite incredible, and Andi felt as though she could fully breathe for the first time in years.

As a robin landed on the frosted outside furniture, peering at Andi through the window, her mind flitted to the last 'normal' Christmas she'd had with her wife. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but as with all the other memories, one she would never forget.

Andi came rushing from the bathroom, pulling her hoodie over her head

and almost losing her footing. When she'd left Jane alone fifteen minutes ago, she hadn't expected to be stumbling her way towards their open space because the smoke alarm was blaring.

As the smell of burnt food wafted towards her, smoke steadily flowing from the oven, Andi rushed towards it. Huh. The temperature had been turned up rather than the oven turned off. Jane...must have gotten mixed up when the timer had gone off.

Andi turned to Jane, where she was waving a tea towel under the small white box attached to the exposed beam above her.

"Love, did you put something in the oven?"

Andi reached for the step stool nearby, smiling. She had asked Jane to keep an ear out for the timer and then turn the oven off, but she should have anticipated this possible outcome. "Yes. Sorry. I was preoccupied in the bathroom."

"Oh dear." Jane grinned, helping Andi up onto the stool. "Do you need me to do anything?"

"No, don't worry. My mistake." Andi should have known better. Jane was becoming increasingly confused and forgetful since her diagnosis. Yes, she was already forgetful, hence the appointment with the doctor, but it seemed to be becoming more rapid now that they had answers. Andi reached up and reset the smoke alarm as she said, "I'll just get rid of the burnt food, and then I'll make some more."

"Make more what?" Jane asked, her brow furrowed. "Were you cooking?"

God, this was painful to witness. Jane had no idea what was going on today. Perhaps the last few days with a lot of friends around had taken its toll on her wife. Perhaps Jane was feeling overwhelmed. Andi had noticed that she seemed less like herself after being around a large gathering of people. Almost as though it was becoming too tiring for her. Andi would bear that in mind for the future. She wanted to make Jane's life as easy as possible from here on out. "I was. But...I forgot to tell you."

Andi turned her back, determined not to show her emotions. One hint of them and Jane would know something wasn't right with this conversation. She had caught Andi out before today.

"Well, look..." Jane took Andi by the wrist as she got down from the stool. "It's not the end of the world. I'll help you with the rest if you've taken on too much."

Andi placed a palm to Jane's chest. "You relax. I can manage."

Jane pulled Andi in, holding her close. Even as her wife started to fade away, those bright eyes remained. "Merry Christmas, love."

And that was the seventh time Jane had wished Andi a Merry Christmas this morning. "Merry Christmas." Andi drew Jane into a kiss, smiling. "Our...twenty-third?"

"I believe it is." Jane draped her arms over Andi's shoulders, stroking her fingertips across the back of Andi's neck. "Thank you for loving me."

"With all my heart."

"I know life with me must be difficult. You have a heart of gold, and I don't know what I'd do without you." That uncertainty flashed in Jane's eyes, saddening Andi. "Did...you ask me to keep checking the oven?"

Andi could either be honest and potentially upset Jane, or she could take this one. "No."

"Are you sure?"

Andi grinned. "I'm sure. Now, a snowball?"

"I'll make them. Just...maybe keep an eye on what I'm doing. I don't want you to be on your back before dinner is ready."

Andi smirked, adoring the moments when Jane's playful nature broke through. Her wife was still in there. "Oh, I don't know. I think I'd rather be on my back...with you."

"That comes later," Jane said, winking as she untangled herself from Andi. She moved into the kitchen, her brows drawn when she placed her hands on the counter and looked up at Andi. "What was I doing?"

"Snowballs."

"Yes! You're right."

Startled when gentle arms wrapped around her waist from behind, Andi lowered her cup and grinned. It hadn't been the plan to have Rachel stay over last night, but Andi was glad she had chosen to do so. Because it meant she could enjoy Christmas morning just like this. It meant she could feel Rachel against her, holding her, as she placed a kiss on Andi's shoulder. These were the days she had missed.

"Good morning." Rachel slowly turned Andi in her arms, those blue eyes soft and inviting. "And Merry Christmas."

Andi leaned in, placing a lingering kiss to Rachel's lips. "Merry Christmas."

"Thank you for having me here this morning." Rachel lowered her eyes

and toyed with the string on Andi's hoodie. "I've never spent Christmas with anyone before."

"Nobody?"

Rachel smiled. "Not...anyone I'm dating, no."

God, Andi hated knowing that. She hated the way people perceived Rachel. Because Andi didn't need to ask, she knew that was why Rachel never spent Christmas wrapped up with someone. Because of her job. "Well, that changes from this moment on."

"I...hope so." Rachel slowly lifted her eyes, chewing on her bottom lip. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Aside from feeling like an idiot because I forgot to set the heating timer, pretty good."

"Yeah?"

Andi brought a hand to Rachel's cheek, stroking her thumb against her skin. "Having you here...it feels right. And judging by last night, I think you know that."

Rachel had overheard everything Andi had said to Sally and Claire in the hallway. The fact that she was prepared to step away from their friendship until they could come to terms with this relationship...well, it had shocked Rachel, and Andi knew it. "I do know it."

"This is an exciting time for us."

"I know. Even though as I slipped off into the kitchen last night, it didn't feel so exciting."

Neither of them had wanted to discuss Sally's unexpected arrival. It had been Christmas Eve, and Andi was far too emotionally drained after their conversation to process it. "I am sorry about the things she's said to you. It's really not like Sally to be so judgemental."

"At first, I thought she was doing just that. Judging me. But I did hear everything she said to you, and I believe her when she says she's worried. She's your best friend for a reason, and I'm glad she cares enough about you to worry."

"I do, too, but not when it has the potential to push you away."

Rachel scoffed, shaking her head. "Trust me. I've heard far worse. It takes *a lot* to get rid of me."

"Good. Because I don't plan to get rid of you. Whether my friends remain friends or not has no bearing on that." Andi placed her cup to the side of the coffee machine. "I'm making more coffee, and then we're getting

comfortable by the fire until we're ready to start dinner."

"Now that sounds like the perfect Christmas morning to me." Rachel offered Andi a peck on the lips. "I'll put some logs on. Meet you in there?"

Andi curled two fingers beneath Rachel's chin. "I'll be right behind you."



Today was potentially too much for Rachel's heart to take. Andi was amazing, Christmas had been like nothing she could have imagined, and now she lay between Andi's legs on a mass of blankets and cushions in front of the fire. If someone had told Rachel she would one day be in this very position, she would have laughed in their face.

Because this didn't happen to her.

Not Andi and not this all-consuming happiness.

White Christmas was playing on the TV, the fire crackled, and both of them were stuffed from dinner. The kitchen at the loft was beginning to make perfect sense to Rachel. Andi was one hell of a cook. She sighed, palming Andi's thighs as Andi ran her fingers through Rachel's hair. Was this the definition of perfect? It certainly felt that way. The longer Rachel lay here, the less she wanted to go home tonight. They hadn't made any specific plans for this evening, but Rachel had already unexpectedly stayed over last night. She didn't want Andi to feel suffocated.

Andi wrapped both arms around Rachel, shifting further down where she rested against the couch. The fleece beneath them felt soft and comforting, but it was Andi's arms that left Rachel feeling emotional. They always felt safe, but a lot had changed for Rachel today. She couldn't put her finger on exactly what or the point at which it happened, but the calmness Rachel felt wasn't something she'd experienced before. It was a high...a weightlessness to her body.

"Andi?"

Andi dipped her head and kissed below Rachel's ear. "Mm?"

"Thank you." Rachel tried to keep her voice in check, but it betrayed her just a little. "Today has really been perfect."

"It has. So, thank *you*." Andi smiled against the side of Rachel's neck, tightening her arms around her. The way she held Rachel told her everything

she needed to know. This woman wasn't playing around when it came to this relationship. It simply wasn't possible to fake her embrace or the way she looked at Rachel. "And...I know you probably have things to do, but if you're able to stay again tonight, it would mean the world to me."

Rachel settled entirely at that. "I'm not going anywhere." She swallowed as she slipped her hand beneath the couch, unsure as to how the next few minutes would work out. They had both agreed that this year's Christmas gift to one another would be simply spending the day together, but Rachel had come across something when she was searching online a few days ago. She couldn't let it go, and so now here she was, wanting to give it to Andi. "I know we said we wouldn't do gifts." She sat up and turned around to face Andi. "And please don't hate me for going ahead and doing the opposite, but —"

"Rachel."

"I'm sorry, but I had to. I couldn't not." Rachel brought the box up between them and placed it in Andi's palm. "Just...take it. For me, please?"

Andi looked down at the Clogau box, her brows drawn together. "Not only did you go back on your word, but you chose something expensive."

Rachel placed her hands on Andi's knees and dipped her head. "When you open it, you'll understand."

Andi exhaled a breath, tears sitting on her eyelids. She lifted the sprung lid, inspecting the bracelet placed inside. "Rachel, this is so beautiful." Andi trailed a fingertip over the white gold bracelet, stopping at the small, detailed pendant hanging from it. "This is..."

"It's a forget-me-not flower. And I hope I haven't overstepped, but it's —"

"For Jane." Andi's voice broke, tears slipping down her cheeks. She nodded slowly, taking it from the box and holding it close to her chest. "Thank you."

"I saw it, and I knew I had to get it."

"I had no idea what to expect when we met. I knew I was interested in you the day you came to view the loft. I knew I was enamoured by your eyes and your smile. But I had no idea what was to come. All I knew when I saw you was that I was ready to move on with my life. That I could remember Jane while potentially giving my heart to someone else."

Rachel regarded Andi with a soft smile.

"You are that someone else, Rachel. I've spent time recently imagining

my life without you in it. I've wondered how I'd feel if I was spending my second Christmas alone. But you? God, you've made everything so much easier for me. You've been there, even when you thought you shouldn't be. You've supported me without knowing it." Andi got to her knees and drew Rachel into a gentle kiss. Her tears had subsided, but that emotion remained in her voice. "You have such a beautiful heart."

"You may think that I've been the one supporting you, but you've given just as much in return, Andi. Just last night, you defended me to your closest friends. Nobody has ever done that for me. Nobody has ever looked at me the way you do. When I wasn't searching, you came out of nowhere. I...believe I was waiting for you. That my past is my past for a reason, and I wasn't supposed to find you until now." Rachel's bottom lip quivered as she brushed a tear from her cheek. "You take me as I am. You trust me with your heart. You...you've never once questioned who I am. When I'm wary about how fast this is moving, I remind myself that I'm happy and that it's all I've ever wanted. To be happy. You make me so happy that I sometimes can't believe this is real."

"I've had those same doubts. But really, you can know someone for years and never open up...then someone unexpected comes into your life, and you show your vulnerability right off the bat. You open up, and you connect, and it's all about the soul feeling right. My soul, when I'm with you, feels at peace."

Rachel got to her knees, mirroring Andi's position. She took the bracelet and fixed it onto Andi's wrist, then brought Andi's hand to her lips and kissed her skin. "So long as you're happy, it's all I want. *You* are all I want, Andi."

Andi smiled as she placed the jewellery box down and shifted closer, pulling Rachel into her lap. She wrapped her arms around Rachel's waist while Rachel draped her arms over Andi's shoulders. "Jane would like you. She...would trust you."

"You think?"

"No. I know it. We always had this thing about people's eyes. How we could tell from the moment we met someone if they were genuine. She would see exactly what I see when I look into yours."

Rachel, wearing a shy smile, dipped her head. "And what is it that you see?"

"So many things." Andi lifted Rachel's chin, her delicate touch sending a

shiver down Rachel's spine. "Life. Excitement. Spontaneity. But most of all, I see hope. For a better future. For love. For something that means so much to you."

Rachel touched her forehead to Andi's, knowing no matter what she said next...she was safe. "Andi, I know this may be unexpected, and I don't expect you to feel even a hint of what I do just yet, but...I'm completely in. I think you know what I'm saying deep down, but I am so in."

Andi didn't flinch. She didn't pull away. She simply stared into Rachel's eyes, unwavering with every breath they took. "How can anyone know when something is too soon? If something feels right, surely that's the important thing."

"You're right. I just...had to say it out loud. I needed you to know that you mean far more to me than you probably realise."

"Then I appreciate your honesty. It's one of the things I've been fond of from the beginning."

Rachel grinned, capturing Andi's lips. She moaned when Andi slipped her tongue into her mouth, their hands roaming. Andi shifted, guiding Rachel down onto her back. When her body came to rest on Rachel, anchoring her, she looked into Andi's eyes and smiled. "This is my favourite part."

"I wonder why," Andi whispered, trailing her lips along Rachel's jawline.

"I know exactly why. It's those divine hands of yours."

"Then I guess they should get to work since you enjoy them so much."

CHAPTER 24

RACHEL PERUSED THE KITCHENWARE IN THE DEPARTMENT STORE SHE HAD dragged Andi along to, undecided on a number of choices. Now that life was settling down, she wanted to put her own mark on the loft while keeping it minimal, too. Andi had rushed outside a few minutes ago to take a call, so now Rachel had a list of questions as long as her arm for when she returned. If this was going to be a long-term thing—God, she hoped it would be—then Rachel wanted Andi’s input. It was important that she felt comfortable in the loft. At home, if you will.

“Rachel?”

Rachel frowned, pausing at the sound of a voice. She recognised it—had spent so long trying to forget it—but she was in a far better place these days. She steeled herself and turned around, her suspicions confirmed when Juliet Saunders stared back at her from across the plate selection. “Hi.”

“Oh, my. How are you? I haven’t seen you in...wow, it has to be months.”

Rachel smiled. Why would Juliet have expected them to bump into one another? “I’m good. Great. How are you doing?”

“Well, aside from struggling to pick out some new cocktail glasses for the bar, really good.” Juliet stepped around the display, looking as immaculate as ever. While Rachel had always admired Juliet’s dedication to her appearance, she had come to realise that the likes of a dressed-down Andi was far more enjoyable. “I’m looking into expanding in the new year.”

“So, The Hideout has been as successful as you imagined it would be?”

“It would appear so. You should come by sometime for a drink. Hannah and Caz have a membership now.”

Ah. Hannah and Caz. Another client/escort relationship that had been a success rather than turned sour. Seemed it was only Rachel who couldn't encourage something more from a client she was attracted to. But...did that really matter anymore? No. Rachel was in so deep with Andi that she was glad it hadn't worked out with Juliet. "I'd have to run it by my partner, but maybe, yeah."

Juliet's eyes widened, and then she beamed a smile. "You've met someone? Oh, that's great."

"I have. It's early days yet, but we've just spent Christmas together, which was really lovely."

"I know you and I ended on not-so-great terms, but I'm so happy for you. And I meant it when I said you should come to the bar. Both of you. We'd love to have you there. I'm...trying to cater more towards our community at the moment."

"Why?" Rachel frowned.

"A safe space. Somewhere the girls can all get together and feel comfortable, you know?"

Rachel nodded slowly. While it was a great idea, she had to wonder how the regular members felt about that. "The others don't mind your bar being taken over by the lesbians?"

Juliet laughed from deep within her belly. "Oh, no. They're all really decent people. And with the expansion, there will be plenty of room for everyone."

Rachel caught Andi approaching from the corner of her eye, a huge smile on her face. "So sorry about that. But I have good news for you!"

"Babe," Rachel said, placing a hand on the small of Andi's back. "This... is Juliet. Juliet, this is—"

"Andi Palmer, right?"

Andi's brows drew together. "Y-yes. Do I know you?"

"You sold me my apartment in Alexander Tower. It must have been... five years ago now?"

"Oh! I remember. You're the lawyer, yes?"

Juliet held up her hands. "Not anymore. I own a bar now. I was just telling Rachel that you two should come in for a drink sometime."

Andi switched her attention between Rachel and Juliet, clearing her throat. "Well, whatever Rachel wants to do."

Sensing that Andi knew all about Rachel's time with Juliet, Juliet

regarded her with an understanding smile. “I should get back. Paige is cooking dinner tonight. But the offer is there. You know where we are, and we’d love to have you both in—anytime you like.”

“Thanks.” Rachel took Andi’s hand, determined to avoid any kind of awkward situation.

“Actually, we’re having a closed thing on New Year’s Eve if you don’t already have plans. Hannah and Caz will be there, Paige will be on piano...”

“Maybe,” Rachel said, giving Juliet a knowing look. “But you know, have a great new year with Paige. And tell Hannah I was asking about her.” Hannah was another old colleague she hadn’t kept in touch with. She had been the very person to introduce Rachel and Juliet to one another back when she left escorting and took a position with Juliet in law. “Take care, Juliet. It was nice seeing you again.”

“You too.” Juliet took a step back. “And it was nice to see you again, Andi.”

As Rachel watched Juliet leave, she felt Andi squeezing her hand in support. They didn’t need to make a big deal out of bumping into Juliet. Actually, it didn’t even require a discussion, but she was sure there would be one. When you bump into your ex-client for only the second time since parting, a discussion was always on the horizon. “Well,” Rachel said as she puffed out her cheeks. “That was a surprise.”

“Are you okay?” Andi leaned in, kissing her cheek.

“Oh, yeah. I’m fine. I just didn’t expect to bump into her, that’s all. Now, tell me about this good news you have...”

“Well, I think it requires drinks and maybe dinner when we’ve finished here.”

“Oh?”

Andi beamed that gorgeous smile. A smile far more enticing than Juliet’s ever was. Looking back, Rachel now understood that it had been fake in appearance. Perhaps not always, but the way Andi looked at her was vastly different. “That was my office calling me. The sale of the loft has officially gone through.”

“It has?”

“Mmhmm. Congratulations.”

A bittersweet moment but one Rachel had been looking forward to. “Well then, that can only mean one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“Picking out a new dinner set is a must.” Andi smiled and followed Rachel towards the two sets she had been trying to decide on. She pointed out the two in question, glancing in Andi’s direction. “Which do you prefer? The steel grey or the white?”

“Oh, uh...they’re both lovely and would fit in well with the kitchen.”

“No, that’s not what I asked. I asked which *you* preferred.” Rachel nudged Andi’s shoulder, smiling. “Come on. Which one?”

“The steel grey is gorgeous, but ultimately, the decision is yours. It’s your kitchen, Rachel.”

“You’re right. It is. But it’s a kitchen that you installed and one that I hope we’ll spend a lot of time in together in the years to come.”

Tears welled in Andi’s eyes as Rachel stared back at her.

“If...you want that.” Rachel reached out and brushed a tear from Andi’s cheek. “Hey, don’t cry. Please.”

“I’m sorry.”

Rachel smiled weakly. While she loved having Andi at the loft, she sometimes forgot that it had once been the place where she lived with her wife. “Don’t be. I understand. Maybe...I should do this another time. Alone.”

“N-no. That’s not necessary. I just didn’t expect you to ask for my opinion. I didn’t think it would matter.” Andi wiped away another tear. “I’d love to help and have a say in how you decorate the loft, but Rachel, this is your new start. Not mine. It’s...*your* loft.”

“It’s *our* new start, Andi.” Rachel lay a gentle hand on Andi’s hip, smoothing her palm over the curve. God, she loved being in this position. Andi’s curves and dips, soft and full beneath her hand, always felt incredible. “It’s almost New Year’s Eve. The second that clock strikes midnight, it’s a new year and a new path that we’re both on. One that I’d like to explore together...not apart.”

Andi stepped closer, their bodies pressed together. “Get the grey set. It’s time for us to leave.”



The second that clock strikes midnight, it’s a new year and a new path that we’re both on.

Andi watched Rachel in the kitchen while she relaxed on the couch, her feet kicked up and covered in fluffy socks. After traipsing around the city centre all day, Andi was ready for a nap. That space between Christmas and the new year—the days when they all kind of merged into one—always took it out of her. She never knew if she was coming or going. She would usually work between the two days but had decided against it this year. She wanted to be with Rachel instead, and there was very little going on at the office at this time of year anyway.

As she reached for her hot chocolate on the coffee table, still watching Rachel, Andi could only smile...while allowing her heart to almost burst with love. Yeah, love. What a strange thing. In the last week, Andi had felt that familiar feeling as it grew more and more intense. She could push it away—her love for Jane was still firmly in her heart—or she could allow the two to merge while feeling incredibly lucky to be in this position.

One thing Andi had never been afraid of was love. How could she? How could *anyone* be afraid of love? It was the most euphoric feeling a human being could feel in their lifetime. And if someone was lucky enough to feel that more than once, to be loved and content, then it was something almost impossible to deny. Andi could never deny how happy she felt, and she didn't plan to.

She lowered her cup to the coffee table again, looking back up to find Rachel watching her. "You look really comfortable."

"Come and join me."

Rachel stacked the final plate in the dishwasher, wiping her hands on a tea towel. She padded barefoot across the room, sneaking under the blanket covering Andi as she lay down beside her. "I love you being here."

"I'm just glad you want me here." Andi wrapped Rachel up against her, stroking her fingernails down the back of her neck. "My place, compared to the size of this, is huge."

"Why did you pick something so big?" Rachel asked, moaning lightly when Andi gently scratched her nails against her scalp. "Oh, God. That feels amazing."

Andi smiled into a kiss, then pulled back. "Honestly, I just wanted to find somewhere. I'd talked myself out of selling this place so many times that when my new house came onto the market, I just put an offer in and went for it."

"But you don't feel connected to it, do you? Because it wasn't what you

really wanted, it's just a place to go back to when you finish work."

Wow. Rachel was one hundred percent right. "At the moment, yes. But it'll become home. It has to. I refuse to move again."

"Do you...feel connected to this place?"

Andi narrowed her eyes, trying to get a read on what Rachel was thinking. She could be honest; she knew that. "I think I'll always feel connected to it in some way. Whether you're here or not, I did spend a lot of years here." Andi hoped that this would become a familiar place to her again one day, with new memories being made. "But most of all, I feel connected to you...and that's what matters. Here or at my place, that connection doesn't change."

Rachel wrapped her arm around Andi's waist and nuzzled into her chest. "Good. That's what I care about."

"Did you...want to talk about Juliet?"

Rachel pulled back, an uncertain look in her eyes. "Not unless you needed to?"

"I don't need to talk about her. But did you want to go for a drink at her bar sometime?" Andi wasn't insecure. She also wasn't the kind of person who would avoid situations based on the past. Juliet was involved, Rachel was involved, so why not potentially find a new group of friends?

"You want to go to a members-only exclusive bar?"

Andi feigned offence. "Are you saying I'm not members-only exclusive material?"

"Oh, God. No. That's not what I was saying at all. But I don't want anything to come between us, and I fear that going there may have that effect."

"Why? Unless you're still in love with Juliet, I don't see that happening."

Rachel rolled onto her back, staring up at the ceiling. "Since I met you, I've come to realise that I'm not sure I ever *did* love Juliet. I was attracted to her, she was the first person in a long time to make me feel like maybe something could go somewhere, but in love? No. I don't think I was. Perhaps I was wishing for that, hoping she would see me as something more, but the way things ended was the right outcome. For us both."

"There didn't appear to be any kind of atmosphere earlier when you bumped into her."

"No, I know. I saw her and Paige a while back when I was out in the city. We sort of cleared the air then. I guess it's just me worrying about nothing."

“Let’s go there. Show them that we’re all adults. It might be nice to have different friends as a couple. Given the last week or so with my friends, I’d rather you were in a space you felt wanted.” Andi stroked her fingertips beneath Rachel’s hoodie, her skin warm to the touch. “Sally is coming around to the idea, but having more friends never hurts.”

“I guess it would be nice to see Hannah again.”

“Hannah?”

“Hannah was...Eva at the agency. She fell in love with her client, Caz. They’re adorable together. It was Hannah who put Juliet in touch with me. She used to be Juliet’s escort, too.”

Andi wasn’t sure she could get her head around all of that this evening. It had been a long day, and she was still recovering from Christmas three days ago. “Right. That’s a lot to take in.”

“Basically, Juliet and Paige are together...and Hannah and Caz are together. That’s really all you need to know.”

“Right. Okay. Well, I say we go there and have a drink one evening. I’ve never been to a members-only bar before.”

“The place is great. Juliet and Paige fit right in there. I’m just not sure of the reception I’ll receive from Paige. I wasn’t exactly her number one fan back when she joined the bar.” Rachel chewed her lip, not meeting Andi’s gaze. “I was...a little bit out of control back then. When you think you’re in love with someone, and another woman comes into the picture, it can make you a not very nice person, shall we say?”

“I get it. I can’t say I wouldn’t be the same if the shoe was on the other foot.”

Rachel laughed. “You don’t have it in you to be a bitch, babe. And that’s exactly what I was to Paige. A complete bitch.”

“Then maybe it’s time to make amends once and for all.” Andi wanted them to have a separate group of friends. If she was going to begin a new life, one with Rachel by her side, then she really wanted to expand her circle. “What do you say?”

Rachel sat up on her elbows, evidently mulling over the idea. Then she nodded slowly. “You know, I think you’re right. Juliet mentioned that she was expanding and turning it into a safe space for the ladies. We can go there, and if it doesn’t work out, at least we can say we tried.”

Andi lifted, shifted, and then straddled Rachel on the couch. “That sounds like a good idea to me.” As Rachel’s hands found Andi’s thighs, her nails

dragging down the denim, Andi braced her hands on either side of Rachel's head and leaned down into a kiss. "But for the rest of the evening, my sole focus is you."

CHAPTER 25

ANDI HELD A DRESS AGAINST HER, EYEING HERSELF IN THE FULL-LENGTH mirror in the corner of her bedroom. She had spent the last hour trying to decide on an outfit for tonight, still none the wiser. Today was New Year's Eve, and she wanted to look good as she strolled around the city with Rachel. After all, they really did make a wonderful couple. Attractive, too, Andi had noticed recently.

She puffed out her cheeks and dropped to the edge of her bed. Andi needed to feel confident as she walked into The Hideout tonight. She wanted the room to notice her while showing Juliet that she wasn't afraid to be at her bar, given the history between her and Rachel. Andi knew she had nothing to prove to anyone, but it was for her own self-confidence. Juliet was a strikingly beautiful woman.

"Andi?" The front door slammed shut as Rachel's voice floated up the stairs. "Have you decided what you're wearing yet?"

Andi sighed. "No. Can you come and help me?"

Rachel rushed up the stairs, her freshly applied eyelashes quite prominent. Andi had never been attracted to women who enhanced their appearance with eyelashes or whatever else they did to themselves, but Rachel was an exception. She smiled back at Andi, then scanned the various dresses strewn across the bed. "Babe, you could get away with wearing *anything* at all."

"Thank you for saying that, but I want to get it right."

Rachel studied Andi, her eyes narrowed. "Why...do you seem so frantic about it? You don't usually have any issues with finding something to wear. We're only going on a night out."

“I know that.” Andi held up her other choice, wrinkling her nose. “I just can’t decide.”

“So long as you have something hot as hell on underneath it, either.” Rachel winked, then threw herself on Andi’s bed. Well, what little space she could fit her body into. “You’re not worried about going to The Hideout, are you?”

“Absolutely not. I just...want to look good for you.”

Rachel snorted. “You’re wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and you already look good. Trust me, I adore anything you choose to wear.”

“Again, thank you for saying that.” Andi hung both dresses on the back of the door, then slumped down beside Rachel. “I feel a bit...off about it all. Was I stupid to convince you to go to the bar?”

“Stupid? Why would you think that?” As Andi tried to find the right words, Rachel shifted on the bed behind her and draped her arms over her shoulders. She kissed Andi below the ear, smiling against her neck. “Talk to me, Andi. What’s going on?”

“Nothing is...going on. You said the bar was exclusive, members-only, and I’m not sure I have anything to wear that would suffice.”

“Babe, it’s just a bar that requires someone to press a button to let you in.”

“And...you used to be there with Juliet? You know, as her escort?”

Rachel smiled weakly. “Yeah.”

“So, people would recognise you there?” Andi wasn’t fond of this new feeling. Was it jealousy? Apprehension? She didn’t know.

“I mean, it’s possible. But we didn’t continue our client/escort relationship for very long once she opened the bar. Few weeks, if that. So, I doubt anyone would *really* remember me other than Paige and Juliet. Maybe that other server she hired. Cara.”

“Right. Okay.”

Andi’s phone started ringing where it rested on the bed. She could hear it, but she couldn’t see it. Likely because she had ten dresses hiding it. She skimmed her hand over the various materials, locating it beneath a navy blue dress she had ‘noped’ immediately.

“Hello?”

“Hi, love. Only me. I know it’s really short notice, but me and Claire wondered if you and Rachel would like to join us for the new year...”

Andi chewed the inside of her cheek, resting back against Rachel. “We

kind of have plans, but can I speak to Rachel and let you know?” Sally had lessened contact with Andi since Christmas Eve, but Andi had a feeling she was just embarrassed about her behaviour. It was nice to be invited over, but it purely depended on whether Rachel was ready to be in the same room as Sally or not.

“Of course. As I said, it’s short notice, but we’d love it if you could join us even just for a drink...maybe see in the new year together.”

Andi smiled. She would love that. “I’ll text you as soon as I’ve spoken to Rachel.”

“Okay, well, I hope to hear from you soon. Bye, love.”

Sally ended the call, leaving Andi with a decision to make. She could put herself through the uncertainty of The Hideout, or she could run Sally’s idea by Rachel.

“Everything okay?” Rachel shifted on the bed behind Andi, holding her tighter. “That was...Sally?”

“Yes. It was. She’s invited us over tonight to spend the evening with her and Claire. I told her I’d mention it to you, but obviously, I completely understand if you don’t even want to consider it.”

“Why wouldn’t I consider it?” Rachel frowned when Andi glanced over her shoulder at her.

She didn’t have to pretend everything was okay. Andi knew it surely couldn’t be. Sally hadn’t even apologised to Rachel yet. “Because she was awful to you.”

“I think it’s important for us to lay that to rest. It won’t benefit us moving forward, and I don’t want anyone to fall out. I know Sally is worried about your future, she’s your best friend, so I’d like to say yes to tonight. We should all get on the same page as one another.”

Andi turned on the bed and pulled Rachel into her lap. “You’re quite something, Rachel.”

“We’re all adults. Let’s get it all out of our systems and then bring in the new year with people who mean the world to you.”

“*You* mean the world to me.” Andi stroked her fingertips along Rachel’s thigh, smiling into a kiss. “So long as you and I are together tonight, I don’t care about anything else.”

“Are you...planning to wear any of these dresses on the bed?”

Andi’s brow furrowed. “No, why?”

Rachel dragged Andi on top of her, her legs wrapped around Andi’s

waist. “Because they’re about to get *very* creased.”

Oh, what an end to this year. Andi stared down at Rachel, her blonde hair splayed out around her, and took a moment to admire just what she had in her life right now. So much had happened since that night some six weeks ago. The night when Andi laid eyes on Rachel for the first time...the night she decided that she was going to make every moment count.

Had she thought it would work out that way? No.

Was she grateful for the outcome so far? Grateful beyond words.



Rachel excused herself from the conversation she was having with Andi and Claire, taking Andi’s empty wine glass with her as she slipped out of the living room. The atmosphere had been enjoyable so far this evening, but the night was still young. Truthfully, Rachel didn’t see any issues arising. Sally had barely managed to look at her so far tonight.

She landed in the kitchen, clearing her throat so as not to startle Sally. “Would you mind if I topped up Andi’s glass?”

“Oh, no. Of course. Help yourself,” Sally said, her back still to Rachel. She was busy plating up nibbles, but Rachel knew it was more than that. “Food shouldn’t be long now.”

“No rush. Andi and Claire are just chatting anyway.”

Sally *did* turn around this time, her cheeks beginning to redden. “Then I guess it’s time you and I had a chat.”

Rachel held up a hand. “Look, tonight is about a new start for me and Andi. Tomorrow is a new year, and I really don’t want to end this one on a bad note. It’s been awful enough without me falling out with Andi’s closest friends.”

“I have to apologise to you, Rachel. I wanted to do it on Christmas Eve, but I suspect my presence was less than welcome by the time I’d finished saying what I had to say. Andi...didn’t need it.”

“Andi is far stronger than you think, Sally.” Rachel took the opportunity to sit down at the dining table. Sally and Claire had a huge kitchen and a very country house, even though it was in the city. “I know she’s had a rough time, it’s the entire reason I told her we couldn’t date in the beginning, but I

was wrong. She's the strongest person I know. And she knows exactly what she wants."

Sally smiled, sitting in the seat facing Rachel. "I know. It took me a moment or two to realise it, but I do know. I guess I just got used to protecting her and looking out for her for too long. When you came along, I saw how happy she was when she spoke about you. Part of me was worried that it was too soon, but we can never really know when the time is right until the right person comes along. I'm sure you agree with that."

"I do agree with it."

"It was only when I found out about your job that my fears really surfaced. And I know, I know I was a judgemental bitch, but that's what it was. Fear. It doesn't excuse the things I said about you, but...that's not really me. I'm very supportive of all my friends and their relationships."

"To be honest, I was quite shocked...and a little surprised. I know my career isn't for everyone, and I don't expect everyone I meet to understand, but Andi is supportive, and that's all that matters to me. That she's comfortable and trusts me. After all, she's the one who spends time with me and knows the real me. Not anybody else."

"You're right. And she's very fond of you, Rachel."

"And I'm very fond of her. She's incredible and has so much to offer. I know all about the past, and I know just how much she loves Jane. I'm not here to replace any of that. Not one tiny piece of it. I'm here to make Andi happy in whatever way she needs that. I don't expect some big 'I love you' or proposal down the line. I don't expect to ever take the place of a woman she spent twenty years married to. What we have works, and I'd really love it if you could trust me enough to give me a chance. That's all I want from her friends. A chance."

Sally sniffled as she dabbed a napkin under her eyes. "You deserve more than a chance."

"But it's all I ask of anyone. I've spent so many years hearing all the things you said. None of it was new to me. I don't expect it'll change until the day I leave the agency. To think this could run smoothly would be stupid on my part. And I don't know...maybe in six months' time, Andi will decide she can't be with an escort, or...she just can't find it in herself to love me in some way, but until then, I plan to just make her happy, Sally."

"I don't think you have to worry about your future with her." Sally slid a hand across the table and placed it over Rachel's. "I see what you mean to

her.”

“Maybe,” Rachel said, her voice wavering. “But it’s very easy for people to not love me. I’m paid to sit with women to make them feel good about themselves. I dress up and play the part. But the reality is that nobody returns that favour for me in my private life. Nobody wants to be seen with me or to spend my personal time with me...until Andi came along.”

“I’m sorry you’ve been treated that way.”

“I went into escorting knowing that would likely be the direction my life took. I’ve had to fend for myself for a very long time now. Being with Andi, having someone who appreciates me for me...I really hope she sees a future that includes us together.”

“Oh, she does.” Sally grinned, getting to her feet when the timer on the oven sounded. “I’ve known Andi for over twenty-five years. Before she met Jane, even. What you see is what you get with her. If she says she wants a relationship with you, then she means it.”

Rachel relaxed into her seat, allowing that to sink in. The fear of rejection down the line was something she would have to deal with herself but to hear Sally say that meant a lot. “Thank you.”

“It may take some time for you and me to build some kind of friendship after how I’ve behaved, but I do hope we can get there eventually. I expect you to join in with our traditions throughout the year, and I know Andi wants you to be a part of our circle.”

“I think that you’ve apologised enough, and I can understand where your worries came from. There’s no reason to keep going over something that isn’t going to help in any way. I’d rather get to know Andi’s friends as me. Rachel. Rather than as Rachel the escort. Because who *you* know *is* the real me.”

“Then I look forward to bringing in the new year with you.” Sally lifted a glass of champagne that she had set out on the worktop and offered another to Rachel. “To you and Andi.”

Rachel beamed a smile, feeling as though she *would* fit in here after all. “To...all of us.”



Oh, what a beautiful night...

Andi looked up at the clear sky, aware that there were only two minutes to go until the clock struck midnight. Never in her wildest dreams did she think she would be in a relationship going into the new year, but she really had soaked up every moment of her recent time with Rachel. Knowing they would wake up together tomorrow and make plans for now and for the future, she couldn't help but smile as the moon shone bright.

"You okay, babe?" Andi felt an arm around her as Rachel stood beside her, looking up at the sky with her. "Do you...want me to give you a minute?"

Thoughtful as ever, Andi smiled. "No. It's almost midnight, and I don't want you anywhere other than right here with me."

She side glanced at Rachel, adoring how those blue eyes shone against the moon. Tonight had been quite something for Andi. Having Rachel with her while she celebrated New Year's Eve with Sally and Claire hadn't felt possible just last week. She thought she would have had to choose one or the other. But she was here, lucky to have everyone who meant something to her.

Sally and Claire's neighbours started to leave their homes, joining them in the street. Andi always felt sad when the crowd dwindled year after year, fewer people choosing to come out and get involved with the festivities, but this year seemed to be shaping up to be a good one.

"Andi?"

Andi turned to Rachel, the crowd around her chatting amongst themselves. "Yes?"

"Thank you for having a little faith in me. For trusting me with your heart."

She lifted a hand and brought it gently to Rachel's cheek. Rachel leaned into her touch, the sound of the ship horns in the distance signalling that a new year was about to begin, and then the fireworks lit up the night sky. Andi leaned in, kissing Rachel slowly and conveying everything she felt about her. The excitement she brought to Andi's life, the hope when she felt as though she had none, the love she felt budding between them. She drew back slowly and placed her palm on Rachel's chest. "Happy New Year, Rachel."

Rachel wrapped her arms around Andi's neck, grinning. "Happy New Year, gorgeous."

Pulled apart by Sally, they linked hands for a rendition of "Auld Lang Syne," the circle growing as other neighbours joined in. Andi scanned the

faces of people she knew and people she didn't, admiring every last one of them as they smiled and laughed their way through the song. The fireworks continued, while the boom as the sky continued to brighten was drowned out by people's voices. Most of all, Rachel's hand was safely in hers.

Life may be significantly different now, but Andi couldn't imagine a better woman to have by her side as she transitioned into an entirely different time.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER...

Rachel waved in Kelly's direction, smiling as her best friend approached from across the street. She held her phone between her ear and shoulder, wishing Andi could have made it today. "I don't know how long I'll be, but if you let me know what time you're finishing work, I can be available."

"Oh, don't worry. Come over to my place whenever you like." Andi sounded tired. The property market was booming at the minute so Rachel wasn't surprised. "Do you have to work tonight?"

"No. I finished with a client about thirty minutes ago. Once I've had coffee with Kelly, I'm all yours."

"Perfect. I can't wait to see you. I missed you last night."

Rachel had missed Andi too. She'd had an all evening booking with a regular, and by the time she had left the club, it was after midnight. She didn't want to wake Andi by getting in so late, so she'd chose to go home instead. Rachel smiled. "I know, babe. I missed you, too." Kelly managed to rush across the street before the traffic neared, landing in front of Rachel. "I'll call you in a couple of hours, okay?"

"Okay. Bye, Rachel."

"Yeah, I...Bye, babe." Rachel cleared her throat as she lowered her phone. That was the second time she'd almost told Andi she loved her at the end of a call now.

She's not ready.

“What’s up with your face?” Kelly asked, linking an arm through Rachel’s. “Trouble with Andi?”

“What? No. No way. Andi is just...perfection personified.” They strolled along the main road, stopping outside their favourite coffee shop. “I have to keep catching myself.”

“Catching yourself?” Kelly guided Rachel towards a table outside, the sun beaming down today. June, so far, had been gorgeous. “What do you mean?”

Rachel inhaled a deep breath, slumping down in a seat. “I keep *almost* saying I love you to her.”

“I don’t see the problem with that.” Of course Kelly wouldn’t. There shouldn’t really *be* a problem with it. Rachel just wasn’t sure it was the right time. Andi was so good for her...*to her*, but she didn’t want to say it out loud and chance anything changing. “Unless you...don’t love her?”

“I-I do.” Rachel knew without a shadow of a doubt that she was in love with Andi Palmer. There was no question when it came to her feelings. None whatsoever. “I know I do.”

“Then what’s wrong with telling her that?”

Rachel sighed, trying to find the right words to explain how she felt. But then she looked up at Kelly, noting her soft eyes, and knew she could just be honest. “The thought of being rejected...”

“You think *Andi* is going to reject you if you tell her you love her?” Kelly laughed and shook her head. “No. No way. Andi *is* in love with you, and I’d bet my house on it.”

“How can you possibly know that? Has she told you or are you just assuming?”

Kelly regarded Rachel with a lopsided smile. “No, she hasn’t told me. But everyone around you two can see it. It’s unmistakable. And honestly, I think it’s been pretty obvious for a while now.” Kelly ordered two cappuccinos when the server arrived, then turned her attention back to Rachel. “That little get together thing you two had at the loft. The loft warming or whatever... since then. Andi didn’t take her eyes off you all night.”

Rachel had noticed. She’d felt it, too. It was hard *not* to feel Andi’s penetrating gaze most of the time. “I know, but that doesn’t mean she’ll appreciate me telling her. What if she’s not ready, Kel? I really don’t want to do anything to scare her off.”

“You’ve been together for like seven months now, babe. If Andi doesn’t

feel even a hint of what you do, then I have to ask whether you two should be together. But I don't need to ask that, because I know you were made for each other. Or...at least Andi was made for you."

Rachel appreciated that Kelly always took Andi's late wife into account. Neither of them went about their conversations without taking Jane into consideration. It was important that Rachel remembered Andi had once been happily married. She wouldn't set her expectations so high by reminding herself daily. "Am I mad for imagining her moving back into the loft one day?"

Kelly lifted a shoulder. "I don't think so. But that's something you and Andi would have to discuss between you. She may not want to, and if that is the case, you have to respect that."

"Oh, I would. Absolutely. But I do still picture us living together down the line."

"And I'm sure the thought has crossed Andi's mind once or twice lately."

Rachel really hoped Kelly was speaking the truth. If she blurted any of this out in front of Andi and it backfired, she wasn't sure what she would do. While it was important to remember Jane, Rachel still wanted that intense love. Surely Andi had a little to spare for her. *Oh, she has plenty for you and you know it.* It was true. Their relationship was only going from strength to strength. Andi had *so much* to give. "I think maybe I need to speak to her tonight. You know, get a feel for what she's thinking about the future and stuff."

"Can't do any harm, Rae."

The server placed their coffees down, slipping the bill under the small glass jar holding sugar cubes. Rachel smiled at her, giving herself a moment to just relax and enjoy her afternoon. If she was so unsure about it this evening, she didn't *have* to bring it up in conversation. She would see how she felt later. "Anyway, never mind me. We always talk about me. Tell me about you and what you've been up to lately."

"Oh, you know me. Not a lot." Kelly smiled. "Although, I...may have met someone."

"You have?" Rachel really loved that for Kelly. And now she wanted to know far more. "Who is he?"

"I...it's actually a she."

Rachel's mouth was agape as she stared back at Kelly. Her best friend had never once insinuated she was into the ladies...and they'd been friends

for a very long time. “No way. Since when?”

“It’s very early. *Really* early. But you know, I’m just going with it.”

Rachel reached a hand across the table, taking Kelly’s. “I’m happy for you.”

“I don’t know that it’ll go anywhere, but she’s great.” Kelly blushed, adding a sugar cube to her coffee. “I’m not getting ahead of myself.”

“You should get a membership for The Hideout. Juliet and Paige are hosting women only nights twice a month. You could bring...*she* along with you. Although, I am assuming this woman of yours has a name?”

“Anna. Her name is Anna.”

“Well, come along one evening with Anna.”

Kelly frowned. “Wait! I thought you and Andi were kind of avoiding the place because of the whole ‘Juliet broke my heart’ thing?”

Rachel snorted. “That was what I thought at the time, but Juliet actually did me a favour. Andi is who I want to be with, and Andi is who I’m in love with.”

“Damn right you are. I’ve never seen you so happy.”

Rachel had never felt so happy. Life with Andi was effortless while being exciting and beautiful all at once. “I know. And long may it continue.”



Andi forced her front door shut, slipping her heels off as she lowered her bag to the floor. She could really do with the weekend off, but that wasn’t likely given the current housing climate. She wasn’t sure she’d ever been so busy, but with one of her staff off on maternity leave, she was having to make do with what she had. Things would even out, they often did, but just one weekend to herself would be ideal. Burning herself out was never beneficial to anyone.

She locked the door, dragging her feet towards the kitchen. She heard the pots and pans, could smell the herbs and spices seeping through the closed kitchen door, and it only made her smile. Because it meant Rachel was here.

“Hello?”

“In here, babe.”

Andi followed Rachel’s voice—even if she knew exactly where she was

—and prepared herself for a relaxed evening. She opened the door, beaming a smile when Rachel stood at the stove. “Hi. I wasn’t sure if you’d be here or not.”

“Came straight over once I’d had coffee with Kelly. She says hi, by the way.”

“How is she? We really should see her more often.”

Rachel spun around and grinned. “Doubt that’ll be happening any time soon. She’s met someone, and judging by the look in her eyes, it’s going better than she claimed.”

“She has? Oh, that’s great news. Maybe...a double date on the horizon?”

Rachel crossed the kitchen and snaked an arm around Andi’s waist. “Maybe. If that’s something you’d like to do.”

“Oh, I love double dates. It’s like a night out with only people you can tolerate.”

Rachel studied Andi’s eyes, her fingertips stroking her back. “I mentioned them getting a membership for The Hideout.”

Andi’s brows rose at that. She couldn’t remember the number of times she’d tried to encourage Rachel there. Andi preferred quieter nights out and the bar seemed like the perfect place, even if they had only been there twice in the time they’d been together. “I’m surprised by that.”

“Why?” Rachel pulled back a little, frowning.

“Well, you don’t seem fond of the place.”

“I just think it’s time to get involved in that circle, you know? Hannah and Caz are great, Juliet and Paige are madly in love, and us...you know?”

“What exactly are we, Rachel?” Andi draped her arms over Rachel’s shoulders, swaying them slowly. Andi had been wanting to say a few things to her, to be sure they were on the same page, but it never seemed like the right time. But then Andi had to wonder if there was ever a right time. If she wanted to say something, why not just come out and say it? She’d never struggled before.

“We’re...us.” Rachel smiled. “And I really like who we are.”

Andi really liked who they were too. Actually, she loved it...loved Rachel. “Well, good.”

Rachel quickly unwrapped herself from Andi when the timer beeped on the oven. Andi wanted to continue, to keep Rachel against her, but it appeared dinner was almost ready. She rested back against the counter, watching Rachel do her thing.

“Do you enjoy being here?”

Rachel glanced over her shoulder. “Of course I do. I love being here with you.”

“And do you maybe think that it’s something to consider down the line? You know, us coming home from work...and being here together?”

“We already do that now.”

Oh, stop being so cryptic and ask her what she bloody wants! “No, I mean something more permanent down the line?”

“O-oh, um...I don’t know. Is it something you want?”

Rachel...didn’t know. *Huh.* Andi had been thinking on this kind of thing for weeks now, but it appeared it hadn’t once crossed Rachel’s mind. Andi ought to slow right now. “I guess it’s probably too soon to consider those things. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Rachel took the baked chicken breasts from the oven and set them on a rack to the side of her. She lowered the stove and turned back to Andi. “I don’t think it’s too soon to have these conversations.”

“Still, it’s not something you’ve thought about. But that’s okay, nothing has to change. So long as you’re here when you can be...I’m happy if you are.”

Rachel rested back against the dining table, pulling Andi away from the counter and between her legs. “I am happy, babe. I’m happy all the time with you. I’m also ready for anything with you, so please don’t think that I’m not.”

Oh, that had Andi’s heart racing. “Yeah?”

“You chose me after everything you’d had with Jane. *Me*, Andi. The woman who people sneered at. The woman who people didn’t trust when it came to love. No matter what happens down the line, I’m so happy, okay?”

“It’s been seven months, but it feels so much longer. I feel as though I’ve known you for years, Rachel. Nothing is forced. Nothing is uneasy. When I’m with you, I’m equally happy. I just...I hope you’re not holding back because of Jane. I know you’re aware of my past and I appreciate that you don’t want to overstep, but that’s not possible. Jane was my past life, but you’re my future, okay?”

Rachel smiled as a tear slid down her cheek.

“Hey, don’t cry.” Andi brushed her knuckles against Rachel’s jaw. “I need you to know that I’m ready. That’s all. For anything you want.”

Rachel lifted a brow. “Anything at all?”

“I see a life with you. I see so many memories we could make. I...love

you. So, yes. Anything at all.” Andi had said it, and now it was up to Rachel to accept that she loved her. Perhaps Rachel wasn’t ready yet, her last love had been much sooner than Andi’s, but she meant it. She *did* love Rachel. She was *in love* with her.

“I-I...”

Andi held Rachel’s face in her hands. “Don’t say it until you’re ready. But I needed you to know how I felt about you.”

“I am ready,” Rachel said, taking one of Andi’s hands and kissing it. “I’m so in love with you, Andi. I’ve been trying to avoid it because I wasn’t sure it was the right time, but I’m madly in love with you.”

Andi’s own emotions threatened to surface, but that was just another thing Rachel offered her. A space to feel and be open. “When I lost Jane, I didn’t imagine a world where I’d find love again. I wasn’t against it, but I couldn’t envisage it. All I needed was a little light. Something, *anything*, to remind me that life could be beautiful again. *You* are that light.”

“I can’t believe we’re here.” Rachel sniffled, staring down at Andi’s hand. “I can’t believe you were even interested in me.”

“Well, when a beautiful woman *rudely* crosses my path, what do you expect?”

Rachel laughed and shook her head. “You’re going to hold that against me forever, aren’t you?”

“Mmm, not forever. Just for a while longer.” Andi leaned in, kissing Rachel. “Thank you for being at the Christmas market that night.”

“Thank you for selling me the loft.” Rachel cleared her throat. “And I don’t want to put any pressure on this, but down the line...would you consider coming back?”

“T-to the loft?” Oh, wow. That was something Andi would have to think about. She couldn’t say for sure if building a new life in her old home was possible. “I...maybe?”

Rachel smiled, nodding slowly. She understood, and that was hugely important to Andi. “A maybe is fine by me.”

“It’s not a no, I promise you that. But it’s something I will have to think about for a while.”

Rachel drew Andi into a soft, lingering kiss. She touched her forehead to Andi’s, those insanely beautiful eyes gleaming. “We’re in love. That’s all I care about.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Oh, hi! It's nice to see you!

I'm Melissa Tereze, author of *The Arrangement*, *Mrs Middleton*, and other bestsellers. Born, raised, and living in Liverpool, UK, I spend my time writing angsty romance about complex, real-life, women who love women. My heart lies within the age-gap trope, but you'll also find a wide range of different characters and stories to sink your teeth into.

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