

A romantic couple embracing in front of a Christmas tree. The man is shirtless, and the woman is wearing a white sweater. The tree is decorated with gold and red ornaments. The background is a soft, white, misty atmosphere.

*Under
the Mistletoe*

A Christmas Kiss

A BBW HOLIDAY ROMANCE

JOANN BAKER | PATRICIA MASON

A CHRISTMAS KISS

Under the Mistletoe

Book 1 of 2

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Taking risks in business had made Maddox Walker a multi-millionaire, and his best friend, Emma, had been there with him every step of the way. With the holidays approaching, she was the only thing he wanted under his tree—and in his bed. Was he willing to take his biggest risk yet to claim the curvy beauty?

Taking her relationship with Maddox out of the “friend” zone, had been Emma’s dream since the first time she’d met him in college and the company’s holiday party was the perfect opportunity to show him her true feelings. Would a Christmas kiss under the mistletoe make her merry—or miserable?

CHAPTER ONE

...

Emma took a deep breath before approaching the large double glass doors leading into the posh hotel and restaurant. Tonight, she was attending her company's annual holiday party, and inside were all her coworkers...and her boss, who just happened to be her best friend. And the man she loved.

She'd promised herself at the beginning of the year that she would do something to move out of the dreaded friend zone she'd found herself in since college. She'd spent the last five years giving her heart and soul to her best friend and his start-up company—The Ace of Spades, an online commerce site that sold anything a man could want. From clothing consisting of casual, sports, and evening wear to boats, motorcycles, and everything in between.

The mega-successful site was the brainchild of Maddox Walker, a boy from the wrong side of the tracks who, through dogged determination and an in-your-face attitude, could now sit anywhere he wanted on the other side of the tracks. Heck, invitations from bluebloods flooded his inbox every day. But, to his credit, he turned down most of them, only accepting the ones that could be used to further his business. Max was a lot of things, but driven was the word that described him best.

Other than sexy, drop-dead gorgeous, and way out of her league.

The doorman nodded slightly as he opened the door for her. She smoothed her hand down her side, feeling the smooth velvet of the dress beneath her palm. It was the sexiest dress she had ever owned or dared to wear. The dress hugged her abundant curves, covering her entirely while leaving very little to the imagination. She felt sensual and self-conscious at the same time. "I can't do this," she muttered, her steps faltering.

"Stop it, Emma," a voice half-hissed, half-shouted in her ear. "You look great."

Emma grimaced at the woman in front of her, Stacy Anderson, also her best friend, but not for as long as Maddox had been. Emma and Maddox had met when Emma was a freshman in college, and Maddox was finishing up his MBA. There was a seven-year age difference, which was one of the factors that contributed to the fact that they had never hooked up.

Well, that and her very curvy body.

And the fact that he was drop-dead gorgeous.

Had she mentioned that already?

She and Stacy had been friends since the other woman had come to work at The Ace of Spades two years ago. It was nice to have a female friend. Emma had spent most of college and the years that followed simply living in Maddox's shadow. She hadn't minded...then.

"You have to say that since you're the one that convinced me to spend a month's salary on this dress."

"I don't *have* to say anything. I say it because it's true. But thank goodness you took my advice and bought some clothes that actually flatter your amazing figure."

Emma knew Stacy spoke the truth—well, told the truth about her clothing. Emma always wore things that were usually two sizes too big and mostly bought from thrift shops. Her wardrobe consisted mostly of jeans, sweats, and oversize tees. She and Stacy had spent the last two weeks shopping in exclusive stores that made Emma feel like a fraud. She liked her jeans and t-shirts but had gone along with her friend's efforts to update Emma's wardrobe and, in Stacey's words, 'find clothing that actually made the most of her voluptuous curves.' Although Stacy had allowed her to keep some of her vintage clothing during the whirlwind decluttering of her closet, the space in her bedroom was now filled with clothing more similar to the dress she wore. Now, she wondered if she'd made a mistake.

She felt...exposed.

Would Maddox know she'd done this for him?

Emma had long ago accepted the fact that she was a big girl. She'd tried diets, both fad and doctor-recommended. Nothing had worked long-term, so she'd given up on those, and now, she simply tried to eat healthy and walk at least four times a week. Her efforts seemed to be working. She'd slimmed down a little, making the hills and valleys of her body a little more feminine and less...well, jiggly. But there had been no significant weight loss.

Emma knew nothing would give her the willowy, stick-like figure that Maddox seemed to prefer in his women. She gave a huge sigh, wondering how she was going to make it through tonight. He would undoubtedly be here with the usual Barbie-doll blonde on his arm. Maybe two. Sometimes he dated them in groups, it seemed.

“What if this is a big mistake?” She voiced her earlier thought aloud.

“Stop that,” Stacy chided again. “Tonight, you will show that man exactly what you are made of.” She stepped back, giving Emma a satisfied nod. “Sweet, delicious curves.” With a grin, she twinned her arm through Emma's and marched them forward.

Emma would have just as soon as stayed in the small entryway for the rest of the night. Actually, she would have preferred it.

Since it was close to Christmas, the hotel was truly decked out in holiday splendor. Noticing the giant evergreens with their large red and green ornaments, snowflakes, and many other iconic Christmas symbols, Emma felt a slight stirring of happiness that she had come to the party after all. She loved Christmas. Everything about it. From the carols, corny romantic movies, and festivals with handmade crafts to hot chocolate, comfy pj's, and snowy winter nights in front of a roaring fireplace.

Of course, each of those things would be all the sweeter if there was someone to share them with—someone she loved and who loved her back.

And that thought brought on a deluge of images of Maddox—doing each activity with her and more. Stealing kisses in the snow and making love under the twinkling lights of a Christmas tree were just two of the many fantasies she'd envisioned. She had quite the romance with him—in her mind.

Even though it had just started a half hour ago, the party was in full swing. The room was crowded with her coworkers and their spouses and significant others. Holiday cheer flowed freely, as did the expensive champagne Maddox preferred. Emma's plan was to arrive late, which she'd accomplished, and leave after she'd poured her heart out to Maddox.

She knew Maddox usually only put in an appearance toward the end of any office event and didn't stay long after his perfunctory speech. He was, to put it bluntly, somewhat of a scrooge. And a Grinch. Early in their relationship, she found out that Christmas and Maddox didn't mix very well. She couldn't blame him. He'd lost his parents at a young age and been raised by a very strict grandmother. From what he'd shared—which was just the bare minimum of his life, there had been very little time or money for fun and frivolity growing up.

Emma's life had been the exact opposite. Her mother had always ensured Christmas was the most special time of year. Her father had supported her mother's almost obsession with the holiday with indulgence, support, and love.

“Come on, let's find Scott.”

Scott Strickland was Stacy's boyfriend, an accountant with the company. Both Emma and Stacy worked in the public relations department. Emma was the social media manager, and Stacy did the print and copy advertising. They had just finished the spring campaigns, and Emma, for one, was looking forward to her time off for Christmas. It gave her time to recharge. Plus, it took her away from the office and away from *him*.

And this year, if her plan went sideways, she would need that distance to decide what to do. She didn't know if she'd be

ready to cut all ties with the man who had taken up most of her thoughts and dreams for so many years.

“Stacy! Emma! Over here.” Scott’s voice sounded from a few feet away.

Even from a distance, Scott looked at Stacy as though he could eat her up. Emma would give anything to have a man look at her that way. Not just any man. Maddox. She sighed. That was about as likely as a snowstorm in the desert.

As they made their way to Scott’s side, a low murmur began going through the crowd, growing louder as the two reached their destination. “Hey, Scott,” Emma offered the greeting automatically as she turned to see what had the crowd buzzing. Following where everyone was looking toward the back of the room, Emma saw what—or who—the commotion was about.

Maddox had entered the building.

He looks like a million bucks, she thought, her mouth going dry at the sight of him.

Which was funny since he was probably worth ten times that amount.

She quickly averted her eyes and turned back to Scott and Stacy, forcing a smile to her lips.

“Well, will you look at that?” Scott murmured as he kissed Stacy and smiled at Emma. “Looks like the boss is flying solo tonight.”

Emma braced herself for the second time that night to do something she didn’t really want to do. She turned her gaze once more to the man she’d dreaded—yet longed—to see. Maddox made his way through the crush of people, smiling and exchanging small talk with the ease bestowed so iniquitously upon those already blessed with an abundance of looks, money, and charm. He looked absolutely delicious in a black tuxedo and white shirt.

He was a big man, which Emma realized was a big part of his attraction. She forgot about her extra padding and the

curves whenever she was next to him. He made her feel comfortable in her own skin.

At six-foot-three, he towered above almost every other man in the room. His dark, almost midnight black hair was brushed back from his face, the stray curl that usually fell across his brow tamed for the night. The thick, ebony strands hung longer than the styles of most of the men present, brushing just below the collar of his white shirt. Maddox was man enough to pull off the look. His features were the most masculine she'd ever seen, other than in drawings of Greek gods, with just a hint of...pretty. He could be modeling his products instead of merely selling them.

As he made his way through the crowd, more than one person stopped him, wanting just a moment to bask in the warmth surrounding Maddox like a cloak. He might not enjoy the holidays, but he knew how to give. There wasn't an employee present that would ever say one bad thing about him or even think of looking for another job. Maddox treated his people like family, and the family loved him for it.

The men extended their hands, receiving a cordial shake in return and, more often, a friendly pat on the back and a warm smile. The women were more presumptuous, taking the opportunity to melt into Maddox's side like flies stuck to glue traps. Whether twenty or sixty, they wanted to love him in a totally different way.

She couldn't blame them, but she hated them for it.

Didn't they know he was hers?

That's probably what every woman here thinks...

Emma looked away as he moved forward again. She knew where he was headed. Straight for them. For her.

His best *friend*.

Sometimes she hated that word.

Maddox Walker was reluctant to admit that he was as nervous as a teenager picking up his prom date. This year had

been the best of his life and career, except for one thing—Emma wasn't by his side to celebrate. Oh, she was at the party already. As he watched from the back, he'd seen her the moment she'd entered. But she wasn't there with him, and that was about to change.

She'd had him tied up in knots for years now. They'd met while he was finishing his college MBA, determined to set the world on fire. She'd been a dewy-eyed and innocent freshman, unaware of the predatory ways of men. Seven years his junior, he'd taken on the job as protector and teacher. It wasn't how he'd planned on their relationship evolving, and now he was running out of time to change the trajectory. Oh, they made great business associates—he came up with the creative ideas, and she knew exactly how to implement them.

But that wasn't what he wanted their relationship to be. At least not all he wanted it to be. He'd never merely seen her as a business partner. He'd known as soon as he'd laid eyes on her that she was his. At first, he'd simply bided his time, waiting for her to gain some maturity and a little social experience. She'd matured, yes. His body took note of just how much as he caught sight of her in the body-hugging dress. Damn! It was a good thing the room was crowded, or he'd drag her to his private suite and peel that lovely thing off her. He'd spent many sleepless nights wondering about the curves she tried so hard to hide beneath the shapeless clothing she usually wore.

Yes, she'd definitely matured in that respect. In others—socially and sexually—she'd stayed the same naïve, dewy-eyed girl, remaining almost nun-like for the last several years.

On the one hand, he'd wanted her to gain some experience so that there would be no question that when he staked his claim, she would never doubt that she was his. On the other hand, he was very grateful that she had remained so innocent—he wasn't sure how he'd have handled her seeing another man.

Now that he'd decided he had waited long enough, he was nervous. If she had no experience, how would she view him after all these years? Too old? Only as a friend?

As the guy to cut her sexual teeth on before she moved on?

Was she even attracted to him?

The thoughts had him breaking out in a cold sweat. As a kid, he'd overcome a lot of bullying and pushed back against all those who'd said he'd never amount to anything. Finally, he'd made good on that promise to himself—prove them all wrong. His business was booming, and he lived his life on his own terms. But he was tired of living alone.

Whoever had said it was lonely at the top had certainly been right. He had women throwing themselves at him, but there was only one he really wanted. The only one who, if fate allowed, would love him for who he was and not his social status and money. But she seemed determined to keep him in the 'friend' zone. Tonight, he planned to do something about that. He just hoped it didn't ruin the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Making his way through the crowd, he rushed through the various greetings of his staff. He appreciated them and knew they had helped make his name a worldwide brand. He knew people wanted to talk and mingle tonight, but there was only one activity he wanted to pursue. Courting Emma.

Finally, he made it to the trio of people he considered his closest friends. "Hello, Scott, Stacy. Glad you could make it."

"Wouldn't have missed this for the world," Stacy giggled, hanging onto Scott's arm. Scott's look said he wanted to say something, but Maddox ignored him.

"Hello, Emma. You look amazing." He reached for her hand, bringing it to his lips to brush a soft kiss across her knuckles. He stepped closer, mesmerized by the green of her eyes and the faint blush that stole across her cheeks.

His gaze went down her body and up again to meet her eyes. She was divine. Everything he could possibly want in a woman wrapped up in a gorgeous package he couldn't wait to unwrap.

She was a curvy woman. Wide hips, big, bouncy breasts, and thick thighs. Her face was classically beautiful, dominated by huge green eyes that held a world of secrets he had yet to discover, a pert nose, high cheekbones, and a full, pink mouth that begged to be kissed each time she spoke. More than once, he'd had to ask her to repeat herself as he'd caught himself wanting to do just that and getting lost somewhere in the fantasy. She was petite in stature, standing an entire foot shorter than him, and the compactness made her body all the curvier...and desirable. Tonight, her long brown hair hung down her back, the thick waves falling to her waist. Usually, she had it twirled on top of her head in a haphazard bun or clenched at the nape, revealing soft, white skin that he wanted to taste and touch.

Something had changed over the last few weeks, and he was determined to find out what. If she'd found someone...

No, he couldn't bear the thought.

Yes, he'd noticed the changes in her voluptuous body—the body that kept him up at night—literally. And he'd noticed the new wardrobe. The dress she wore tonight emphasized her stunning curves and made her wide green eyes even more mysterious. But what bothered him most was how she stopped talking to him. Oh, she still did her job with the same perfection, but she'd stopped telling him about her day. She'd stopped dropping by his office for no reason. And she'd stopped hanging out with him outside of work.

He missed her. She'd always been there, listening to his dreams and pitching in to help him achieve them. He wouldn't be where he was today without her. He'd thought he'd been the same kind of friend for her, but apparently not if she wasn't even willing to tell him what had suddenly made her change everything.

If it *was* another man, he wasn't about to give up without a fight.

It wasn't in his nature.

“Thank you, Maddox.” She lowered her gaze and inhaled slowly, carefully so he wouldn't hear, drawing his scent in—

the smell of expensive cologne and the earthier, more masculine scent that was uniquely Maddox. She felt the acceleration of her pulse in her throat, her chest, and lower, between her legs. As unobtrusively as possible, she shifted her stance, clenching her thighs to alleviate the steady thrum of desire humming through her most female part. He was standing so close that she could feel the heat of him. Her body ached with a hunger as deep as the ocean.

Maddox kept her hand in his, surprised—and downright delighted—when she didn't attempt to pull it away. She'd been so skittish around him lately.

The feel of her soft palm pressing into his calloused one was enough to set his big body to trembling. He hoped she didn't notice. Later, if things went his way, he would tell her just how weak she made him. In a good way. To cover his vulnerability, he asked, "Is everyone enjoying the party?"

The foursome made casual conversation for several minutes before a waiter brought a tray of drinks, followed closely by another with a tray of hors d'oeuvres, forcing Maddox to let go of Emma's hand. As soon as his fingers closed around the cold champagne glass, his heart knew exactly what his life would feel like without her in it. He'd wrestled for weeks with whether or not to tell her about his feelings, knowing that if she didn't—couldn't—return his love, then things between them would be awkward, forcing them apart. Ultimately, he'd known he had to tell her. His heart wouldn't let him do anything else. Besides, if he didn't tell her and she found someone—may have already found someone else—he'd have to leave anyway. He couldn't stand even the thought of her with another man. Seeing her every day, knowing she could never be his, would kill him.

"Here you go." He handed her the champagne. He almost choked on his first sip as she took a small bite of her cranberry crostini, leaving a smear of ricotta spread on her lush lips. It took every ounce of his willpower not to bend his head and lick it off. He groaned when her tongue came out and did just that.

"We'll dance when you've finished with that."

Emma blinked in surprise, almost choking on the toasted baguette. She hadn't really wanted it, but keeping herself occupied from thoughts of how good Maddox smelled standing so close had made grabbing the appetizer seem like a good idea. "You don't dance."

"I do with you. Tonight."

He knew she didn't realize it, but he'd been dancing with her for as long as he'd known her. Dancing around the way she made him feel. Dancing around the warmth, she brought into his lonely life.

"Are you going to be around for the Secret Santa gifts?"

Maddox blinked, his eyes moving automatically from Emma to Stacy. He'd completely forgotten that she and Scott were there.

Hell, he'd been so engrossed in Emma that even the festivity around him had disappeared as his world had narrowed down to the woman he wanted with every breath in his body. Now, he forced himself back to the present. He couldn't make time go faster, so he'd just have to slow down and enjoy the next couple of hours.

"I'll be here." His gaze met Emma's once more. "I'm not going anywhere."

Scott said something, drawing Maddox into a conversation, leaving Emma to ponder precisely what Maddox had meant by those cryptic words. His usual M.O. was to make an appearance at the annual holiday party, say a few nice words, hand out the Christmas bonuses, and leave. He didn't do Christmas.

So, why was he so bent on hanging around this year? And why did he go out of his way to make sure Emma knew?

"Hey, Em, I'm going to powder my nose. You want to come with?"

Emma nodded, following Stacy through the maze of bodies. She didn't have to look back. She could feel Maddox's eyes burning along her backside. It was a relief when the ladies' room door closed behind her.

However, her attention was quickly diverted when Stacy began going from stall to stall, opening each door and peering inside.

“What are you doing, Stace?”

“Making sure we’re alone.”

“What?” Emma had seen Stacy skip into a men’s room to pee when the ladies’ room had been full. “Why?”

“I think the dress worked.”

Emma frowned as she tried to comprehend Stacy’s excitement. “What are you blabbering about? I swear, Stace, I think the champagne has gone to your head.”

“No, you idiot,” Stacy turned her friend toward the mirror. “The. Dress. Worked.” She grinned at Emma’s reflection. “Maddox hasn’t taken his eyes off you.”

“That’s ludicrous.” Emma stared at her reflection, barely daring to breathe.

“He’s smitten.”

Her gaze caught Stacy’s in the mirror. “You think?”

Stacy nodded excitedly. “I do.”

Emma shook her head even as her heart began to race. “No.”

“Yes.” Stacy turned Emma around to face her. “Why do you think he’s suddenly so interested in staying for the whole party when he’s never done it before? And why do you think, with all the other people in the room, he hasn’t left your side?”

“I’m his best friend. He just...”

“Your friendship wasn’t enough to make him stay any other year, was it?”

“No, but...” Emma tried to come up with something else. There had to be a reason other than what Stacy was suggesting. If she was right...

Emma’s heart fluttered in her chest, then an excited, panicked beating began. “What do I do?” Turning back to the

mirror, she gripped the edge of the sink as her knees went weak. “What if he kisses me?”

“Then kiss him back, you idiot.”

Emma took a deep breath, fighting the sudden attack of butterflies in her stomach. “Stace, I don’t know....”

“Hey, Em, what is it? I thought this is what you wanted.”

“I thought so too, but now that there’s a real possibility Maddox might see me as something more, I’m afraid to step out of the friend zone.” Emma shook her head. “What if I ruin everything? I’d lose my job. I’d lose the only life I’ve known, and,” her voice trembled, “I’d lose Maddox.”

“Then you have a choice to make, honey. You can go out there and rebuff any advance he makes,” Stacy’s eyes met hers once more, “cause the man is definitely going to be making some moves on you, or you can follow your heart and have this night—and maybe more—with the man you’ve always wanted.”

“I couldn’t bear to lose him, Stace.”

Stacy put a hand on Emma’s shoulder. “Honey, I hate to break this to you, but at some point, your relationship with Maddox is going to change. It already has. And whether you remain friends or become something more tonight is totally up to you. If you take a chance and things don’t work out, I know it’ll be heartbreaking for you, but what if you don’t take a chance and Maddox moves on? Can you honestly say you’ll remain his friend or continue to work with him if he finds someone? I don’t think you can, Em. You love him too much.”

“So, you think I should...I should...”

“Match his every move. Let him know you’re as into him as he is you. You’ve been waiting on this moment forever. Grab it, Em, and stay in it as long as it lasts. The future will take care of itself.”

CHAPTER TWO

...

The future will take care of itself.

Emma repeated the words over and over as she followed Stacy back to the party. She was so engrossed in persuading herself that the words were true she didn't notice Stacy's sudden stop. Bumping into her back, Emma backed up a quick step with a muttered *umph*.

"What the hell, Stace?" Rubbing her nose, she peeked around the taller woman, going still at the sight that met her eyes.

Maddox stood near the raised dais where the live band played, on the edge of the section designated for dancing. Of course, she couldn't say that was what he was doing with the newest Ace-of-Spades hire. Nala was plastered to Maddox's lean body, but the two barely moved. Nala Gentry was the type of woman any other woman would love to hate. She was tall, almost eye-level with Maddox, and had a body that would put a supermodel to shame. On top of that, she had brilliant blue eyes and thick blond curls that bounced as she walked. And she was freakishly smart.

"No woman is that perfect," Stacy mumbled, echoing Emma's thoughts.

Nala was a vision in a pale pink strapless gown that hugged her willow-thin shape. Standing there with her blond head close to Maddox's, the two looked like an advertisement for everything beautiful and elegant. Emma suddenly felt fat and frumpy. What had she been thinking? How could she have let Stacy convince her that Maddox felt something for her? It was laughable. Why would he want Emma when he could have Nala—or maybe he already had Nala.

Was she the reason for Maddox's sudden interest in Christmas?

"I have to get out of here."

“No, Emma, don’t go.”

Emma squeezed the hand Stacy had clasped around hers, blinking back tears. She wanted to go home, get out of this stupid dress, eat an entire tub of chocolate ice cream, and have herself a world-class cry. Not necessarily in that order.

“I shouldn’t have come, Stacy. This,” she motioned toward her dress, “was a stupid mistake.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Stacy tightened her hold, willing Emma to listen. “I know he has feelings for you. If you would only....”

“Stop, Stace.” Emma barked a short, mocking laugh. “I think what we just saw proves otherwise.”

“Please just *talk* to him,” Stacy pleaded.

Emma shook her head, suddenly too tired to think. “I don’t want to talk to him. I don’t even want to see him right now.”

“Um, that’s going to be kind of hard since he’s headed this way.”

Involuntarily Emma turned, her gaze following Stacy’s. Sure enough, Maddox was making his way back to them, the crowd parting like the Red Sea for Moses.

“Oh, no. I can’t do this.” She tried to extricate her hand from Stacy’s grip, but her friend was surprisingly strong. “Stace!” She hissed desperately as Maddox joined them.

“There you are. I was hoping we could have that dance now.”

“I...uh...I....”

“She’d love to.”

Emma felt Stacy pulling her forward, propelling her toward Maddox. She tumbled into him with a soft grunt, her eyes going wide as his arms closed around her, locking her against his hard frame.

For a moment, Emma forgot to breathe. She’d hugged and been hugged by Maddox in the past, but she’d never been

fully aligned with every hard sinew. The feeling was almost drug-like, and, like any addict, she wanted more.

“You feel good.”

His words whispered into her ear, sending gooseflesh rising along her arms—and panic into her heart. Suddenly, a vision of Nala’s body against his ripped through her brain, and as much as she’d wanted to burrow closer into his arms just seconds ago, she now wanted to get away.

As close as they were, she had no doubt he could feel every jiggly inch of her, especially the extra pouch she carried around her middle. She held her breath, trying in vain to hold her stomach in. She’d bet her last pint of mint chocolate chip that Nala had no need to wear Spanx.

She looked around for Stacy, but she’d disappeared. Finally, she spotted her standing with Steven, watching them. Her face heated as she realized they were the center of attention.

“People are staring, Maddox.”

“That’s because you’re such a knockout in that dress.”

His hands wandered slowly up and down her back, making it incredibly hard to think. “Nala looks better. Why...” She shivered as his fingers found the indentation at her low back, “don’t you finish your dance with her?”

“Nala and I weren’t dancing.” Maddox fought the urge to move his hands to her lush hips so that he could pull her into his burgeoning erection. He wasn’t going to be able to wait much longer.

“I saw you...,” she cleared her throat. “Stacy and I noticed you when we returned from the ladies’ room.”

He stopped all movement and stared down at her. She cringed. She knew how she sounded...jealous.

“Nala was thanking me.”

“And I bet I know what for.”

Emma could have bitten her tongue as soon as she uttered the catty words. She couldn't help her response. Any time she thought of Maddox with another woman, her claws came out.

“Emma, we've got to talk about—”

“Maddox, you don't owe me any explanation. You're a good-looking guy, and,” her head dipped, “women love you.”

“Emma, I don't want indiscriminate women. I want...”

“Ladies and gentlemen, it's time for a few words from your estimable employer. Give it up for the guy who all of you say deserves the best boss award every year.” The MC chuckled. “Looks like everyone is angling for a big Christmas bonus.”

A peal of laughter went through the crowd.

Once again, Emma could feel every eye on them, but this time, they were aimed solely at Maddox, waiting expectantly for him to take the stage. He looked anything but pleased by the public admiration.

“Will this damn party never end?”

Emma pulled back, feeling chilled at the loss of his warmth. She attempted a smile. “It's ending for me. I'm going to call it a night.”

His face tightened. “No, you can't leave yet.” His hand took hers.

“Maddox Walker,” the MC tapped the microphone, “your fans are waiting.”

Emma liked the feel of Maddox's hand wrapped around hers. She didn't like him letting it go as he placed her between Stacy and Scott.

“Stay here,” he ordered. He directed a quick look at the other couple. “Don't let her leave. If she does, you're both fired.”

And she definitely didn't like being ordered to stay like a golden retriever.

Thirty minutes later, Emma's short bout of anger had turned to misery. After his speech, Maddox had been roped into a conversation with several mid-level executives who hoped to start the new year as senior executives. She didn't envy Maddox that part of the job. On the other hand, it had to be boring as hell.

She took a sip from her second—no, third, glass of champagne. She should slow down, but the light buzzy feeling in her head was helping her fight the melancholy threatening her holiday spirit. "I'm going, Stacy. I can't take this anymore. I've made a complete fool of myself, and I just want this night to end."

"No, Emma, please don't. Give him a little more time."

"All the time in the world isn't going to make a difference, Stacie. I tried something, and it didn't work. It's time to call it a day and put this whole idiotic notion of Maddox and me being more than friends behind me."

Stacie snorted. "Like you can do that. Come on, Emma, take a good look at the poor guy. Can't you see he's just as miserable as you are? Give him a chance."

Emma glanced to where Maddox stood, surrounded by several men and women, all hoping to make an impression on the boss. Like her, they all wanted something from him. The difference was she wanted his heart. She wanted him.

All of him.

Focusing on his face, she drew a sharp breath. His smile was strained. His hand clenched the glass he held like a lifeline.

He'd never liked crowds. He was drowning and trying hard not to go under.

Instinctively, Emma moved toward him. She was his lifeline.

With a smile, she interrupted the group smoothly. "Excuse me, everyone, but I've been promised a dance, and I'm here to collect."

“How do you do that?” Maddox said, letting out a deep, cleansing breath. “I’ve been trying to think of a way to extricate myself since they roped me into their conversation.”

“You overthink it,” Emma smiled, taking his hand as she led him toward the dance floor. When his hand tightened on hers, she felt the familiar heat go through her, along with something else. She could feel his tension lessening.

It had always intrigued her how someone so charismatic and successful could be so bad in social situations.

That’s why he never stays long...

The revelation was like a lightning bolt. It wasn’t because he didn’t want to be there or because he had something better to do. It was too stressful.

“Do you think they know how unsettling I find all of this?”

It was Emma’s turn to squeeze his hand. “No. You hide your anxiety under a very thick layer of confidence.”

Maddox took Emma in his arms, amazed again at how she always understood him. How she could pick up on his moods when everyone else was oblivious. His hand still held hers; the other found the indentation just above the swell of her hips. He’d fantasized about that particular spot for years, the mere idea of stroking the soft swell with his tongue helping him find relief in the shower on many lonely nights, only to go to bed and feel the deep, searing yearning to have Emma there next to him.

He was damnably frustrated. But tonight, he intended to do something about his situation, one way or another. Losing Emma as a friend would be the hardest thing he’d ever had to do, but living without her as a lover was no longer an option.

He settled her against him, enjoying the feel of her lush curves pressed against his hardness. For the moment, it was enough. But later...

“Emma?”

“Hmm?” She looked up at him through half-closed eyes, lost in the feel of him. For once, she allowed her body to totally relax against him. If this night ended badly, if he rejected her as a lover, she wanted to keep the memories of what it felt like to be held like this—like a woman and not just as a friend.

“I’ve been thinking about us and how we’ve been together so long and....”

“Hey, you two are under the mistletoe.”

The sharp intrusion burst the happy little bubble she’d allowed herself to slip into and roused Emma from her stupor. She was fully alert to Maddox’s low curse and somewhat relieved that he seemed to feel as upset as she was about the interruption.

“Kiss her, man.” Someone yelled.

“Emma, I’m sorry....”

“Don’t worry about it.” Emma tried to extricate herself from Maddox’s arms, embarrassed at herself for daydreaming about a future with him when it seemed he couldn’t even bring himself to kiss her.

Was the thought really so repugnant to him?

“No,” Maddox stopped her when she tried to pull away. “Dammit, Emma, I didn’t want our first kiss to be in front of a crowd.”

“Oh,” was all Emma could manage as she tried to process his words. *Our first kiss...*

Did that mean he wanted more?

She certainly did.

And the crowd didn’t matter to her. She’d kiss Maddox anywhere.

Everywhere.

He was the one that didn’t like crowds.

With a smile, she stood on her tiptoes, looped her arms around his neck, and pressed her lips to his.

The crowd cheered.

Maddox groaned and deepened the kiss to a level her inexperience didn't allow.

Emma was lost.

The crowd was gone. There was just Maddox.

Her lips softened under his, and as she relaxed, his mouth grew more possessive. He drew her closer still, and now she couldn't tell where her body stopped, and his began. She could feel his heart beating strongly—or was it her own?

His fingertips traced along the outer edges of the dip in her spine, wandering dangerously close to her hips. Her legs moved restlessly, wanting to be closer to him still.

“Hey, get a room.”

The comment was like a dash of cold water, followed by a sharp realization of sanity. Like someone being awakened cruelly from a lovely dream, Emma wanted to scream at everyone to go away and burrow back into Maddox.

The MC took that moment to tap the microphone, the sound overly loud to her senses.

“Okay, folks, it's the moment everyone has been waiting for. Gather around the big tree in the center of the room, and you'll soon find out who your Secret Santa is.”

“Dammit,” Maddox groaned, “I forgot about that.”

Emma licked her lips, swallowing a groan as she tasted him there. “It's the last thing you have to do tonight. Everyone is looking forward to their gifts.”

His eyes bored into hers with a message that sent new shivers through her body. “But I have to wait to unwrap mine.”

The way he said the words did something to her insides and made her toes curl in the tips of her shoes.

“We're waiting, Mr. CEO.” The MC laughed nervously.

Maddox reluctantly stepped away from Emma. Pulling a card from his pocket, he placed it in her hand, curling her fingers around it. “Go up to my apartment and wait for me. I’m going to be the fastest Santa Christmas has ever seen.”

Emma watched him disappear into the crowd, then slowly opened her hand. In her palm was the key card to his suite. She swallowed the nerves that rose suddenly, her heart pounding in rhythm with every step she took toward the elevators.

CHAPTER THREE

...

Emma stepped out of the elevator and headed to Maddox's apartment. Well, his hotel suite. Maddox enjoyed living as he did. No upkeep and no worries about parking. Full-time staff to cater to his every whim. It was a life he enjoyed and could afford. It wasn't the first time Emma had been in Maddox's home. It was, however, the first time she'd ever been there as a potential lover and not just as a friend. It made the place look different. Feel different.

She was afraid to be anywhere except the living room—or out on the terrace. She certainly wasn't about to go into his bedroom. Just the thought had her palms sweating.

She was well aware of the big four-poster bed, matching chest, and nightstands. She knew about the brown and tan comforter, the green throw pillows, and even the Andy Warhol Sunset prints hanging on the walls. She'd helped pick them all out. Another perk to being rich. You could change the décor in a hotel suite to anything you wanted. Just as long as you paid for it.

Seeing all those things now would be different somehow.

She would be different.

No, scratch that. She *was* different. That kiss under the mistletoe had changed things—at least for her. Now she knew that friendship with Maddox, as wonderful as it was—would never be enough for her. She'd had a taste of him, of passion with him, and the hunger for more was coursing like fire through her veins.

And if he only offered her this one night, she'd take it, and each time she grew lonely, she'd bring out her memories and open them again and again like a precious gift. It would be enough.

It would have to be. Maddox was all she'd ever want.

“What are you doing sitting here in the dark, honey?”

She started at the sound of his voice. She'd been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't heard him come in. "No," she said quickly when he went to flick on the lights. "Let's just enjoy the lights from the tree."

"As long as I can see your beautiful face," he said, sitting beside her on the wide leather couch. "Can I get you something? Some champagne?"

"No," Emma's hand covered his nervously, "I think I've had enough to drink tonight."

He captured her hand, feeling the iciness of her fingers and the slight tremor she couldn't hide. "Are you cold, Emma?"

"No...no," she murmured, wondering suddenly if that was the only word she was capable of saying. "I'm fine."

Maddox looked as though he wanted to say something else but said instead, "Scoot over here next to me then, and let's enjoy the tree together."

"I can't believe you actually have a tree. You usually don't bother."

"A tree seemed important this year." He settled against her, and his arm came around her shoulders. When she laid her head on his shoulder, his hand moved to rest against the sensitive skin just below her ear, his thumb idly stroking her earlobe.

They sat that way for long minutes, the blinking lights of the tree throwing patterns against the neat white walls. The fireplace was lit, casting an added glow around the room, making it feel as though they were alone in a warm cocoon all their own.

Emma found herself trying not to breathe for fear of disturbing the moment. She looked at Maddox through half-closed eyes, tracing his features in the soft light. She felt both restful and restless as she sat there with him.

Restful because one of her dreams was coming true. She'd fantasized about sitting just so with Maddox in front of a blazing fire and a beautifully decorated tree every year.

Restless because his body created more heat inside her than the fireplace.

“Emma,” Maddox said softly. “I’ve got to ask you....”

She murmured something, perhaps a tiny protest at having the peaceful moment interrupted. Or of having to face the reality of why she was sitting in Maddox’s apartment, in his embrace, and feeling anything but friendly.

“While we were kissing, did you...like it?”

Her eyes opened wide, her mind searching frantically for the answer that would lead to the least embarrassment as her mind jumped swiftly to all the what-ifs.

What if he hadn’t liked it?

What if he wanted her to admit it first?

What if he was trying to find an easy way to say they should just stay friends?

She didn’t pull away from him, but her whole body tensed guardedly. “Why do we have to talk about it right now?”

Couldn’t she just have these moments with him?

“Please don’t jump up and run away. I just wondered whether you would want to do it again?”

Emma closed her eyes. Was he saying he wanted to kiss her again? Or was he trying to figure out if she wanted him to kiss her again?

“I mean...” she chuckled awkwardly, “I’m not so good at it...at kissing, I mean. I...haven’t done much practicing,” she finished lamely, blushing to the roots of her hair at the nervous admission. “I doubt you...anyone would want to kiss me more than once.”

Maddox was silent for so long that she finally worked up the nerve to look up at him. Maybe the topic was so dull he’d gone to sleep. Her heartbeat quickened as she found him staring at her, his dark eyes holding an incredulous look.

“You can’t mean that, Emma.” His arm tightened around her. “I’d like to kiss you every day for the rest of my life.”

Emma blinked, trying to understand his words over the pounding of her heart. Could he mean...

“Maddox?” she questioned softly, hopefully.

“I’m tired of looking at the Christmas tree lights, Emma. I’d much rather look at you. Beneath the lights. In my arms.” His fingertips traced the soft skin of her shoulders, caressed the smooth line of her throat, and then slid sensually under the low neckline of her dress to caress her breast. The heat of his hand on her so intimately sent a sharp shudder of feeling through her.

“I want to touch you, Emma, every delectable inch of you. I want to make love to you.” Desire gave his voice a rough edge.

“Maddox, I...I want that too.”

Was she dreaming? Had the champagne gone to her head, making her hallucinate?

She reached for him, her hands finding his shirtfront. He’d removed his jacket, and she could feel the heat of his skin beneath the expensive fabric. His heartbeat thundered beneath her palm.

His head bent toward her, and she met him in a kiss that was firm but not demanding. His hand moved inside her dress to cup the fullness of her breast. Emma was glad now that she’d chosen the dress. She arched into his hand, pushing her aching flesh into his calloused palm. The feel of his rough skin against her flesh made her groan.

His tongue slipped between her lips, gently tracing the outline of her teeth, then nibbling on the soft flesh of her bottom lip.

“You taste like the sweetest heaven,” he murmured, leaning his forehead against hers. “I can’t believe I’m touching you like this. I’ve dreamed about it for so long.”

Emma covered the hand still holding her breast, her face turning up to his. "I've dreamed of this too, Maddox, but what if...."

His lips touched hers gently, cutting off her words. "No buts or ifs, Emma." His hand moved from her breast to capture her fingers in his. "I'm in love with you. I have been for a very long time. I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid of ruining our friendship."

Emma nodded, tears forming in her eyes at his declaration. "I feel the same way, Maddox. I..." she closed her eyes briefly, "I've loved you for so long."

Maddox stood, holding out his hand. "Will you come with me, Emma? Will you let me love you the way I've dreamed about for so long?"

On shaky legs, Emma stood, taking his extended hand. She could only nod, following silently with her heart beating wildly as he led her to his bedroom. She couldn't believe this was finally happening. Finally, her wildest dream was being realized.

She stopped him when he reached for the light. "I like the moonlight."

Outside, the snow had stopped, and a brilliant three-quarter moon shone through the bank of windows overlooking the city lights. The big bed in the center of the room was just as Emma remembered, although the covers were slightly crumpled.

Maddox followed her gaze. "I wasn't expecting company." He shrugged. "I haven't been sleeping well lately." His hand grazed her arm. "I've been having these...dreams."

"Yeah," Emma stepped closer, reaching up to push a hand through his thick hair like she'd always dreamed of doing. "Was I in them?"

"You were the star, honey," he said huskily, reaching for her.

"So kiss me, Maddox, before I explode."

There was nothing sweet or slow about the kiss this time. It was pure need. Long awaited need. His mouth captured hers, his tongue exploring at will.

Emma lost all sense of time and place. She was overwhelmed by the sheer essence of the man in her arms. His smell—slightly woody and all male. His feel—powerful, passionate, and confident. His taste—slightly sweet from the champagne they'd had downstairs and something that was indefinably intoxicatingly Maddox.

She snuggled closer into his arms. He groaned and pulled her tighter. They bit, nipped, and dove into each other's mouths, taking, tasting, and sharing.

His hands raced up and down her back, his hips pressed so intimately against her waist that she could feel the evidence of his arousal burning into her. "I need you naked, Emma. Now," he gasped.

In a giddy blur, they undressed one another, fumbling with buttons and zippers. Kissing, touching, stumbling, they made it to the bed, where he lifted her with ease. Depositing her in the center of the bed, Maddox stood back, gazing down at her with the look of a man suddenly present with everything he'd ever wanted.

"You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Emma, for the first time in her life, reveled in her curves, allowed herself to be seen. She couldn't feel anything but beautiful as Maddox worshipped her with his eyes. Holding open her arms, she reached for him. "Love me, Maddox."

He joined her on the bed, letting his hands worship her as his eyes had. Lowering his head, his lips found her breast, feasting on the tender flesh like a starving man. He traced the rounded underside, then teased the hard nipple with his tongue and teeth. Her hips bucked up, grinding into him.

"Please," she begged.

"Oh, I intend to please us both, honey." His mouth switched to the other breast, and he repeated the arousing torment. Under him, Emma writhed and moaned, her hands

sliding over his body in a way that had him near the breaking point. His hand moved down her body, between her legs, pressing the heel of his palm against her mound.

Emma bucked, almost coming off the bed. She placed her hand on his, begging for more of his touch. When his hand moved further between her thighs, his finger finding and circling the small bud, Emma lifted her leg over his, allowing him deeper access. With a groan, she reached for him. Circling his strong erection, she closed around him, gliding her hand up and down his hard length.

“Oh, Emma!” His hips lifted off the mattress. “I can’t take anymore. I’m going to explode.” He reached for her, dragging her under him. “I need to be inside of you when that happens.” He lowered his body slowly, achingly, until he was seated at her entrance. With barely held patience, he slid inside her, groaning at the achingly sweet sensation of finally loving Emma.

Emma drew in a sharp breath, savoring the stretching, burning sensation of being filled by Maddox and surrounded by him. Closing her eyes, she moved with him, matching the slow pace he set. They moved together, their breath raspy, their groans of delight breaking the silence. Faster, faster, they moved, sweat pooling on their bodies as they strove together for the pinnacle.

She was growing tight, her body pulsating. Maddox reached between them, where their bodies joined. His fingers found her sensitive nub and massaging it, he pounded into her harder.

Emma shattered, screaming his name.

Maddox kissed her lips, her eyes, her mouth, loving her until she calmed. When she opened her eyes to look at him, he smiled down at her. “Hold on, baby.”

He lifted his hips until only the tip of his erection was still inside her. Emma reached up at the loss, pulling him back to her. She cried out as he entered her, climaxing all over again. Maddox groaned her name, falling into her, joining her

in a pleasure so intense, it went beyond anything he'd ever experienced.

Emma woke slowly, the watery sunlight filtering through the windows, making her close her eyes with a groan. With a yawn, her lids lifted once more, and she focused on keeping them open with effort. She was still sleepy—she certainly hadn't slept much last night.

Her body tingled as she recalled all the delicious things Maddox had done to her last night and the insatiable way her body had responded to his every move. Even now, after a marathon night of lovemaking, she wanted him again.

She winced as she moved from the bed, sore in places she was sure she'd never considered. As she dressed hurriedly, she wondered where Maddox was. Why had he left without waking her?

Was he sorry in the cold light of day? Did he regret moving their relationship from the friend zone?

Maybe the best thing for her would be to slip out, return to her own place and wait for him to call.

If he calls.

She shushed the devilish voice. She may not know if Maddox regretted last night, but she knew that he wouldn't keep her hanging either way.

If he had decided that one night was all he wanted with her, she knew what she had to do. As much as she'd hate it, she would find another job and go on with her life. It wouldn't be easy to do with a broken heart, but she'd have to manage. And, she'd have her memories from last night to see her through.

Opening the bedroom door, she listened for a moment for any sound. Hearing nothing, she moved quietly down the hallway. The white lights of the tree were still on, blinking silently. The fireplace was dark.

She could hear sounds from the kitchen—was that Maddox humming? And did she smell bacon? Should she go in there? Go back to bed?

Shaking her head, she decided to stick with her original plan. To go home and wait. That was sensible.

Right.

Her hand closed around the door knob.

“Where are you going?”

She turned to find Maddox wearing an apron, underwear, and nothing else, spatula in hand and a questioning look on his handsome face. It would have been funny if she had any idea what he expected from her.

“I...I thought I’d get out of here and let you have some peace and quiet. You know, it’s probably a good thing....”

“Emma.”

She stopped talking, knowing she’d been babbling like an idiot again. It seemed to be her go-to move around Maddox anymore. “Yes.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

Taking a deep breath, Emma forced a calm she didn’t feel. Her life, her happiness, depended on the next few minutes. “Then what do you want, Maddox?”

He moved around the couch, padding across the thick carpet on bare feet to stand before her. “I thought I made that pretty plain last night, but I’m willing to show you again.”

He stood so close that she could see the light in his dark eyes, the one that said he wanted her. His big body called to hers in a way so primitive that it made her weak. “Last night was wonderful,” she whispered. “But what happens when you don’t want me anymore, Maddox?” Tears formed in her eyes, and she turned her head to stare out the window. Clouds were building, and it looked like snow again.

“Oh, Emma,” Maddox flung the spatula toward the sofa and pulled her to him. A hand under her chin forced her eyes up to his. The moisture there made his heart ache. He never wanted to hurt her. He’d rather cut off his own arm. “Don’t you know that day will never come, honey? I’ll want you till the day I die and even beyond.” His arms closed around her,

dragging her against the very evidence of his words. “I want to spend my nights wrapped in your arms and my days hearing your laughter. You are my whole world, Emma.”

“Maddox!” Emma wailed, tears of joy flowing from her eyes. She buried her head in his throat, kissing the wild beat of his pulse. “I feel the same way.” She drew back slightly and looked up at him with a watery smile. “I was so afraid that last night was enough for you that you might be sorry....”

He placed a quick kiss on her lips. “The only thing I’m sorry about is not telling you sooner how much I love you.”

“I love you, too, Maddox. I always have. And I always will.”

“I was going to wait a while to give you time to adjust to our new relationship,” he reached into the deep apron pocket and withdrew a small black box, “I think a Christmas wedding would be beautiful.”

“Maddox?” Emma stared in wonder as she took the box from his outstretched hand. Opening it like the treasure it was, she gasped at the brilliant diamond winking up at her.

Maddox removed the ring, dropping the box soundlessly onto the carpet. Taking her left hand, he slid the ring onto her third finger. “Will you marry me, Emma, and be my Christmas every day?”

Emma’s hand trembled, and happy tears threatened once more. Taking a deep breath, she smiled at the man who filled her heart with happiness and her soul with such joy. “I can’t imagine a better present. Yes, I’ll marry you, Maddox.”

His head bent, and he captured her lips under his, sealing their promise of happily-ever-after.

Three months later...

“You know, you can get in trouble with the boss for that.”

Maddox grinned, his lips exploring his wife’s soft throat. “I’ll take my chances.”

Emma sighed, wishing she could wipe everything from her desk and pull her husband on top of her to assuage the fire

he'd started. The fire that always burned just below the surface.

True to his promise, they'd been married on Christmas day, just eight short days after they'd spent the night at his apartment. Emma had never asked how he'd pulled off such an elaborate event on such short notice. She'd been too happy to know that Maddox was hers for the rest of their lives.

"Maddox, I have an idea."

"Yeah," his tongue laved her ear. "Me too," he whispered erotically.

"No," Emma shivered, pushing lightly against his broad shoulders, "I really want to discuss my idea for a new line."

Maddox leaned back with a sigh, his hand smoothing a soft strand of hair behind the shell-like ear he'd just nibbled. His erection pulsed against his fly. "Okay, I'm listening. What's your idea? Sexy aprons? Spatulas that double as sex toys?" His brows wiggled.

"Baby clothes."

Emma held her breath, watching as Maddox stilled, his mouth parting silently. "Baby..."

"A whole line," Emma nodded, a soft smile playing about her lips. "From newborn to toddler."

Maddox swallowed. "Newborn?"

She took his hand and placed it on her stomach. "We could have the whole line up and running by the time our baby makes his appearance."

"His? You're giving me a son?"

"I think so, but we won't know for sure just yet." She watched Maddox's face change from shock to pure wonder. She'd waited to tell him she was pregnant until she was absolutely certain. Thankfully, she wasn't suffering from morning sickness, so it had been easy to keep her secret to herself. She'd seen the doctor yesterday, and the first ultrasound was scheduled next week. Then, they would know for sure, but she just had a feeling they were having a boy.

Their night together had resulted in many firsts for both of them. Their first child, a son, would arrive in time to celebrate his parents' second Christmas together. Emma hadn't thought anything could top last Christmas. The tiny life inside of her proved her wrong.

"Oh God, Emma," Maddox pulled his wife into his arms, a dopey look in his eyes. "I didn't think I could possibly be any happier."

"We could work on your idea, too," she whispered provocatively, the same dopey look on her face. "It sounds really, really sexy."

"Now that's a plan I can get on board with," he answered huskily, bending to take her lips in a kiss filled with promise.

A WORD ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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