



Christian Clause

Author: *Theresa Hodge*

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Description: Hope has some setbacks in life, but the Christmas season is the time for miracles, second chances, faith...and a new beginning. Christian Clause is successful, charismatic, and the owner of Clause Enterprises. He has set his sights on Hope. The attraction is mutual, but when he offers her a job as his assistant, he tries to put his interest aside to keep things professional. Will this holiday season work its magic and allow romance to bloom in and out of the boardroom for Christian and Hope? Or will it end with another disappointing setback with no glad tidings and joy?

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Prologue

Hope

“Can this day get any worse?”

Shivering, I lift my dark brown eyes to glare at the dark ominous clouds which mirror my mood. The darkened October sky will not let up soon, I surmise. I might as well continue my journey back to my apartment. It doesn't matter if I get drenched before I get there. A cold tremor runs through my body as I walk down the street from my office. Well, former office.

A sob catches in my throat.

About thirty minutes ago, I was relieved of my job as an Associate Developer Assistant in the computer department of Novak Corporation.

“I'm so sorry, Miss Grady, but your services are no longer needed,” Mrs. Barnett from HR told me in a sorrowful tone. “We've had to make some cutbacks, and I'm afraid that means laying off surplus staff.”

Surplus staff, I wanted to yell at her but left with my dignity intact. I stiltedly thanked her and went to my office to pack my stuff. After working in the corporation for five years, I didn't think I deserved such treatment. But when I saw Giles and Nat also clearing their desks, I had felt slightly better. Petty, but better.

Everyone came around to wish us well, but I knew they were happy that they weren't

in my shoes. It took great effort, but I managed to smile at everyone and thank them, even though I wanted to crawl under my desk and cry my eyes out.

Tears glisten in my eyes and I hastily brush them away. Tears won't solve anything. I need a plan.

Plan? What plan for a shitty life?

I have no job, no savings, no boyfriend...nothing.

Two months ago, Terrance, my boyfriend of over a year, walked out on our relationship. Why? He was no longer feeling the connection between us.

It was later I got to know that it was all because of his first love, Christie. They had dated back in college and broken up after graduating. But he hadn't been able to put her out of his mind.

"I have tried to forget about her, but she's in my heart, my soul," he told me the night he shattered my heart to pieces. "And now that she's single again, I see no reason we can't be together. She also feels we made a mistake breaking up."

Like a fool in love, I cried and begged. I reminded him of all the good times we spent together. But that didn't stop him from telling me it was over.

Terrance made me feel good about myself, and his loss from my life had hit me hard. Every day, for a month after he left, I read his poem-like text to me from when we had just started dating.

Your flawless satiny dark brown skin makes me think of smooth chocolate.

All I can think of whenever I'm with you is placing my lips on your full, glossy lips,

and running my fingers through your natural black hair.

Your curves are to die for and don't get me started on your heart-shaped face. An artist would die to paint it. And your eyes can eat a man whole; dark brown with light gold specks that sparkle like fire.

You're beautiful, babe. And I love you.

A hand squeezes my heart in pain. I deleted the texts when the words were too much for me to bear any longer, and everything that had to do with him in my life before he dumped me.

As if nursing a broken heart for the past two months wasn't bad enough, I lost my job as well.

Tears well up in my eyes.

Keep your chin up, Hope. You can overcome anything, baby.

I sniffle as I remember what my late mother used to tell me whenever I was blue.

I miss you, Mom.

I lost my parents in an automobile accident five years ago, and I haven't been the same ever since. I will never forget the day Debra, my older sister, called me to tell me the horrible news. It shattered me. The shock left me numb for days.

They were coming home from visiting a sick friend when a drunken truck driver pushed them off the road. It was painful for me because I hadn't seen them in a while.

After graduating from Spelman University, I fell in love with the city of Atlanta and

had no desire to return to the chilly atmosphere of Colorado where I grew up. My parents wanted me to return, but I was adamant about staying back in Atlanta. When I got a minor job working for an IT firm a few months after graduating, it sealed it for me. I went home for the holidays whenever I could. But after my parents died, I found it harder and harder to go back there even though my sister and her family lived there.

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And now, I'm a thirty-year-old woman with no job or love life. How am I going to pay my bills? Alice, my roommate, usually nagged if I was even a day late in paying my share of the rent.

She will blow her top and maybe even put me out if I can't pay the rent when it's due. My heart cringes at the thought of her barbed comments if I dare ask for a few days to complete my share of the rent which will be due at the end of the month.

Things haven't been easy. A year ago, the corporation offered us the options of a pay cut or a sack. We all chose to slash our salaries by fifty percent, which made life even harder for me. I could barely keep up with paying my bills, and now this? I planned to complete the rent money with this month's salary, but I don't even think I am going to receive any as they have chosen the first day of October to fire me.

I place my box on the ground as despair overwhelms me. Depression reaches out, grabs my throat, and threatens to choke me. I'm in so much pain at the heavy hand that life has dealt me. It's unfair. I try to think of what I might have done to bring this upon myself, but nothing comes to mind.

People brush past me as I stopped right in the middle of the sidewalk, but I don't care.

Why is my life so full of difficulties? One minute I'm smiling, and the next, I'm lamenting over one tragedy or the other. It's not fair.

I need someone to talk to, but I don't really have anyone except Debra. Calling up my older sister just to lament how shitty my life has turned doesn't seem like a good idea

to me. I'm thirty years old for crying out loud, and I've been independent for a long while. And so, I'm going to have to wallow in self-pity all alone.

I look up at the darkened sky and let the raindrops mix with my salty tears.

Chapter One

Christian

Cursing under my breath at the nonsense I have just read, my eyes, filled with fury, lift to regard the sultry blonde-haired woman who is gawking at me like she wants to eat me.

"Get out. You're fired!"

Her lips part with surprise as her blue eyes widen. "What?"

"You heard me," I throw at her with a savage bite. "I don't know how you got the job as my personal assistant, but you suck at it. I have tried to be patient with you for the past three days because I desperately need a personal assistant, but not at the detriment of my company."

"But..." her lips wobble and her eyes become wet with tears.

A grimace crosses my face because I'm in no mood for theatrics.

"But nothing. Please leave before I call security," I snap, getting to the end of my tether.

Why's a good personal assistant so hard to find these days?

“Please tell me what I’ve done wrong,” the teary-eyed woman persists, placing her hand on her hip.

With irritation, my gray eyes roam her body, beginning with her blonde hair she left flowing at her shoulders, her round face, her tight pale yellow blouse with the buttons almost popping, to her black miniskirt and yellow heels.

I know she is trying to be seductive, but I find her cheap and annoying. Why anyone would wear such clothes to the office is beyond me.

Gritting my teeth, I tell her, “Next time, cover up when coming to work. And learn how to spell, too.”

Her face turns a rosy hue, but I don’t care. I’m sick and tired of employees who feel they can get me by dressing nearly unclad. To further annoy me, she raises her hand to twirl a strand of her hair in her finger while maintaining what she believes is a seductive pose.

Pouting her lush lips, she says, “Is that all?”

“If you’re not out of here in sixty seconds, I’ll have security throw you out.”

All form of sultriness leaves her face. She straightens and gives me a fulminating glare.

“The rumors are true. You’re a cold, hard man, Christian Clause,” she remarks before turning on her heels and swaying her hips out of the office.

If I wasn’t so angry, I’m sure I would laugh at her words. I’m only cold and hard to people like her. But I don’t care one way or another about what people like her think about me. Come to think of it, I don’t care about public opinion. As long as I’m

happy, who cares? I didn't come this far in life to pander to the dictates of the public.

Reclining back in my swivel chair, I let out a heavy sigh. I have a lot of work to do, but I'm encumbered by the lack of a personal assistant.

Leaning forward, I buzz my secretary. I have had enough of unreliable workers who are only here to get me into bed or a relationship.

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“Mrs. Ashwell.”

“Yes, Mr. Clause,” she replies shortly.

“Call HR and tell them I need another assistant ASAP!” I instruct her in a snappy tone.

"Sure thing, Mr. Clause, I will get right on it. Will there be anything else?" Mrs. Ashwell replies.

"Yes. Tell them to send someone reliable this time around and not just any blonde bimbo that's more interested in dating the boss than doing her job."

Silence falls at the other end of the line.

“If they don’t send someone dependable, tell them I’ll have them all fired and hire a competent team.”

“All right, Mr. Clause.”

I don’t know who keeps on sending me sex sirens instead of personal assistants. But if I have one more seductive woman passing through my door, I’m ready to go down to HR to get to the bottom of the matter. Probably someone there isn’t taking his or her job seriously and wants to look for another one.

I try to be fair to my workers, but as a hard worker myself, I expect the same from them. I will not give less of myself.

Sighing, I push my chair back and rise. I stride across my carpeted floor to my floor-to-ceiling window to stare at the busy Colorado business street.

As usual, cars move past my office building. People walk up and down the streets, patronizing the shops below.

It brings back memories of the first time I walked down the streets in search of a building to begin my electronic business. Every building had been too expensive for me to rent. So, I went back to working for a factory to save enough money.

A smile spreads across my face when I remember the day I made my first million. Of course, millions have since turned into billions.

“I’ve come a long way,” I mutter and turn away from the window.

My nose catches the pungent scent of the woman who has just left my office. A grimace crosses my face. I almost gagged earlier when she stepped into the office. I wanted to ask her if she had her bath in a tub filled with perfume.

I shake my head as I return to my seat. The last assistant sent to me was equally incompetent. My fingers run through my hair as I settle in my chair. It isn’t the first time I’ve had women sucking up to me, but I’m particularly disgusted because this is a work environment. I don’t enjoy mixing business with pleasure. Everyone who knows me is aware of that. The bimbos refuse to understand that I don’t joke with my work. I didn’t come this far to have a fling with my personal assistant.

I never thought I would say this, but I miss my former personal assistant. She was a very efficient worker. Unfortunately, she had to move with her husband to London.

Pushing aside my feeling of discontent, I flip open the file on my desk.

Chapter Two

Hope

“I’m sorry, Miss Grady. We don’t have a position for you at the moment,” the HR manager says to me with a small smile on her face.

My heart crumbles in my chest at the disappointing words of the woman.

“Thank you,” I reply and force my stiff body from the chair. I straighten my blouse and pick up my purse.

With my shoulders slumped, I make my way out of the office. I navigate my way out of the building, thinking of what I’m going to do next. If I don’t find a job soon, I’ll be in big trouble with my piling up bills.

Out in the sunshine, I let out a frustrated breath. I’m confused as to where next to go as I watch cars move up and down the busy street. I turn around and look at the building I just vacated. It would have been nice working in the IT firm, but they don’t need my services.

Shifting my gaze, I spot a café a few blocks away. Keeping my fingers crossed that I’ll be able to get free Wi-Fi there, I force my feet into motion. As I cross the distance, a shiver of fear runs through me. What if I don’t find a job before the end of the month? Alice has already told me that if I don’t come up with my share of the rent by month’s end, she’ll look for another roommate.

“I thought we were friends,” I told her with tears in my eyes.

“We are, but I have to be realistic,” she returned with a savage bite. “I can’t afford to pay your bills and mine.”

“So, you’ll put me out?” I asked with shock.

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Swirling back her glorious blonde hair across her shoulders and sporting a small frown on her oval face, she said, “Well, if my new roomie doesn’t mind your sleeping on the couch and sharing the apartment with us, no problem.”

I could not believe my ears as she walked away to her room. We have been roommates for years. When she had some difficulty with her finances some time back, I assisted her with the bills before she paid me back. But now that the shoe is on the other foot, she refuses to help me.

“So much for friendship,” I mutter and push open the door of the café.

The cozy-looking place with its exquisite antique interior brings a smile to my face. I love the round tables with a burgundy table cloth. The décor was done in shades of blue and gold, which is a contrast to the white floor and black chairs. My interest is in the antique vases and art work on the wall. I have never been to this side of Downtown Atlanta before.

I choose a seat by the window and settle down on the comfortable chair. Almost immediately, a waitress, in a black and brown uniform, walks up to me with a smile on her face.

“Welcome.” She brings out her a white notepad. “What can I get you?”

I don’t really have much money on me, but seeing as I didn’t eat breakfast and I want to use their Wi-Fi, I know I have to order something.

“Coffee and a slice of cake, please.”

“Coming right up,” she says and is about to turn away when I ask, “Do you have Wi-Fi?”

She nods and says, “I’ll get you the password.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Thanks.”

I look out the window at the passersby and I wonder if I could work as a waitress. No shame there, as I’m desperate. I don’t think the pay would be much, but if I can give Alice at least half of the rent at the end of the month, I’m sure she’ll get off my case a little.

When the waitress with the lovely smile returns with my cup of coffee and a slice of cake, and a small note with the Wi-Fi password, I smile brightly.

“Thank you.”

I take a bite of the red velvet cake and feel as if I’m in heaven. It’s a rare treat for me because I try to eat healthily and stay away from things that will add to the weight. Not that I’m fat or anything, I just don’t want to be more voluptuous than I already am. I like being curvy. At five feet three inches tall, I’d like to believe that I carry my weight pretty well.

But that didn’t stop Terrance from leaving you.

My heart falls at the mocking voice.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell myself. “One day, I’ll meet a fantastic man who will truly love me and never leave me.”

I retrieve my mini laptop from my bag. I had to pawn my best laptop when things

became tight. I was able to get this small one for my online applications, though.

I log into my mailbox and my heart flips when I see an email from one of the firms I applied to.

Dear Miss Grady, we're sorry that...

I don't bother reading the rest of it. It's no use. I have received so many of such messages I wonder why I'm disappointed.

"Looks as if no one is hiring in the entire country," I murmur with heartfelt disappointment.

I applied for jobs in other states, not just Georgia, but they all appear fruitless. I love Georgia with all my heart, but if it doesn't have a job for me, I have to leave it.

After going through my emails and spam messages, yet not seeing anything promising, I let out a frustrated sigh. Snapping my laptop shut, I place my head in my hands and will my tears not to fall. The last time I was this teary-eyed was when Terrance left me. I'm thinking now that this is worse than him leaving me. I can't remember the last time I felt despair so great that it's as if nothing will ever be all right again.

I lift my head and look around the café, wondering if there's anyone there I can meet for a job. I'm past caring about how I look. Anxiety is gnawing at my heart.

There aren't many diners in the place, save an old couple and a man with his wife. My eyes move to the waitresses. I really don't mind being a waitress at this point.

Even though I lost my appetite, I still force the cake and coffee down my throat. I'm going to pay for it after all. Rising with my purse and laptop, I walk swiftly to the

counter and pay for the meal.

“Erm... I...” I tug at my earlobe. “Do you by any chance need a waitress?”

Offering me a small smile, the old man who apparently owns the café shakes his head.

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“I’m sorry, I don’t need one at the moment.”

Shamefaced, even though I don’t know why since I didn’t have a choice, I give him a stiff smile and walk out of the café.

What am I going to do?

Crestfallen, I walk down the street. I’m determined to find a job, no matter how meager. I’m ready to forget about my graduate status and look for any paying job.

Hours later, I return home with a heavy disappointment in my chest. I walked the length of the entire block and some, yet no one was hiring. Feeling as if the entire world has fallen on my shoulders, I drop on the couch and wonder for the umpteenth time what I’m going to do.

I barely sit down when the door to the small apartment opens and Alice comes in with a tall and skinny looking girl. Her brown eyes roam the small space while she flips back hair from her shoulders.

Alice, with a bright smile across her face, looks at me and says, “Hope, meet our—my new roommate, Becky.”

My jaw drops. “What?”

Shrugging, she replies, “I figured that you wouldn’t be able to come up with your share of the rent. So, I made alternative arrangements. I met Becky here at the gym and she’s looking for an apartment. She has cash up front. So...”

If the floor could open up and swallow me whole, I would be mighty glad at this moment. Despondency clings to me like a tight sheath. How can Alice do this to me after all we've been through together? When the apartment was burgled, I replaced most of the things, even hers because she blamed me for it. She said it was because Terrance and his friends came over one night. She didn't like the look of one of his friends.

My heart drops to my feet when Becky strides forward and, with a haughty expression on her face, asks, "When are you moving out?"

I watch my life becoming a hot mess. Alice and her newfound friend Becky making my life a living hell. Even though I sleep on the couch, they complain about every little thing that I do or don't do. I have to wake up very early to take a shower, before any of them wake up, because if they find me there, I will receive nasty words.

Becky complains about my belongings in her room, making me place them in the living room. Alice complains that it is making the place look crowded, making me sell off most of my belongings. I try getting another accommodation, but everyone has one excuse or the other to give me why I can't come and stay with them. Since I have nowhere else to go, I have to stay here and search for a job.

Whenever Alice and Becky have guests, I am told to leave the living room. Frustrated, I have to ask Alice what I ever did to her to deserve this.

Snarling, she tells me, "Now you know how it feels to have nothing. When you were moving about with your fancy clothes, good-paying job, and handsome hunk of a boyfriend, did you think of me? You should be grateful I allow you to crash on the couch because you bought it."

I weep myself to sleep on the couch. Jealousy is the reason Alice treats me like dirt. She does not understand that it is because I lived frugally that I could get most of the

stuff I have. And didn't Terrance dump me? How she must have laughed inwardly the night I cried in her arms, lamenting Terrance's betrayal.

When all my efforts to get a job prove futile, I swallow my pride and decide to call my sister for help. I have to do it quickly before Alice or Becky returns. If they find me using the phone, I'm afraid they might kick me out. They already warned me not to touch anything that wasn't mine in the apartment.

Tears roll down my eyes as the call connects. I never thought I'd be in this situation.

"Hello, Deb." Emotion clogs my throat, preventing me from saying more.

"Hope? What's wrong? Are you all right?"

Hearing her sweet voice feels as if a dam broke in my heart. Tears flow down my cheeks.

"Hope? You're scaring me. Please tell me what's wrong."

Hearing the anxiety in her voice, I try to pull myself together.

"I lost my job a month ago."

"Oh, love. I'm so sorry to hear that. Are you all right?"

I want to lie that everything is fine so as not to worry her. But, I can't, because I'm badly in need of help.

I shake my head. "I'm not all right, Deb. Things have been pretty rough lately."

"I'm sorry. Why don't you come home for the holidays, Hope? We haven't seen you

in ages.”

I draw in a stiff breath. Go home to Cedar Crest, Colorado? I don’t think I’m up for it. I mean, I left there for a reason. I don’t particularly like the cold temperature, mainly at this time of the year.

“I don’t think—”

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“No, Hope. I insist you come home. Please. Ray and I will help you figure things out.”

Scratching the back of my neck, I weigh my sister’s words. What does Cedar Crest have to offer? The small community I grew up in featured mountains, trees, and few businesses. What can I do there? Set up a business? A computer firm? Where do I stay? Surely I can’t encroach on Debra and her family.

More questions race through my mind.

“Look, Hope, I know you love Georgia, but please come home. I miss you. If you’re worried about getting a job, Ray told me that his boss might need an assistant at Clause Enterprises.”

A job! The words are like music to my ears.

“And you know you don’t have to worry about where to stay, don’t you? Staying with us is not up for debate. You can stay here until you’re back on your feet again.”

“Deb, I don’t know. I wouldn’t like to be an inconvenience to you, Ray and Aria.”

Laughter rumbles from Debra’s throat. “Are you serious? Aria has missed you, so have I. Ray would be delighted to have you stay with us.”

Silence descends between the two of us. I don’t want to be a burden to her and her family. I miss my four-year-old niece, too. But after living with Alice and Becky, I long for my own space. Not that Debra will ever treat me like an unwanted pet.

“Hope, don’t forget this is your home, too. Mom and Dad left it for us, but you let Ray and I have it,” Debra reminds me in a soft tone.

That was because I thought I had a life in Georgia and only holidays would get me back to Colorado.

Debra quietly adds. “I will never forget your generosity.”

I sniff. Debra and Ray had been having a tough time. It was the only thing I could do to help them at that time as Debra had refused to take money from me.

“It would delight Aria to see you. She talks about you all the time and asks when you will come visiting again.”

A soft gurgle of laughter bursts from my throat. “Emotional blackmail, too, huh?”

Debra giggles. “You know it. Oh, come on, Hope. If you don’t like it here, then you can always go back there or somewhere else. Just give it a try.”

Tears wet my eyes again. When I called her to inform her of what I was going through, I hadn’t expected her to suggest I come home with the promise of a job.

Feeling vulnerable at that moment, I agree. I tell her all that I’ve been going through. It shocks Debra that Terrance left me.

“I thought it was a match made in heaven.”

I can’t help laughing and crying at the same time because I had thought so too.

Debra and I talk for a while. I no longer mind if Alice or Becky comes home. I have some money from pawning my things. I’ll pay them for the call, even if they don’t

walk in on me.

“Please don’t give up, Hope. Dad used to say when one door closes, another opens. You’ve got to believe that, girl. Those words have got me through tough times.”

I nod as more tears spill down my cheeks.

“And you’re better off without Terrance. You don’t need a disloyal man in your life, anyway. Don’t you worry; I bet your Prince Charming is right here in Cedar Crest, waiting for your return.”

Laughter bursts from my throat. Memories of when Debra and I used to play with dolls and create imaginary characters flood my mind. She’s lucky that she found her own Prince Charming. I don’t know if I’ll ever find mine, but that’s the least of my worries at the moment.

I feel infinitely better after my phone call to my sister. I’ll go home for Thanksgiving. I don’t know yet if I’ll apply for the job. But then, what do I have to lose after weeks of searching for a job?

Perchance I get it, I’ll definitely stay in Cedar Crest and build a life there.

Home sweet home, here I come.

Chapter Three

Hope

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Tears glisten in my eyes when I see Debra waiting for me at the airport. All the fatigue from the flight flees from my body the instant she smiles at me.

Hurrying forward, I reach her and she throws her arms around me. My bags hit the ground as I return the hug. Suddenly, tears pour down my face. Hugging my sister reminds me of the time I used to come home into my mom's embrace. It feels as if she's the one I'm hugging.

You don't come home often enough, my mom used to say.

Sniffling, I pull back from Debra's arms. Tears also run down her face. We smile through our tears.

"I needed that," I tell her.

"Me, too," she replies with a small laugh.

Trying to contain my emotions, I say, "I've missed you."

She flips back her weave and says, "Yeah. I have that effect on people."

A soft gurgle of laughter bursts from my throat. Gosh, how I have missed her.

She lifts my hands and takes a step back to look at me.

"Girl, I swear every time I see you, you always look better than the last time."

Warmth spreads through me at her words. Debra always knew how to make me feel special. I know that I look a wreck with all I went through in Georgia, but my sister will never tell me that. Instead, she'll make me feel like a beauty queen.

I laugh again. "Thank you. You're not looking bad yourself."

She gives me an incredulous look and says, "Girl, please don't get me started. Between Ray and Aria, I don't know who drives me crazy more."

It feels so good to see her again; all I can do is laugh. She dips a little to carry my bag while I carry the other. Holding hands, we walk out of the airport to where she parked the sedan.

A chill runs through me and I'm not surprised. It's Colorado, after all, in winter. Debra and I place my bags in the car's boot and we get into the car. My sister pauses for a moment to give me a fond smile.

"I still can't believe you're here."

Returning her smile, I say, "Me neither."

She starts the car and drives into the busy traffic. The car eats up the distance as we drive away from the small airport. My eyes roam hungrily all over the place.

Over the years, from being a small picturesque town with a few inhabitants, Cedar Crest has grown into a big town. When I was growing up here, we used to go to Colorado Springs for things that we couldn't find in Cedar Crest. But as Debra drives down the interstate towards home, I see that things have changed even more. The town has developed even more since the last time I visited years ago.

I can see that they have extended the shopping mall. More buildings house spas,

cafes, small businesses, and even a bigger amusement park for kids. I have to say that I'm quite impressed and pleased. Even though it's just two days to Thanksgiving, houses and shops are decorated with Christmas lights and decorations. Christmas carols blare from loudspeakers.

Seeing children playing around in the snow in front of their houses as Debra turns into our street brings back nostalgic memories. Cedar Crest always started celebrating Christmas early. I'm glad to see that tradition hasn't changed. Sometimes, I like to think it's because the snow falls there abundantly throughout the fall and winter months. I recall my childhood with a wistful smile and how Christmas used to be my favorite time of the year. Gigantic mountains surround the town, which serves as some sort of cocoon.

"A lot has changed, I must say," I mention as my eyes roam the streets.

Unlike the busy streets of Atlanta, Cedar Crest is a peaceful place to live in. Although I don't like the weather because it's mostly cold with a paltry amount of sunshine, I like the serenity that the town offers.

"It sure has," Debra replies as she pulls up in front of the house.

A thick knot forms in my throat as I stare at the house I grew up in. I wait for my mom to come out of the house with arms outstretched, with my dad standing behind her with a loving smile. When they don't, tears sting my eyes.

I miss you, Mom and Dad.

As if Debra knows what's going through my mind, she reaches out and clasps my hand with a warm smile on her face.

"They're in a better place," she says and opens the car door.

I nod and let myself out of the car into the snow-covered driveway. I gaze at the one-storied structure with a fond smile. Memories flood my mind as my eyes shift to my bedroom window. I remember sneaking out of the window to go to a party. It wasn't surprising that I fell and sprained my ankle. I ended up not going to the party, had a sprained ankle, and was also grounded by my mom.

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Carrying my bags from the boot, Debra teases, “Come on, don’t be a stranger. Let’s go in.”

I laugh and follow her into the house. I sigh at the warm interior of the house and the smell of good cooking. Debra’s fortunate that Ray is an excellent cook.

Debra takes my bags to my room. Even before I remove my coat in the hallway, my darling little niece runs out of the kitchen.

“Aunt Hope!” she cries with joy.

I go down on my knees and wrap my arms around her. Emotion tugs at my heart as I ensconce her small body in my embrace. I last saw her when she was three years old.

Oh, how I missed her and her cute smiles.

She pulls away from me and I see how much she has grown. Her round face inherited from Debra is still as cute as ever. Her big black eyes are still full of curiosity. I kiss her dimpled cheeks and ruffle her curls.

Rising, I lift her and she giggles as I tickle her. “How’s my favorite niece?”

She giggles again. “I’m your only niece.”

I laugh heartily as we make our way to the kitchen.

“Something smells nice.”

Ray turns from the stove where he's grilling several steaks. His wide smile, so like his daughter's, makes me realize how much I miss him, too.

Ray's a great guy whom I'm so glad Debra married. The level of understanding between the two of them never fails to amaze me. Although he can't be described as handsome, he's tall, broad-shouldered, bald, with an angular face and a ready smile.

"Hey, stranger," he says as he strides forward to hug me with his daughter still in my arms. "How was your flight?"

Smiling as he pulls away, I say, "I'm fine but a little tired, though."

"Is dinner ready?" Debra asks as she comes into the kitchen.

She places a kiss on Aria's cheek and kisses her husband.

My heart swells at the sight. I wish I could find a man to love me and treat me right the way Ray does my sister. Pushing away the thought, my eyes travel around the kitchen, noting the changes that were made.

Discussing Ray's work and how his folks back in Denver are doing, I help to make a salad despite his and Debra's protests.

The conversation around the dinner table is joyous as Debra and I catch up on what has been going on in our lives. I deliberately skip out all the nasty details of the way Alice and her new roommate treated me.

When I told Alice I was leaving that morning, I saw the guilt in her eyes although she tried to hide it. Becky told me 'Good riddance', but I didn't take it to heart. She was only acting from whatever Alice told her of me. I didn't know her and she didn't know me, so I didn't let her parting words hurt me.

When Alice tried to say something else, I carried my bags and left the house for good. I hope never to come across someone like her again.

“You must be exhausted.” Debra notices with a small frown.

I simply nod. Although my flight was in the evening, I left the house in the morning and spent the entire day at the airport lounge, waiting for my flight to be announced. One more minute spent with Alice and Becky, and I was sure I would have lost it.

“Why don’t you take a bath and go to bed to get some rest?” Debra suggests in her usual motherly fashion.

“Yes. Please go and rest,” Ray adds.

Stifling another yawn, I say, “But I want to help do the dishes and put away all this food.” I look down at my barely touched meal of steak, mashed potatoes, and salad on the side.

Ray chuckles. “Don’t worry about it, Hope. I’ll help Debra put away the leftover food and clean the kitchen.”

Not wanting to argue because I’m exhausted and in need of sleep on a bed for the first time in weeks, I rise slowly from the table. After bidding them goodnight and kissing Aria’s cheek, I leave the dining room. Taking a shower and lying on the comfortable bed from my childhood, I sigh with pleasure.

It really feels good to be home.

Chapter Four

Hope

A smile crosses my face as my eyes flutter open the following morning. I can't remember the last time I had such a refreshing sleep.

Hearing sleet fall on the roof makes my smile widen. I stretch gracefully, yawn, and shiver from the cold. Sighing, I tuck the thick bed covers securely around me to ward off the iciness. It hadn't been so cold the previous night, so I have on only a pair of thin pajamas. I forgot I was no longer in the small and cozy apartment in Atlanta.

Last night, I was too tired to look around the room. Nothing has changed much. My room has always been done in shades of baby pink and blue. I'm glad to see that Debra left it the same. Only the pink carpet was changed to cream. I don't mind at all; I'm just blessed to have a place to lie my head.

The four-poster bed Mom bought in a yard sale, the antique table and chair, a small closet, and pictures on the wall are still the same, though. I remember choosing this room out of the other three rooms in the house because I wanted to always see what was going on in the street. Debra loves quietness, so she chose the room overlooking the yard that has been turned to a nursery, while my parents' room is down the hallway.

I'm still musing about my childhood when I hear a knock on the door.

"Come in," I call, eager to see my sister.

The door opens to reveal a smiling Debra, who peeks her head around the corner.

Before I can say anything, she sprints across the floor and jumps on my bed. She dives under the sheets and gathers me in a loving embrace. We both laugh in memory of how I used to jump on her bed when I was younger.

Debra used to enjoy sleeping in, but I never allowed her. And as a rule, Mom never allowed us to lock our doors with keys, so I always took delight in going to Debra's room and waking her up for a long talk.

"I can't tell you how happy I am that you're finally home." Her voice holds so much joy; all I can do is smile brightly. "I have missed you terribly. Having you living so far away is so not cool."

I laugh. "I've missed you, too, Deb. I'm home now."

Placing a kiss on my forehead and she says, "Well, I hope it's for good this time around. I know you love Atlanta ever since you schooled there and don't like the cold weather here, but I missed you dearly."

I understand the way Debra feels. We have always been close growing up with four years' difference between us in our ages. All that changed when I moved away. Debra went to Colorado State University so she would be close to home. We keep in touch, but it isn't the same as seeing each other and spending hours talking until Mom came to look for us.

"I know, Deb. I miss our time together, too," I admit with a grin as we snuggle closer.

"I just pray Ray can get you a job in his workplace," Debra says in a voice filled with hope. "I won't miss you so much anymore."

I have mixed feelings about settling down in Cedar Crest. But at the moment, I'm grateful to be home with loved ones. I know little about Ray's job, except he's an engineer at Clause Enterprises.

"I'll keep my fingers crossed," I finally say as I don't know what the job entails, not that I should be choosy at this point in time of my life.

"Me, too," Debra concurs. "Anyway, we can look at other places, you know. Maybe you can join me in my interior decoration business."

I chuckle. "Maybe." Changing topics, I ask, "Where's everyone?"

"Aria is still sleeping. Ray is at work. So, it's just the two of us for breakfast."

"I like the sound of that," I remark and we laugh.

We continue catching up on childhood memories until we hear Aria call for her mother.

"And her royal highness is awake."

We burst into laughter and Debra rises from the bed.

Watching her with fond eyes as she crosses to the door, I say, "I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Alright, take your time."

Humming, I push aside the bedcover and rise from the bed. I catch my shoulder-length hair into a low ponytail before doing my morning stretches. After moving my body, I take several yoga positions.

Satisfied with my little exercise, I pad across the carpeted floor to the window to draw back the flowery silk curtains and stare out of it with a fond smile. Snow pings against the window and the faint sound of wind graces my ears.

Winter!

My favorite time of the year! Even though I don't like being cold and always have to cover up throughout the season, I love it nonetheless. Christmas used to be my favorite holiday until my parents died, and I didn't come home often anymore.

Turning away from the window, I stride out of the room to the bathroom down the hallway to take a shower. I sing a Christmas carol. After my shower, I head back to my room. I was too tired to unpack last night, so I quickly do that before slipping on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I pull on my favorite blue sweater and black ankle-length snow boots. I walk down the stairs to the sound of Debra and Aria talking in the kitchen. The aroma of fried eggs and bacon fills the house.

"Good morning, my darling." I walk over to Aria and place a kiss on her forehead. "I hope you slept well."

She nods and says, "Uh-huh."

I smile and pull out a chair at the table and Debra pours me a cup of coffee.

"This looks delicious," I comment, fixing my eyes on the toast, bacon, and eggs.

I push back the emotion that clogs my throat. Most times, I skipped breakfast because I couldn't afford it. Life has really been difficult for me these past weeks. My gaze shifts to the window to avoid Debra's questioning gaze. With a rueful smile, I watch as the snow bathes the backyard in tiny flurries.

Refreshed from my night's sleep, I contribute heartily to the discussion at the table, unlike last night when I was so tired. Debra talks about her business and how it is flourishing. It thrills me because things had been tough initially for her when she first started.

Finally, we finish up the delicious meal and I tell Debra that I have to get some toiletries at the store. In my hurry to leave the apartment, I forgot to pack some. I didn't worry because I knew I could get everything I needed when I got to Cedar Crest.

"You can use my car." Debra sips from her cup of coffee. Adding on teasing note, she says, "You remember the way to the mall, don't you?"

Giving her a mocking affronted look, I say, "Of course."

"Good. You can take the car wherever you want to go. I don't intend on going anywhere today."

My brows shot up. "I'm only going to the mall."

With a twinkle in her brown eyes, she sips her coffee. "Who knows? There are a number of eligible bachelors right here in Cedar Crest. Maybe you will meet one and they will make you forget about your heartache. Soon you will be saying, Terrance who?"

I let out a sigh and lift my eyes toward the ceiling before meeting Deb's stare. "Slow your roll, Deb. I only arrived yesterday."

Debra shrugs with a mischievous smile on her face. "We really can't say where we'll find love."

“Oh, please, Deb. Not in Cedar Crest, of all places.”

Putting down her cup, Debra’s face twists into a frown. “What do you mean by that? Give the men here a chance, Hope. If I hadn’t met Ray at the University, I would have told you they’re men like him around here. Plus, he has good friends he could introduce you to.”

I laugh and shake my head. “You’re something else, Deb. I’m not ready for anything serious.”

“Just think on it, okay. We could go on a double date night sometimes.”

I lift my hands in mock surrender. “Little Miss Cupid, please get off my back.”

Not waiting for her to reply, I quickly rise from the table, kiss Aria’s sweet-smelling hair and exit the room. Debra’s laughter follows me up the stairs. I shake my head. I came here to find peace and possibly a job.

Definitely not love.

Chapter Five

Hope

“Why am I not surprised?” I say as I pull up in the parking area of The Cedar Crest Mall.

The Colorado skies are ominous with the threat of heavier snow. I hope that I can finish my shopping and be in the comfort of the house before it starts getting worse. I stand for a moment, looking at the magnificent edifice. Over the years, the mall has changed from a three-story building into an outstanding structure. The glass and

marble building is so huge I have to tilt my head back to take it all in.

A shudder runs through me. I realize that I'm standing in the cold. I make my way through the throng of other shoppers heading for the entrance. A pair of doormen in red and white uniforms stand at the entrance, opening doors and welcoming people. I walk through the sliding doors, relieved to be out of the cold.

I can't help the bright smile that crosses my face when I see how decked the place is for Christmas. Shoppers jostle around me, heading for the aisles, counters, and escalators. I just stand there in the middle of the huge mall, remembering when my mom and I used to come here. An awe-inspiring forty-foot-high green Christmas tree stands in magnificence at the side of the mall. My smile widens when I register how beautifully decorated it is with red and green ornaments, white and red bows, Christmas lights, and garlands.

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Everything in the place, from the wreaths to the golden bells hanging around the mall reminds me of Christmas as a child. I tuck my hands into my black coat as memories of fighting for who would put either the star or the angel on top of the tree flood me. Every year, Debra and I would flip a coin for who got to do it.

My eyes lift to the floors above as shoppers throng all over the place. I'm amazed at the number of Christmas shoppers since it's only two days to Thanksgiving. I hear gleeful laughter in the midst of the Christmas music piping through the speakers situated throughout the mall.

I glance to my left to see a large ice-skating rink erected. Kids and adults alike swirl around the festively decorated rink, having the time of their lives. My mouth lifts into a smile and I just continue standing there, viewing the skaters with longing. A feeling of melancholy overcomes me when I remember how Debra and I spent time here as children with our parents. I wish I could turn back the hands of time. Those are such happy memories that I will treasure forever.

Catching myself staring unblinkingly at the skaters, I shake off the nostalgic feeling. A happy feeling overwhelms me as I think of Debra, Aria, and me skating at the rink. Oh, what fun we'll have.

Suddenly, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. My spine stiffens and my heart hammers against my chest.

What's going on?

I can't remember the last time I felt this way. I feel as if life is being sucked out of

me. Unexpectedly, a thrill of excitement flows through me.

Something must be going on around me.

I slowly turn my head and meet intense gray eyes staring at me. The man's eyes remind me of smothering ashes with swirls of smoke rising from its embers. Such gorgeous eyes!

I shiver, and my hand automatically goes to my chest. I rub it as if I'm trying to tell my heart to stop pounding. I can feel his stare piercing me to my very soul. My regular breathing turns into pants, and my heart continues to beat erratically against my chest. Emotions roll through me as the man's gray stare searches mine.

Then one side of his mouth tilts up and my heart flips in response to his sexy grin that shows off his perfect white teeth. My eyes travel down his magnificent body.

Wow! Am I hallucinating? Are men still made like this anymore? My throat runs dry. He's at least six feet four inches in height with broad shoulders, narrow hips, lean long legs, and a face that would make a Greek god jealous. His wavy blond hair is beautifully cut and styled, and swept back from his forehead. His brows are neatly trimmed, his nose slightly pointed, and lips and jaw firm. His broad shoulders fill out his black jacket impressively. I can see the firmness of his stomach through his blue shirt. His pant-clad legs show strength. He doles out masculine strength in waves. I can feel it wrapping around me.

This guy is the total package.

Tugging at my earlobe, I'm stunned at the effect he's having on me. I have seen countless handsome men; Terrance is in fact drop-dead gorgeous. So, why is this man making me weak in the knees? Heat inflames my body as I wonder what's happening to me. I take in a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to calm my ragged nerves.

Oh, my God. His eyes trail my body and heat suddenly pools in between my legs.

His eyes are so expressive my lips part in arousal. His relentless stare causes a shiver to slither down my spine. I can feel him undressing me. And I like it. Usually, I would be both irritated and disgusted and would walk away. But, I find myself rooted to the spot, ensconced in his stimulating presence.

Belatedly realizing how silly I look gawking at a stranger, albeit a drop-dead gorgeous one, I make to move away.

Chapter Six

Christian

My gaze roams with boredom around the mall until my eyes finally settle on a curvaceous woman standing in the center of the mall. For some reason I don't understand, my interest immediately piques. Perhaps it's the way she's standing still, despite the throng of shoppers.

Even though her back is to me, I crave to get just a glimpse of her face. I take a step closer, eager to see the face that goes with such a banging body. My crotch area tightens as I take in the way her clothes fit her curvy backside. Her skintight jeans hug snugly her flaring hips.

Suddenly, the woman turns and our gazes clash. Her dark brown eyes widen, and her mouth opens and closes. I take in her flawless dark brown skin with awe. My gaze shifts to her full lips shining with gloss.

"Hello, have we met before?" I ask, taking in her curvy form.

The stunning woman is considerably short in my estimation. Her chin barely reaches

my chest area. I figure she should be about five feet three. I tower over her like an apartment building. I root my gaze to her heart-shaped face, down-turned dark brown eyes with specks of lighter gold. Her nose is straight with the tip pointing downward. Her medium length, natural black hair bounces against her shoulders.

My eyes drop lower to her lovely neck, then lower to the generous mounds on her chest. Gosh, I wish I could put my hands on them and squeeze them until I hear her moan. Instantly, desire licks through my veins. I want her deliciously curvy body under me so badly I ache inside. The woman remains speechless as she stares up into my face. Her spine noticeably stiffens before she replies.

“No, I don’t know you.” She turns to walk away and, unexpectedly, I panic.

I can’t allow her to go without knowing her name or a way to contact her. Everything inside me admits that she’s definitely an interesting woman to get to know.

“Wait. Don’t go. Can we have coffee together?” I ask, trying to keep this gorgeous woman from leaving, and me from never getting to see her again.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I have never in all my life done this. Most times, it’s the other way around. I go somewhere and have the women falling over themselves to get to know me. And even when I want to approach a woman, it’s not at a mall with a cheesy line like ‘Have we met before?’

I run my fingers through my hair as I wait for her reply. I swallow thickly as I see her shaking her head. My eyes widen. No way! No woman has ever rejected my offer before. A thick frown crosses my face. What in the world is happening? Maybe, I should have just sent my secretary instead of coming here myself to look for the best birthday gift for a friend.

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Damn it!

“I came to shop,” she finally says after a short while.

A grin covers my face. “It’s only coffee.”

She tilts her head to the side as if considering my proposal. The gesture causes my grin to widen. This has never happened to me before. It makes me even more intrigued by her.

I chuckle. “Is it so hard to decide?”

A smile lifts around the edges of her mouth, and she laughs softly. The sound sends tingles all over my body, alarming me.

She shrugs. “Okay. Coffee sounds wonderful.”

Great!

“I’m Chris, by the way.” I lift my hand for a handshake.

Beaming, she says, “I’m Hope.”

I decide not to use any more cheesy lines along the lines of what a beautiful name she has for a beautiful lady. Instead, I take her hand and stifle a groan as bolts of electricity shoot through my body in contact with her. Pleasure runs through me when I see her brown eyes widen. Quickly, she retrieves her hand and lowers her eyes.

Happy that she too is feeling the chemistry between us, I lead the way to the coffee shop in the mall.

I feel an inch taller walking with such a gorgeous woman. Usually, I have blondes snuggling to my side like arm candy, but not Hope. She carries herself in such a way that one won't know we are together. With every passing minute in her presence, I'm getting more and more intrigued.

Thankfully, the coffee shop isn't crowded, unlike the mall. I lead her to one of the white tables at a corner of the shop. A waitress in a white and pink uniform comes to take our order. I'm not moved when I notice the young woman gawking at me. I nod at Hope.

"Please take her order."

"Only coffee, please. Thank you," Hope simply says.

My brows shoot up. "Coffee only?"

Shrugging, with a twinkle in her eyes, she says, "Well, that was the only thing you offered."

I let out a chuckle.

"Besides, I've already had breakfast," she adds with a small smile.

I want to argue so I can spend more time with her, but I let it go. She doesn't seem to be the kind of woman who will allow others to dictate to her.

"Coffee for me, too," I tell the waitress who is still staring at me as if all her Christmases had come in one package.

“Sometime this year,” I tell the young woman.

She blushes deeply and says, “Right.” before leaving to get our order.

Hope’s low laugh makes me return my attention to her.

“Care to share the joke?”

Lifting her beautiful face, she says, “Do you get that a lot?”

My eyes narrow with confusion. “Get what?”

“Mindless stares from women.”

Startled laughter rumbles from my throat as I didn’t know that she had noticed the way the waitress stared at me.

Lifting my shoulders and dropping them, I remark, “Sometimes. But I bet a woman like you doesn’t do such things.”

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Instead of replying, she looks away just in time for the waitress to bring our cups of coffee.

Determined to know more about her, I ask, “So, what brings you here, Thanksgiving shopping or Christmas shopping?”

After taking a sip from her coffee, she says, “Neither. I’m here to get some personal stuff. What about you?”

I lean back in the chair to regard her with interested eyes. “I’m here to look for a birthday gift for a friend.”

Her eyes widen a little.

“What?” I ask, intrigued by the action.

She shrugs lightly. “Well, you don’t look the type to go about buying birthday gifts for friends.”

Laughter escapes from my throat as I lean forward to place my hands on the table. In a low voice, I ask, “What kind of man do you think I am?”

Suddenly, the air thrums with sexual tension. My eyes drop from hers to her lips. Desire slams through my body and leaves me breathless for a minute as I watch her chew on her bottom lip. I feel like drawing closer to trail my tongue across her full lips and nibble them.

Just then, a couple with two kids enters the place nosily and breaks the tension between Hope and me. Grimacing, I sit back and watch how she tries to avoid my gaze. There's something between us I want to explore. When I see what I want, I go for it. I don't allow the grass to grow under my feet.

"What are you doing for Thanksgiving?"

Her breath catches in her throat as her brown gaze clash with mine.

"I'm spending it with my sister and her family, whom I flew from Atlanta to see," she tells me matter-of-factly.

I'm not bothered by her response. "So, when can I see you again?"

"Are you for serious?"

I chuckle and nod.

She shakes her head and says, "I came here to be with my sister and her family."

"I don't see how seeing you again would hinder that," I challenge softly.

"It does because I don't have the time for anything else."

"Not even a harmless date?"

Raising her delicately carved brows, she says, "Is it really going to be a harmless date?"

I plaster a grin on my face when I say, "You tell me."

She laughs and I enjoy the sound of it. She shakes her head again and says, “It will not be possible, Chris. I just got out of a relationship and I’m not about to start another. I came to Cedar Crest to enjoy the holidays with my family, and that’s it.”

I open my mouth to tell her I don’t want a relationship from her. But then, I pause and ask myself what I really want from her. Sex, red hot steaming sex?

No. That’s not what I desire from her. At the moment, I just want to get to know her because she seems like a very interesting person. There’s the added advantage of her stunning beauty. Before I can tell her we should start with getting to know each other, she astounds me by pushing back her chair and rises swiftly.

“Thanks, Chris, for the coffee. I better get on with my shopping. It was nice meeting you.”

I just sit there watching her swaying hips as she walks out of the coffee shop. Then I let out a curse.

Did I just let her go?

Swiftly, I pay for the coffee and rise, belatedly realizing that I didn’t even take a sip from mine. I hurry out of the place back to the mall. My heart tightens in my chest when I catch no sight of her luscious body. Shoppers move noisily about the place, but the woman clad in jeans and a jacket with a white and purple sweater proves elusive. I check the stores on the ground floor, hoping that she dashed into one of them just to avoid me.

After going through each one, I don’t see her, which heightens my frustration. I run my fingers through my hair as I stare at the escalators. Could she have gone up to one of the upper floors? Feeling like a stalker and a maniac, which is totally out of my character, I head for the escalators. After moving through almost all the floors, I

realize that I'm making an utter fool of myself.

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I burst into laughter in self-mockery. Did I just spend almost an hour looking for a woman I only just met? It defies all reasoning. If my friends could see me now, they would say I'm definitely losing it.

But the woman isn't just any woman. I have to give her that. Her jasmine scent still tickles my nostrils. I wish I had gotten more information from her about who her sister is and where she lives. It would have made my search easier because I'm determined to find her.

"What is wrong with me?" I ask myself for the umpteenth time.

Never has a woman had me all worked up, not even when I was a teenager trying to get my first girlfriend. Hope's brown eyes with specks of gold flash through my mind again. Those eyes could eat a man whole.

No. I shake my head. I'll find her, even if it's the last thing I do. And when I find her, I won't let her say a single word before crushing her thick lips with mine. The thought of kissing her makes my body harden instantly. And then I'll take her to a special dinner where we'll get to know each other.

"Watch out, Hope—if that's your actual name—I'm coming for you, and this time around, I won't take no for an answer."

Chapter Seven

Hope

“Why can’t I stop thinking about him?” I ask myself a few days later.

I can’t believe that thoughts of the handsome hunk I met at the mall have flooded my mind repeatedly. Even during Thanksgiving Day, my mind drifts to him and I wonder what he is doing at that moment. Hastily, I push the thought from my mind, ashamed of thinking about him when I have a feast before me with my loved ones.

I better put thoughts of him aside before he makes me botch my interview.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror. I woke up early to make sure I didn’t arrive late and to take special care in my appearance for my interview at Clause Enterprises. Sweet Ray put in a good word for me and helped to submit my application. Thankfully, I have worked as a personal assistant in between jobs.

I stare at my rounded hips revealed by the tight black pencil skirt I have on. My full breasts slightly strain the cream ruffled blouse covering them. I feel ready for the interview. Carrying my black purse, I leave the room and gently walk down the stairs in my cream heels.

“Wow. Don’t you look like a personal assistant already?” Debra teases as soon as I step into the kitchen.

I throw her a fond smile and place my purse on the counter before pouring myself a cup of coffee.

“Breakfast is ready,” she announces, but I shake my head.

“I don’t think I can stomach food for now. I’m so nervous, as if it’s my very first interview. I don’t know why.”

She smiles beautifully. “It’s because you’ve been searching for a job. Don’t worry,

you'll get it. Ray said that his boss is badly in need of one, so I'm sure you'll be hired. You have the looks and the brains."

Laughter erupts from my mouth. "The looks? What has that got to do with being a personal assistant?"

"Everything. A wealthy man like Clause would want people around him to always look good. You, my dear, look sensational."

Unable to stop myself, I go over to where she's standing by the oven and throw my arms around her.

"You've always been good for my ego."

She laughs. "I know, right?"

I pull away and tears glisten in my eyes at the motherly role she had taken.

"Thank you," I say with heartfelt emotion.

She shrugs it off and I return to my cup of coffee. I leave the house a few minutes later and take a cab to Clause Enterprises. I pay my fare and stand for a moment looking at the magnificent building in the heart of the town. Keeping my fingers crossed that I'll soon be an employee there, I walk into the building. I'm not surprised at all by the opulent décor and the chic looking receptionist.

Pasting a smile on my face, I reach the receptionist's desk.

"Good morning."

She returns my smile. "Good morning. How may I help you?"

"I'm Hope Grady. I'm here for the interview for the position of a personal assistant."

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“Go up to the third floor. Someone from HR will interview you.”

“Thank you.”

I briskly walk to the elevator, eager to get the interview over with. I’m joined by two other ladies who get off at the second floor.

Letting out a deep breath when the door finally opens on the third floor, I find myself in a tastefully furnished reception where a woman is waiting for me. Apparently, the receptionist called to inform her I was on my way up.

“Miss Grady?” the middle-aged woman asks with a small smile.

I nod.

“Please come with me.”

She leads me into a nicely furnished office.

“Please take a seat.”

“Thank you.” Carefully, I slide into the chair.

She settles down on a swivel chair and I tug at my earlobe.

“Don’t be nervous, Miss Grady. You have quite an impressive resume.”

“Thank you.”

“How was Thanksgiving?”

My eyes lift with surprise at the question.

“It was lovely. I spent it with my sister and her family.”

“That’s wonderful. Some of my folks came from Denver and we had a splendid time.”

I like the woman interviewing me. She’s friendly and her smile never wavers.

“What do you know about Clause Enterprises?”

I smile and answer, “I know the company deals in electronics, cosmetics, hotel, and restaurant businesses.”

“Good. What makes you think you will be a good fit for this company, Miss Grady?”

“I believe with my wealth of experience, which I’ll bring to the table, I’ll be able to fit perfectly for the job. As stated in my resume, I have worked in such an environment before, only smaller. So, it’s just like continuing from where I stopped.”

“Do you realize that we may put you in the position of doing a lot of traveling from time to time?”

I nod. “Yes. It was part of the job description.”

“Do you have any obligations or encumbrances to prohibit you from doing so?”

“Certainly not. I’m single and happy.”

I hope she believes me because I actually enjoy traveling and I look forward to it. Well, that’s if I get the job, anyway.

“Could you please wait for a few minutes while I consult with my boss? I don’t normally handle the interviews, but because of a lack of competent employees these days, they called me to do it.”

Her words send a frenzy of anxiety running through me. I don’t know what to say as she rises and goes into an inner office. Would I have preferred the unknown former interviewer to her? Since she’s so warm and friendly, I can’t really say.

My mind goes over what getting the job will mean to me. Going back to Atlanta will no longer be an option, and Cedar Crest will become my home again. I don’t know how I feel about that. I love being around my sister and these past few days, we’ve drawn closer. I can only hope that we get back the closeness we used to have before I went away to college.

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I decide that I really want to stay in the town I grew up and be around Debra, Ray, and Aria. Maybe, I could get my own place close to Clause Enterprises.

The thought gladdens my heart.

The woman comes back a few minutes later with the same smile on her face.

“Congratulations, Miss Grady. We would like to offer you the job as a personal assistant to Mr. Clause.”

My heart flips with joy at the good news. A bright smile turns the corners of my lips.

"You can start tomorrow. Wait a short while for your employment letter.”

I nod, too overcome by emotion to say anything. I can't believe that I finally have a job after weeks of searching for one. It's actually not my dream job, but at least I can earn something. My eyes enlarge when I receive the appointment letter and see the salary structure. It's more than generous.

“If you do your job very well, I can assure you of a pay increase,” the woman says when she catches my reaction to the mouth-watering salary.

I hold back laughter as I feel like standing up and dancing.

“You'll work with Mr. Clause and his secretary on the fourth floor.”

“Thank you very much,” I say as I push myself to my feet, smoothing down my

clothes.

“Welcome to Clause Enterprises.”

Chapter Eight

Hope

I’m a bag of nerves the following day as Ray pulls up in the parking lot of Clause Enterprises.

“Relax, Hope. Mr. Clause might be a hard boss to work with, but he’s a great guy.”

I haven’t really brought myself to think about the man I’ll be working for. All I know, which I heard from Ray, is that he’s a man who demands what he gives. He’s a workaholic and a sucker for perfection, and expects the same from everyone who works for him.

Since I have no problem with those stipulations, I surmise that we’ll work well together. Ray and I part ways on the second floor as I ride the elevator to the fourth floor which opens to an opulent reception area. No one is about, so I walk nervously to the first office I see.

A dark-haired middle-aged woman turns from a photocopier to look at me with a smile on her face.

“You must be Miss Grady.”

Resisting the urge to tug on my earlobe, I smile in return. “Yes.”

“I’m Mrs. Ashwell, but you can call me Clara. I’m Mr. Clause’s secretary.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say as we shake hands.

“Same here. I’ll show you to your office and then to Mr. Clause’s office, Miss Grady.”

“All right. Please call me Hope.”

She leads me to an office adjoining another. I expect the office to be small, considering that I’m just a personal assistant, but I love the place. It is spacious and has the necessities of a comfortable working environment.

“This way, please.”

Clara takes me down the hallway to an office with sturdy wooden double doors. She knocks briskly on it.

“Mr. Clause. Your new personal assistant is here. Miss Hope Grady.”

Before I can tell her thank you, she exits the office. The large room with an artistic décor is breathtaking. A huge mahogany desk with swivel chairs on both sides occupies one part of the room close to the floor-to-ceiling windows which show a beautiful view of the town. A minibar, sofas, armchairs, and a coffee table are stationed on one side; all in elaborate arrangements.

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The man I thought I would never see again walks into the office from an adjoining door and my heart slams in my throat. He stiffens perceptibly upon sighting me. The shock in his eyes mirrors mine.

"Hope," he says in that smooth voice I'll never forget.

While I stand there gaping at him like a lunatic, he slowly walks towards me.

I try to say something, but my tongue feels glued to the roof of my mouth.

This is unbelievable. Why of all the men in Cedar Crest does it have to be the stranger I couldn't get off my mind that has to be my new boss?

My mouth runs dry when he comes to stand directly in front of me. I find drawing oxygen into my starved lungs to be painful. His tantalizing scent tickles my senses. My stomach clenches as if butterflies are flip-flopping around it. Suddenly, my breasts feel very heavy and my nipples tighten against my blouse. I can only hope they haven't become glaring to this man who exudes sexual magnetism.

What the heck is wrong with me, I wonder. Get a grip. You're acting like a lovesick high-school girl.

He's incredibly handsome, so what? Does it mean I have to go crazy and drool all over him anytime I see him? He is already used to women fawning over him and making a fool of themselves to get his attention. I remember the way the waitress at the coffee shop blushed and stared at him. Pushing away all sexual thoughts from my mind, I'm determined not to belittle myself before him. I'll make sure he doesn't see

me as one of the cheap women he's probably used to.

Then why am I standing here gawking at him like a starving woman seeing her first meal in days?

"Well, hello, Hope. We meet again," he drawls softly, grinning with obvious pleasure.

In place of the black suit he had on at the mall, he is sheathed in a charcoal gray suit that shows off his virile masculinity in ways that make me recall the first time I saw him. When I got home that day, I chided myself for not agreeing to see him again. But when I thought of Terrance, I decided I did the right thing.

"Nothing to say," he teases and places his hands in his pockets, drawing my attention to the strength of his legs.

Struggling to control my emotions, which were running haywire, I say, "What's there to say?"

"There's nothing really, is there? Except, fate dealt me a good hand and brought you to me instead of allowing me to channel my resources into looking for you."

I don't know what to say to that, so I simply change the direction of my gaze from his handsome face to the window.

"You know," he continues, "I told myself that the first thing I'll do whenever I see you again is kiss you until you can speak again. I'm afraid I can't do that now, even though my presence alone seems to be doing that for me. However, I haven't given up on the thought yet. Maybe not in the office, as I don't mix business with pleasure."

He wants to kiss me?

The knowledge fills me with elation as the feelings are reciprocated. But, I quickly catch myself. Chris Clause is my boss. I'm sure he's used to his workers throwing themselves at him and allowing him to do whatever he likes with them.

Well, not me.

I wish now that I had asked for his full name when we met at the mall. I would have been prepared for this meeting. At that time, I thought that I wouldn't see him again. But then again, would I have taken the job knowing I had the hots for the boss?

Before I can say anything, his phone buzzes on the desk. Swiftly, he reaches the desk and presses a button.

"You have a meeting in the conference room in a few minutes, Mr. Clause," Clara's voice comes through the intercom.

"Work begins," Christian tells me, taking a file from the desk and handing it to me.

I do everything possible to make sure our hands don't brush. He notices it and gives me a mocking smile.

"We'll continue this conversation later."

My heart does a jiggle at the promise I hear in his voice. I don't have the time to ponder on it as I hurry after him. His long strides lead out of the office, down the hallway to a large conference room where some men and women are already waiting. He introduces me and asks me to take notes of the meeting. Clara comes in to hand me a notepad. It's a struggle at first to concentrate when all I can think about is Christian's handsome face and charisma.

Eventually, I put my game face on and do a good job, which impresses him. I go to

my office to type out the dictation and present it to him, which he likes but doesn't say much as two other men are in his office. I spend the rest of the day typing notes and organizing meetings and bookings for him. I don't even know when he leaves the office until Clara comes to tell me it's time to go home. I'm relieved but enjoy the challenge the work presents, which differs from my previous job.

Debra and Aria welcome me as if I've been gone for a week. It warms my heart that I have a family to return to, unlike in Atlanta. I shudder when I remember Alice and Becky. I join Debra in preparing dinner and as soon as Ray gets home, we settle down to eat.

"So, how was your first day at Clause Enterprises?" Ray asks, passing me the salad.

"I enjoyed it. Maybe it's from not working for a while."

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Ray nods. “And how do you see Christian Clause? I hope he didn’t work you to the bone.”

I chuckle and turn to Debra. “No, he didn’t. As a matter of fact, Chris and Christian Clause are the same.”

Her eyes enlarge. “No way.”

“Chris? Who’s Chris?” Ray puts in with a frown.

“He’s the guy I met at the mall last week who turned out to be my new boss this morning.”

Ray’s jaw drops.

“Imagine my surprise.”

Laughing, Ray asks, “Did he hit on you at the mall?”

I lower my gaze, not wanting any of them to know that I was sweet on my boss.

“Not really. We just had coffee. That’s all.”

Ray nods his head, but his lips curve with a sly smile. “Okay.”

With my interest piqued, I ask Ray in a forced light tone, “Does he hit on women often? I mean his workers, so I can prepare myself to give him a resounding no.”

Ray chuckles. “No, he doesn’t. It’s actually the other way around. I’m sure he’ll find you a refreshing change from the women who always throw themselves at him because of his looks and wealth.”

Smiling with pleasure at his words, I say, “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Ray.”

Debra pokes her fork at me, “Don’t go falling for him, though. I heard he’s quite the ladies’ man.”

Feigning being appalled, I say, “If I didn’t fall for him when I didn’t know who he was, why would I do so now that I know he’s my boss?”

Debra smiles and winks at me. “I’m just saying. Working with him every day might make you catch feelings.”

Laughter bubbles from my throat when I realize that she’s just pulling my leg. I didn’t want to have another relationship so soon, I might want to have sex with him, but that didn’t mean I wanted anything long-term with him.

Besides, why would I want to have an entanglement with my boss? I, too, didn’t mix business with pleasure. I have to admit that we have sexual chemistry going on between us, but that doesn’t mean that I am going to do anything about it or allow Christian to.

That night, as I lie on my bed, a smile covers my face as my mind sifts through my work activities for the day. I look forward to continuing the following day.

Chapter Nine

Hope

“This is going to be so much fun. I can’t remember the last time we hung out like this,” Debra tells me as she drives to the mall.

“Me neither,” I reply, sitting in the passenger seat.

Excitement bubbles through me. It’s finally the weekend after the long working week.

I actually enjoy working at Clause Enterprises. I can’t say the same about working with Christian because most of the time, I’m always on edge around him. I expected him to continue flirting with me, but as he said on the first day in the office, he really doesn’t mix business with pleasure. I’m a little disappointed because I thought I would have to keep fending off his advances, which isn’t the case.

So far, Christian and I have been working in perfect accord. Christian is all business with me. And I, too, make the effort to be professional even though most times, I can’t take my eyes off of him. I have also made friends with my co-workers and enjoy having lunch with them at the cafeteria on the ground floor.

Clara and I have become quite close as I see her as a respectable woman dedicated to her job. She told me about her husband and two children and invited me for dinner at her house the following week. It is at that dinner I heard there were many PAs before me. Those women were more interested in getting laid by the boss than in their jobs.

The knowledge makes me more determined not to have anything to do with Christian, particularly at the office.

Why are you lying to yourself? If the man asks you to jump, I bet you’ll ask how high and for how long.

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I let out a sigh. That I'm attracted to the man doesn't mean I'll fall at his feet and beg him to take me to bed and fulfill all my sexual fantasies. Admittedly, I'm a little disappointed that the man who had come on strong to me at the mall and the first few minutes in his office has suddenly disappeared. In fact, he doesn't even give me the time of day unless it has something to do with the business.

There is no suggestive look in his gaze. He makes sure our fingers never brush against each other when I'm collecting or handing files to him. Everything is strictly business to him. Truthfully, it hurts to think he has lost interest in me that fast. But I know it's for the best. I can't imagine an atmosphere where his smoky gray eyes undress me anytime I step into his office. Or, him telling me sexual innuendoes instead of dictating to me.

It, however, doesn't stop me from noticing everything about him, though. He comes in early to the office with a small impersonal smile for me and closes late in the evening with instructions for me for the following day. I attend meetings with him and on one of such occasions, I realized how very intelligent he is. I like the fact that he expects everyone around him to be intelligent and hardworking. He's professional and courteous with his staff and gets a great deal of respect from them.

Only once has he snapped at a man who brought the wrong files to a meeting and told the embarrassed man to focus. That was a one-off incident. I have even gone on a long date with him and other clients and learned that he's a healthy eater. He can be a hard taskmaster sometimes, but I recognize that I enjoy working with and for him. Sometimes, the job can be challenging, but Christian makes me look forward to seeing him the following day.

“What’s that smile on your face for?” Debra asks, and I glance out the window.

“It’s nothing, really. I’m just so happy. A month ago, I never thought I would have cause to smile ever again,” I truthfully tell her.

“Aww.” She reaches out and squeezes my hand for a moment before returning it to the steering wheel.

“I’m so happy that you’re here.”

“Me, too. And going shopping is something that we haven’t done together in ages.”

She laughs. “I’m so excited.”

Ray brought down the enormous Christmas tree from the attic that morning. Debra and I discovered that we didn’t have enough decorations for the tree. Most of them are old and fading. So, she decided we should have a sisters’ day outing shopping for Christmas supplies. I readily agreed because I was also eager to spend time with my sister. Ray suggested keeping Aria so he could spend some time with her as they only got to be together in the evenings or during weekends.

Memories of meeting Christian at the mall flood me as soon as Debra pulls up in front of it. I plaster a smile across my face as we get out of the car.

Debra and I have a wonderful time shopping at the mall. On the spur of the moment, I dip into my savings from selling my stuff. I splurge on five brand new outfits for my new job. I’m a little ashamed that while I was purchasing the clothes, thoughts of Christian filled my mind. I wonder at his reaction when he sees me in the outfits.

I hope he likes them on me as much as I do.

I quickly wipe away my errant thoughts and focus on what Debra is saying.

“We should have lunch before going back,” Debra suggests.

“What about Aria?” I ask, already missing the little darling.

“I’m sure she’s having a wonderful time with her father. Come on, I know a good restaurant nearby.”

I nod and follow her out of the mall with my purchases. After loading the car with what we bought, Debra drives us to a nearby restaurant. Immediately when we enter the place, Debra talks about the décor and how much she loves it.

There’s a Christmas feeling in the air with decorations hanging on the ceiling, and a large Santa Claus sitting in a corner with a broad smile on its rubbery face.

‘Deck the halls’ plays in a low tone, giving me a nostalgic feeling. We find a seat close to the window. I admire the gold and blue theme of the place as Debra tells me of having done a job in the past with a similar décor.

We place our orders and I continue to listen with interest until my gaze shifts from her animated face to a couple at the other side of the restaurant.

My heart stops for a moment as I recognize Christian and a woman with fiery red hair. Her oval face is stunning to look at, and I can’t take my eyes away from it. The woman is model thin, with a slinky red form fitting dress that complements her slim figure. Little wonder Christian lost interest in me. With such a gorgeous woman, it’s a wonder he looked my way in the first place.

Jealousy burns through me, and I suddenly feel like bursting into tears. There I was fantasizing about him this past week, only to be smacked in the face with the truth

that the man had been just having fun with me. If the red-haired beauty is the kind of women he dates, then I've been making an utter fool of myself, because we're nothing alike. Then why did he come on so strong to me at the mall? Why did he tell me he wanted to kiss me in the office the other day? Was it just a fluke? Or, is it that he saw me as something of a quick lay but later changed his mind since I work for him? So many questions run through my mind as I try to stifle the envy running through me like jagged knives.

Suddenly, his head turns and his gaze captures mine. Time stands still as we both stare at each other across the distance. My throat feels so parched I grope for the glass of water on the table without breaking my gaze with him.

Again, I find my dress getting tighter and my body heating from his scorching gaze. Thankfully, the waiter chooses that moment to bring our food. My color deepens when I realize that Debra has continued talking all this while. So deep in her interest with interior decorating she hasn't noticed that my eyes and mind drifted from her.

I smile at the waiter and make sure my eyes don't move in Christian's direction again. How dare he look at me like that when he's with another woman? How dare he ignore me in the office all week and then strip me of my clothes with his eyes? It makes little sense and I'm tired of pondering about it. With a shaky hand, I lift the glass of water and take another sip.

Calm down, Hope. You've got this. No man can dazzle you again. You've had enough of them.

My nerves are stretched so taut from having Christian in the same restaurant with me a short distance away, that I hardly taste the salmon I ordered. I wish now that I had told Debra we should go someplace else, so I can enjoy this outing with her. But what excuse would I have given? I can't bear to be in the same proximity with my boss because I'm jealous he's with another woman?

Debra would understand, of course, but then it would be absolutely crazy that I feel so strongly for my boss of just two weeks. I choose to save myself the embarrassment and keep calm.

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“Hope, are you all right? You look flushed.”

Forcing a bright smile on my face, I reply, “I’m fine. I guess I’m just happy.”

Debra returns my smile. “Me, too.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Christian and his female companion rising from the table.

I heave a sigh of relief, which immediately turns to panic when I realize that he’s coming this way.

His viral masculine scent hits my nose before he surfaces beside me. My heart nearly jumps out from my chest from throbbing.

“Hello, Hope.”

Pasting the fakest smile in history on my face, I lift it. “Mr. Clause.”

His penetrating gaze smolders me again and leaves me in awe of his commanding presence.

“This is Katherine, an old friend of mine,” he says, even though I’m not interested in meeting the beautiful woman.

Old friend, my foot! The way the woman looks at him with seductive blue eyes tells me they’re more than friends.

He turns to the woman. “This is Hope, my PA”

I smile at the woman and wish I didn’t as her smile is frosty. I stare at Christian until Debra clears her throat.

“Oh. This is my sister, Debra.” I don’t know why but I add, “The one I told you about.”

I guess I want to make it look like Christian and I have shared many conversations. I smile with satisfaction when the red-haired woman eyes widen a little. I feel petty for doing that. She’s the one leaving with Christian to God knows where.

Christian and Debra exchange pleasantries.

“See you on Monday,” Christian says before departing with Katherine.

I nod because I can’t help wondering if he’s taking his female companion to his house or dropping her off at her place.

And why is that my business?

“Wow. Talk about sex in human form.”

“Debra!” I exclaim with startled laughter, happy that she doesn’t notice how jealous I am.

She shrugs. “It’s the truth. The fact that I’m married to a man I love doesn’t mean that I can’t appreciate other men. I have seen him on several occasions from afar, at Christmas parties or meetings, but this is the first time he has been this close.”

Happy she doesn’t notice my ruined mood, I force the food down my throat.

Later, we decide to see a movie before going home. I enjoy my time with my sister, but thoughts of Christian and Katherine are never far from my mind.

Chapter Ten

Christian

Laughter bubbles from my throat at yet another joke told by my friends. It is always fun and jokes whenever I hang out with my friends. I reach out and take my tumbler of whiskey from the table filled with an assortment of expensive drinks. I'm not much of a drinker, but whenever I'm around my friends, I can't help indulging. I take a sip of my drink as my eyes travel around the exclusive club. My friends and I usually come here to relax after long weeks of tedious work.

We like the club because of its exquisite settings and the fact that it offers the utmost privacy. Entrance is only by reservation. Bouncers are placed at strategic positions in the place for troublemakers, although nothing of that sort has ever happened. Only wealthy people can afford the services of the exclusive club.

The leather chairs are arranged in booth style with dim and colorful lights above every corner. Expensive paintings hang on the walls. Smartly dressed waitresses attend to the patrons while jazzy music plays from loudspeakers. Sometimes, a live band entertains the patrons.

My friends and I have known each other since our college days. Tall, blond-haired and blue-eyed Hudson is in the restaurant business, while dark-brown-haired Wayne with honey brown eyes is into hotels and real estate. Tyler is the only odd one out. He's the only professional among us, a successful surgeon. He is also the quietest of the bunch with black hair and green eyes.

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My eyes catch the eye of a woman seated opposite of me at a nearby table. Her sheer lace black dress leaves nothing to the imagination. She bats her eyes at me even though she's seated with two men. She crosses and uncrosses her legs and strikes a provocative pose. Disgusted, I return my attention to my friends who are talking about their ex-girlfriends. As an unwritten rule, we don't talk about work or anything serious. We leave that for our business meetings, with an exception of Tyler. We also do that when we play golf or tennis, or host parties on our yachts.

I grunt at the thought of how well-known we are. We're all single and known by tabloids as players. Not that the title is accurate, but we're used to the tags.

"What's with women and commitment?" Hudson asks with disgust in his tone.

My shoulders lift and drop in a shrug. "I guess that's how they were made."

Wayne takes a sip of his scotch. "It grates on my nerves. I sent Lisa a Ferrari and a diamond necklace, but she wasn't satisfied. She wants a ring. I had to be plain with her. I simply told her that hell would freeze over before her dreams came to pass."

The others burst into laughter, but I only chuckle.

Hudson cuts in, "I can't tell you guys how happy I am that it's over between me and Annabel. She clung so much to me she left a rash."

Laughter erupts from our table again.

I understand what my friends went through. I, too, don't like clingy women.

Unfortunately, we seem to attract such women.

“It’s such a turnoff,” Wayne puts in. “Thank goodness we’re free from such women.”

Raising my brows, I ask, “Are we?”

Wayne takes his glass of wine and says, “Well, I am. My present mistress knows once she gets clingy, things are at an end between us.”

I laugh and lean back against the black leather chair. Wayne only dates actresses and models. We all nod because we’ve been there with women who refused to get the message that it was over. My last girlfriend was sweet and understanding in the beginning. But after six months of dating, she wanted a commitment from me, too.

I told her I wasn’t the marrying kind, but she tried everything in the book to get a ring on her finger. She even went as far as faking a pregnancy. It ended unpleasantly. Britney yelled like a banshee when she moved out of the house I bought her. She also destroyed the Bentley I got her as a birthday gift and burned the clothes I ordered for her during one of Paris fashion weeks. I was grateful I changed my mind about taking her on my yacht for the weekend. She would have set it on fire.

Suddenly, my friends, who are seated in a circle around me in the booth, turn to look at me with inquisitive eyes.

“So, how’s life after Britney?” Tyler asks with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

I shrug and stare into my glass. “You know, it’s been great.”

Hudson frowns. “Just great?”

I nod. “I don’t have the time for women right now.”

Normally, I would have told them about my interest in Hope, but I keep it close to my chest. My friends know I don't date my staff. Telling them I can't get my personal assistant off my mind would sound crazy.

"What about Katherine?" Wayne asks with a mischievous smile on his face.

A frown creases my forehead. "What about her?"

My friends look at one another.

Hudson shakes his head. "Don't tell me you're blind to her banging body and stunning face?"

I almost burst into laughter as I recline against the booth. I stare at them from the rim of my glass. I know my friends are inquisitive about Katherine, who moved to Cedar Crest a few months ago. I like them wondering about my relationship with her.

"Katherine, I agree, is stunning, but she does nothing for me," I tell them with amusement.

My friends exchange surprise glances. "Are you serious?"

I shrug. "Katherine is an old friend. She knows nothing can ever happen between us."

"I can't believe you're saying this, Chris." Tyler looks at me with bewilderment. "Britney and Katherine are similar in looks and figures. How is it that you're not attracted to Katherine?"

An image of Hope comes through my mind. "I don't know. I prefer a woman with a curvy body, generous breasts, thin waist, flared hips, nicely rounded backside, smooth dark brown skin, a heart-shaped face and piercing dark brown eyes."

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Silence falls at the table after I finish describing the woman who refuses to leave my thoughts right from the moment I set my eyes on her.

“Did you just describe someone in your life?” Hudson is the first to find his voice.

“Maybe,” I evasively say, and smile at them over the rim of my glass before taking a gulp.

I didn’t mean to talk about Hope, but as usual, she crept into my mind. Working with her is both pleasurable and sheer torture. It’s a struggle trying to be professional when all I want to do is drag her into my arms and place my lips against her succulent ones. Many times, I have stripped her naked with my eyes while her head was bent, taking dictations. I have fantasied about taking her in my arms, laying her spread-eagled across my desk and plunging so deep in her it would take a crane to pull me out from her honeyed depths. My body hardens instantly as usual as I think about red hot and reckless sex with Hope.

Wayne whistles. “You’re some dark horse.”

“Tell us about her,” Tyler urges as he signals to a waitress to bring more drinks.

I shake my head. For some reason I don’t understand, I don’t want to share more details about Hope. Usually, it’s easy for me to talk about my latest interest. But this time around, I don’t want to talk about her

“I’m sorry, guys. I’m not ready for you to know her yet.”

Hudson casts questioning eyes on me. “How come you don’t want to talk about her? It’s very unusual.”

A chuckle escapes from my lips. “That’s because she’s unique. Don’t ask me why I think so. I just feel it.”

Tyler suddenly bursts into laughter. “Someone will not remain a bachelor for long.”

“That’s going too far,” I protest as they burst into raucous laughter.

Wayne shrugs. “Well, what do you want us to think when you refuse to tell us about her? It means wedding bells are ringing for you.”

I grin at them and shake my head as they all wait for me to talk about Hope.

“Give it up, guys. I’ll tell you about her when I’m good and ready. For now, I’m just playing it cool.”

Tyler snickered. “Guys, Chris is gone. When has he ever played things cool?”

I can’t help agreeing with Tyler. I go after whatever I want without a moment’s hesitation. In the past, as soon as I see a woman I like or I’m attracted to, I chase her ruthlessly until I get her. Typically, it rarely takes long for me to get them in bed. But then I get bored. I think maybe that’s why I want to take things slowly with Hope.

Am I afraid that after taking her to bed, I’ll get bored with her? I shake my head and tell myself, I don’t think so. Hope is intriguing and interesting to be with. Or am I scared that she might find me boring? Or, maybe I’m not her type?

I run my fingers through my hair at that sudden thought. Hope hasn’t as much as showed an interest in me. She’s quite cool and professional. I have never so much as

caught her staring at me surreptitiously. I don't know why that disturbs me. Maybe because I've never had a woman who told me no before. Something tells me Hope is going to be an enormous challenge.

A smile crosses my face. I'm going to enjoy chasing her. I'm a little bothered that I'm breaking my rule of not having anything to do with my employees, but Hope is worth it.

"Talk about the devil," Wayne cuts into my thoughts.

My heart flips in my chest as I turn in my chair. Only then do I realize that Wayne doesn't know Hope. I'm disappointed not to see the beautiful woman who has occupied my dreams recently. Instead, it's Katherine in a tight green strapless mini dress walking toward us. I completely forgot I'm to take her to dinner. She called earlier to ask where I was.

I force a smile on my face as I wish it was Hope coming our way. I also long for when I'll take her to dinner and then to my penthouse suite for a steamy night of sex. My body hardens again, and I take a large gulp of my drink. One way or the other, I just have to get Hope. And I always get what I want.

Chapter Eleven

Hope

Sitting at a dark corner in the hip exclusive club, I can't believe I'm actually there. The luxurious interior of the place known to be frequented by celebrities blows me away. Even at the entrance, paparazzi were already stationed to take pictures of the famous and wealthy people gracing the place. My eyes trail the posh dance floor as a few of the patrons move their body in rhythm to the cool music. Well, some of them are actually smooching and not dancing.

“Thanks for bringing me along with you, Laura and Mike. It’s been too long since we’ve seen one another.” I turn to my companions with a bright smile on my face.

Laura and Mike went to high school with me and are now dating. Mike designed the club and so didn’t need reservations. I’m glad I ran into them at the movies last night. They invited me to the club to hang out. I didn’t want to accept at first as I felt three was a crowd. But, they insisted so we could catch up.

“You’re welcome,” Laura says, returning my smile. “You look fabulous.”

I look down at my mini skirt, knee-high boots and the matching clingy black top and shrug. Terrance used to love me dressing like this when we went clubbing. I hastily push thoughts of him away, wondering why my mind brought him up. I haven’t thought about him in a long while.

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“Thanks,” I say, and reach out to take my glass of Bloody Mary from the table.

“So, what’s up with you?” Mike leans forward, looking at me keenly.

I replace my glass on the table and shrug. “Nothing much. I recently moved back here. Things were rough for me in Georgia for a while, but I’ve put my act together. I now work at Clause Enterprises.”

Mike lets out a whistle while Laura draws closer to me on the red leather booth. I see the twinkle in her eyes and laugh.

Laura turns slightly to look at Mike and says, “Apologies, Mike, but you know I can’t help it.”

Mike shrugs good-naturedly and smiles before taking a sip of his martini.

“Have you seen the handsome hunk who owns the place?” Laura fans her face with her hands. “Talk about sex in human form. Such handsomeness and charisma make me drool.”

Uneasy laughter flows from my throat. I look over at Mike, wondering how he feels that his girlfriend is describing another man in those terms.

“Don’t worry, Hope. I’m used to her drooling over men like Clause. It’s sort of her thing.” Reclining and throwing his arms across the booth, he adds, “You can say what you think. I won’t get offended. After all, you won’t be the first woman to fall for Clause.”

Laura giggles. “Mike knows I’m only kidding. He’s the only one for me.” She glances at her brown-haired boyfriend and winks at him before blowing him a kiss. Mike laughs.

Mike is handsome, but truly, he can’t hold a torch to Christian. There was something about Christian and his commanding presence that makes everybody, both male and female, sit up whenever he walked into a room. That he is also drop dead gorgeous and wealthy makes him quite a catch.

Laura turns to me. “So, have you seen him?”

A little flushed, I reply, “I work with him, I’m his PA.”

Laura whoops and claps her hands. “So, has he made a pass at you?”

My eyes widen. “Of course not. Chr— Mr. Clause is more interested in his business than anything else. Believe me when I tell you he’s a workaholic.”

“Why am I not surprised? No wonder he’s super successful,” Mike says with a note of jealousy.

Laura laughs. “I like men who work hard and play hard. Please wring an invitation for me and Mike whenever he hosts one of his high-class parties. I would give anything to be onboard his yacht, not to talk of the small Greek island I heard he recently bought.”

As I know nothing about his properties, I keep quiet. I try my best for my feelings not to show on my face as Laura talks about Christian’s ex-girlfriends. How do I compete with supermodels and celebrities whom he enjoys dating? Do I even want to?

After seeing Christian with that stunning woman the previous day at the restaurant, I

know there is no hope for me. Clara has already told me Christian never dates his employees. And whenever one comes on strongly to him, he fires her. So, even if it kills me, I'll continue to keep everything professional between us.

"Just look at her," Laura blurts and I lift my head.

A small gasp escapes from my lips when I see Katherine walking in the opposite direction with a sexy smile on her face. Heads turn to stare at the beautiful woman in a dress that complements her perfect figure. But, of course, they make such exclusive clubs for the likes of her. Jealousy cuts through me when I see her approaching a table.

I am so enamored by the place I haven't noticed Christian and three men sitting a few tables from ours. Christian always looks good in his power business suits. But seeing him now in a black leather jacket, black silk shirt and designer black jeans makes heat pool in between my thighs. Laura is right. Christian is sex on a stick. His hair looks wind kissed as if he ran his fingers repeatedly through it.

He can rake his fingers through my hair anytime.

I quickly jerk my gaze from the table after such an errant thought. My eyes quickly search the faces of my companions to see if they noticed the green-eyed monster in the depths of my brown eyes. Thankfully, they too are staring at Christian and his friends. Unable to stop myself, I look again to see that all the men had risen and Christian is placing a kiss on Katherine's cheek.

"Rumor has it that that hot ex-model is Clause's latest fling," Mike mentions and turns to me. "Is that true?"

Tearing my gaze from the table, I shake my head, struggling to hide my jealousy.

“I have no idea. I only started working for Mr. Clause a few weeks ago.”

Laura laughs. “You haven’t changed much, have you? You always loved minding your business. If I were in your shoes, God knows, I would have found out every juicy gossip about Clause by now.”

I force a light hearted chuckle from my throat. “I’m only there to work, Laura, not get to know the boss.”

With a mischievous twinkle in her eyes and a wry twist on her lips, Laura asks, “Not even if he wants to get to know you?”

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I duck my head and feign interest in my drink. “He doesn’t mess around with his workers, Laura.”

“So I heard,” Mike interjects and I let out a small sigh of relief. “Not to make you feel as if you’re not beautiful or anything, Hope, but you’re not exactly his type.”

Laura nods in concurrence. “True, though. Clause likes his women model thin with legs that go on and on. But you, my dear, will give Kim Kardashian a run for her money in the curvy department.”

Laughter erupts from my throat even though despair clings to my heart. If I’m truly not Christian’s type, then why did he come on to me at the mall? That question has tormented my peace for a while now. Why did I even allow him to buy me coffee? It brought on silly fantasies. I wish I could turn back the hands of time.

“Thanks, Laura,” I say for lack of something better to tell her. I struggle to think of something to change the topic. My night is already ruined with the presence of Katherine and Christian at the club. Talking about them continuously might make me want to get drunk. That might make me late for work the following day.

“So, tell me what’s going on with you, Laura,” I quickly insert when she continues talking about Christian.

I release a small sigh of relief when she takes the bait and starts talking about her cosmetic business. To blank out Christian, his girlfriend and the jealousy I’m fighting to control, I focus on Laura and I’m soon caught up in the conversation.

Or so I think.

A movement catches the corner of my eye. Christian and Katherine have risen and are saying goodbye to the men at the table. Christian walks away from the table with his hand on the small of Katherine's back. They look so good together, my throat constricts. Both tall and slim, they look like the perfect couple while I would look like a short fat blob beside Christian.

My heart squeezes with pain.

Christian stops to exchange greetings with the woman and her male companion. Katherine uses the opportunity to mold herself into Christian. I figure I would do the same thing since the attractive woman looks like she wants to eat Christian whole. I have never been this jealous in my life, and it's driving me crazy. Fighting it from showing is getting tougher and tougher.

I realize I've lost the battle fighting off my jealousy from showing when I turn to see Laura and Mike staring at me with keen interest.

Eyeing me and curving her lips in a sweet smile, Laura says, "Are you sure Christian is just your boss?"

I groan inwardly.

Chapter Twelve

Hope

"How was your weekend?" Clara asks me as she settles down on her chair.

"It was good," I reply with a smile on my face.

Clara returns my smile. “What did you do?”

“My sister and I went shopping, had lunch and saw a movie. I also went to a club with old friends.”

Clara beams. “Sounds like you had a pleasant time.”

I nod. “I sure did.”

There’s no need to tell her I spent the last two nights wondering about Christian’s relationship with Katherine and what they were doing while I lay awake on my bed. I told myself that I wouldn’t bother with whatever was going on between them. That’s easier said than done, though. I can’t help wondering if Christian will soon announce that he’s about to marry Katherine. Is he even the marrying type?

No. I shake my head. I will not do this. This is a new day, a new week. I can’t continue torturing myself by thinking about Christian and his women.

“So, how was your weekend?” I ask Clara just to get my mind off my handsome and sexy boss.

Clara is still telling me about her husband’s relatives who came to visit when Christian strolls into the office. Decker in a tailored pinstripe suit that makes him look every inch the successful business tycoon he is, he takes my breath away.

I greet him, but I avoid looking at him. I’m happy he has a lot of meetings today, so I won’t get to see him much and drool over him as usual. However, it might not stop me from thinking about him.

As predicted, two men enter the office and Clara informs Christian of their presence. He summons them into his office. I let out a sigh of relief.

All day, Christian holds meetings with members of his staff and visitors. He goes on a business meeting with some people who flew in from New York. I keep busy, sorting out his mail and schedule and taking his calls.

A few minutes to the close of work, Christian strides back to the office. I can see strains of fatigue on his face as he walks by. I wish I could offer him comfort, but with thoughts of Katherine ringing in my mind, I stifle the urge.

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My intercom buzzes a few minutes later. A sizzle goes through my body when I hear Christian's voice.

"Hope, please come to my office."

"Right away, sir," I reply and rise from my desk.

I smooth down my black wrap-around dress, grateful I splurged on it and other dresses. I take my pad, sure that rapid-fire dictation is what I'll get. I've come to understand that Christian is someone who's always up and doing, and thinks quickly on his feet.

My heels are soundless on the carpeted floor as I cross the short distance to Christian's office. My drop-dead gorgeous boss is seated at his desk. I notice he has removed his suit jacket and his tie. My lips part as I take in his curly chest hair from a glance at his unbuttoned collar and few buttons. He flips through a file.

Girl, control yourself.

I hastily change the direction of my gaze. But I can't help looking back at him as he raises his head. He rakes his hand through his blond hair and my eyes fuse to his perfect angular face. No argument here, he's the most handsome and enigmatic man I've ever come across.

I stand before his desk, trying to control my twirling emotions. Everything in me wants me to turn tail and run out of the office, but I stand my ground. I'm happy that I can maintain the cool facade I present to him, even though my feelings are running

riot.

The air thrums with sexual tension as he continues to stare at me as if stripping me of my clothes. Or, maybe it's just my mind and what I want him to do.

My nerves stretched taut by the silence, I swallow thickly and say, "You summoned me."

A boyish grin crosses his handsome face. "I did."

Pushing back his chair, he rises swiftly and walks around his desk to perch on the edge. He folds his arms across his chest as he gives me a once over. Heat runs through my body at the bold stare. It takes everything in me not to beg him to take me right there on his desk. My heart throbs against my chest and I'm afraid that it might just jump out. Even though the office is cool, beads of sweat form on my forehead. This amount of tension is not good for me.

"Come here," Christian coolly says.

My lips part as I can't believe what I just heard.

"Excuse me?"

His grin widens. "You heard right. You're too far from me."

I blink rapidly as I wonder if I've somewhat dozed off at my desk and was now having this wild dream.

"You've been treating me as if I'm going to give you frostbite all day." He drops his hands and sighs. "Heck, you've been treating me like that since you started working here. And I swear it's driving me crazy."

What? I want to accuse him of treating me like nothing but his PA, but I keep my mouth shut. How do I treat him as anything other than my boss when he hasn't so much as looked at me the way he did at the mall?

Eyeing him and wondering what he's up to, I take a few steps forward.

"You are a hard man to figure out."

"Yes, I am. I'm hard in every way. Would you like to feel how hard, Hope?"

Christian's brow arches and he gives me a slow seductive grin.

I remain speechless. I can feel the heat suffusing my cheeks.

Suddenly he chuckles as humor enters his eyes. "Are you being shy with me, or do you like to play games, Hope?"

I shake my head. "I don't play games."

"Then come to me. I want to hold you in my arms. I want to feel your luscious body against mine."

Please don't do this to me. If you continue saying things like that, you'll have me underneath you, begging you to make wild love to me.

Even though my body is aflame at his words, I try to maintain a level of control over my aroused body. I hope he doesn't notice how hard my nipples have become and how they are pushing against my dress.

"Why are you doing this?" I say for want of something better to tell him.

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“Because I want you,” he bluntly tells me.

"What?"

His eyes trail my body with a heat that leaves me squirming on my toes.

“Hope, before you came to work here, we both knew I wanted you. I didn’t hide that fact. However, I don’t mix business with pleasure. So, I’ve had to keep my intentions at bay these weeks. But the thing is, I can’t hold it back any longer. You keep me awake most nights. It’s one of my principles not to date my employee but to hell with that rule when it’s affecting my work.”

It definitely isn’t a love proposal, but at this moment, I will take anything. A thrill runs through my body, and it’s all I can do not to throw my arms around his gorgeous body.

“We must be very discreet, of course, but there’s no reason we can’t explore this chemistry between us. I know you feel it, too, so don’t deny it.”

I wouldn’t be able to deny it even if I were threatened. Aroused, I nibble on my bottom lip; nervous, I tug at my earlobe. I want to tell him I, too, want to tear his clothes off and have my wicked way with him. But, I keep mute. I want to see how things go first. After Terrance, I know I have to be very careful with men, especially one as suave as Christian.

“Now, will you come here instead of standing there looking at me as if I’m some sort of monster who steals candies from babies?”

A small laugh bubbles from my throat.

When I still don't move, he grins and says, "I don't eat gorgeous women with banging bodies for breakfast."

I take one more step toward him just for him to know I'm indecisive but still want to meet him halfway. He chuckles and leans forward to drag me into his arms. I fit perfectly in between his hard and muscular legs. His hands move from my arms down my body to my waist. His eyes widen a little and I lower my head, knowing he felt the tremor that ran through my body. I don't know why I'm acting like a shy schoolgirl. This is the first time I'm completely not in control of my emotions.

"Look at me, beautiful," Christian urges softly.

I reluctantly raise my eyes and my mouth runs dry at the intense desire I see in the gray depths.

"You're gorgeous."

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. Christian's head descends and his lips capture mine in a kiss that leaves me reeling. He draws me closer into his embrace and deepens the kiss. His mouth moves expertly against mine and sensations run through my body, leaving me breathless. I struggle to get a hold of my wavering emotions, knowing that if I don't, I might just allow him— no, beg him to bang me right there on the thick carpet.

When his tongue entwines with mine, I give up the fight and lean deeper into him with a sensual moan escaping from my lips. That gesture somewhat drives Christian crazy as he holds me tighter in his arms and his mouth becomes even more insistent against mine. His thick arousal presses against my stomach, and it's all I can do not to go down on him. The kiss goes on and on as if we're trying to devour each other.

When Christian's large hand reaches up to grasp my breast, I can feel my panties getting wet. I want more of him, so I lift my hands and clasp them around his neck. My fingers dive into his hair and caress his scalp. It's something I've always wanted to do since I first saw him rake his fingers through the thick and silky mass.

The buzzing sound in the background finally penetrates my consciousness. I realize it's Christian's cellphone on the desk ringing. Aghast at what I was doing with my boss, I quickly take a step back out of his hold. I watch as Christian's chest heaves just like mine. His smoky gaze sears me just like his explosive kiss did.

Christian reaches for me again before I can move away.

"That was amazing," he whispers against my lips.

Trembling with desire I'm struggling to get under control, I hold my breath. His warm spicy scent assails my nostrils. I squelch the urge to lean into him, to sniff profoundly at his intoxicating fragrance. Shards of electricity shoot through me as Christian whispers into my ear.

"Only sheer control is keeping me from spreading you across my table right now and giving both of us the release we so desperately want."

I bite my tongue hard to keep from telling him to go ahead. I can't have hot passionate sex with my boss on his desk. It's just too sleazy for me, even though my heated body is begging for it.

Christian pulls away a little and straightens. "We have to take things slowly, though."

I try to say something to concur or reject the idea, but Christian's kiss has turned my brain into mush.

He threads his fingers through my hair as he pulls me closer. “I still can’t believe I’m doing this, but I can’t help myself. I have tried to put you off my mind, but it has been an exercise in futility. You have occupied my thoughts and my dreams.”

My lips part at his admission. I’m thrilled that I’m not the only one who has been having sleepless nights. It feels good to be wanted again after Terrance’s betrayal.

Why in the world am I thinking of that loser?

Christian lowers his head again, and I wait in anticipation of another passionate kiss that will leave me melting in his arms. I’m not disappointed as our second kiss is as explosive as the first one. I’m left gasping for breath when Christian finally elevates his head.

“Do you have plans for the weekend?”

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Brain, please start functioning again.

My mouth opens and closes without me saying anything. Two fiery kisses have turned me dumb?

“Is that a yes?”

I shake my head.

His brows shoot up, and amusement reflects in his gorgeous eyes. “Could you please say something? You’re kind of confusing me with mixed signals.”

Clearing my throat, I force my brain to come back to normal. In a husky voice, I reply, “I don’t have any plans for the weekend.”

Christian’s smile warms my heart. “That’s perfect. We’ll go out and see the city and have dinner.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I reply, trying to hide how excited I am.

“Great,” he remarks with a grin. He kisses me one more time before releasing me and turning to answer his phone that has been ringing.

I stand there twitching my hands like a kid caught being naughty. It takes me a few seconds to realize that Christian has dismissed me. I stare at him talking into his phone with his rich baritone voice, his back turned to me. Flushed, I turn away and walk on wobbly legs out of the office. I’m grateful it’s the close of work. Anyone

who sees me at the moment will know what I have been doing with the boss. I get to my office, drop on my chair and put my hands on my flushed face.

What in the world has just happened?

One minute I'm thinking about getting a new job so I can stop thinking about my boss, and the next, I'm smooching with him in the office. I sit there dazed for a moment, stifling the flurry of feelings twirling in the pit of my stomach.

What is this? What's going on? What about Katherine?

Afraid that I might give in to the temptation of going back to Christian's office to demand some explanation about seeing him with Katherine at the restaurant and at the club, I quickly stand up. I rush to the restroom to put my dress, my hair and makeup in order before dashing out of the office to the elevator.

No way am I going to act like a jealous girlfriend over a kiss. That will make me look crazy. I need to go home to think about what to do. Away from Christian's intimidating and intoxicating presence, I can think properly.

Is it wise to date my boss even though I want him?

I have a lot of thinking to do.

Chapter Thirteen

Christian

A smile curls the corners of my lips as I tread out of my office. Still smiling with thoughts of Hope filling my mind, I stride toward the elevators. The reception area is empty with the exception of the night security as it's the close of work and most of

my employees have gone home. I should have exited the building earlier. But after Hope left my office, I just sat there, recalling the beautiful moment I had with her.

My body hardens instantly as I recall how her body fit perfectly with mine. I let out a low whistle at the memory of my hand caressing her generous breast and my mouth devouring her full lips. Quickly, I place my briefcase in front of my midriff, thankful that no one is about. It would be mighty embarrassing for someone to see me with a hard on. Not that I care about what people think about me. But then, as this is my workplace and I don't joke with my business, I see it as highly inappropriate.

But it's not inappropriate to smooch with your PA in your office?

A grin covers my face at my inner voice. As long as we're discreet in having an affair, I don't see the problem. It is going to be inconvenient sneaking around with Hope, but the thought of it thrills me. I'm going to have to work very hard to hide the fact that every time I set my eyes on her, I want to tear her clothes off her and make passionate love to her. I successfully hid it these past weeks, but Hope left me weak in the knees this morning when I saw her in that wrap around dress that accentuated her figure.

All day, I struggle to focus on my meetings because all I have are thoughts about peeling her dress off her body and discovering the luscious flesh hidden underneath it.

"Sir, is there anything wrong?" A security guard asks as he makes his rounds.

"No, everything is fine," I reply, and he walks away.

I blink, belatedly realizing that the elevator doors were open and I stood there gawking at it, motionless. The doors close, but thoughts of Hope still fill me.

How in the world do I hope to carry out a successful affair with my PA with no one finding out? It isn't something I have done before, so I see it as a bit of challenge I'm looking forward to it. I have to think about Hope and how it will affect her, too. No one will dare say it to my face that I'm dating my PA. However, it might not be the same for Hope. I hate office gossip with a passion and want to shield her from it.

Maybe I should fire her.

The thought crosses my mind for a moment as I walk out of the elevator. The lobby is empty as I cross it to exit the building. The huge, colorfully decorated Christmas tree stands like an imposing giant in a corner of the place.

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A slight shiver runs through me as I step outside. Even with my coat, I can feel the cold swirling all around me because of the falling snow. I pause for a second to appreciate the beauty the snow brings, covering everything in white. Briskly, I climb down the steps and reach my limousine parked in front of the building. My driver swiftly opens the door. I slide into the warmed interior, letting out a sigh.

Should I fire Hope?

It will appear cold-blooded of me if I do that. Besides, I have to take into consideration that things might not work out between us in the long run.

What then?

I run my fingers through my hair, hating the thought of Hope not being in my life for long. Quickly, I push away the unpleasant thought. It's too soon to be thinking of a breakup when we haven't even started anything. A wolfish smile crosses my face at the recollection that Hope and I started something heated in my office a short while ago.

Leaning forward, I pour myself a stiff drink and recline against the cool leather seat. The seductive image of the petite and curvaceous Hope standing in front of my desk, looking so unsure of herself, fills my mind. I recall with a smile her glorious black hair tied in a bun at her nape against her beautiful and smooth skin. Her generous breasts were made prominent by the dipping V neck of her dress. I stiffen as I remember putting my hands on her small waist, her full hips perfected with nicely rounded buttocks. All I could think of while she stood there was to slowly peel off the dress from her body, which was stretched taut because of her generous breasts, and

play with the twin mounds with my hands and mouth until she wriggled with unbidden ecstasy.

That fast, I become hard and move uncomfortably on the seat. My iron-clad control over my libido has turned into mush because of Hope. I release a ragged sigh as a hot wave of testosterone shoots up my body. What is it about Hope that wants to make me throw caution to the wind? I have never fantasized about a woman like this, not even in my teenage years. She's not only stunning with a banging body, she's also hardworking and intelligent. Is that enough for me to throw away my principles and have an affair with my PA?

What is wrong with me?

An unsettling feeling runs through me and I take a gulp of my drink.

It's just sex. It has to be.

I rub a hand across my face. Maybe, it's because I haven't been with a woman in a while. After ending things with my ex-girlfriend, I haven't indulged lately. Britney's clinginess put me off women for some time. But I think I'm ready again for nights of nonstop passionate lovemaking.

A frown creases my forehead as I place Hope and Britney side by side. Britney is tall, blonde-haired with a face that will make men turn and stare and a sexy body that can grace the covers of magazines. Hope is the total opposite. Yet I'd rather be with Hope than Britney.

Amazing. Hope is the first curvy woman that has turned my head. Maybe I secretly like them curvy but didn't know because most times, it's women with Britney's physique who usually come my way and throw themselves at me.

The limousine pulls up in front of my penthouse apartment. The driver gets out and pulls the car door open, and I exit the vehicle. It's still snowing, so I hastily climb up the steps. I nod at the people in the lobby and head straight for the elevators. Silent Night sounds in the air from the speakers, giving me a nostalgic feeling.

The concierge, dressed in a red and gold uniform, presses the elevator buttons. I slide in after giving him a tip. I reach my penthouse suite and as typical, my security team combs the place before I go in. It's a necessary procedure I have to take after Britney went all cuckoo on me.

Tired after the hectic day, I walk down the hallway to my bedroom and remove my clothes. Swiftly, I enter my state-of-the-art bathroom and take a warm shower. Toweling my wet hair, I return to the room and my gaze falls on my king-sized bed. I smile as I recall the erotic dream I woke up from that morning.

The dream was so vivid I thought it was real. I dreamed that Hope entered my room in the sexiest lingerie I had ever seen. The black lace fabric left nothing to the imagination. Even Victoria's Secret would be envious of it. She walked seductively toward the bed and performed an erotic strip dance that left me rock hard and aching for fulfillment. As soon as I rose from the bed to plunge myself into her honeyed depths, I woke up to my chagrin.

Finding I'm alone in the room with a painfully hard erection, I cursed savagely. It's of little wonder that I haven't been able to resist the urge of smooching with Hope in the office. The dream stayed with me all day.

Clad in my black boxers, I shake my head and climb into bed. The more I think about Hope, the more I realize that I like her. Other than the fact that I want to bed her, I find her interesting. Hope is smart, courteous and very efficient in her work. I'm yet to find any error in her work. I imagine the affair I'm about to have with her and a smile curving my lips. It's chauvinistic of me not to be bothered that she hasn't

actually agreed to my proposal. But I want her so badly, I don't care.

I know it's absolutely crazy getting involved with one of my PAs, but it can't be helped. I want her, and I know she wants me. I saw the desire in her eyes when I kissed her. Besides, she would have slapped me silly if she hadn't enjoyed the kiss and would have threatened to file sexual assault charges against me.

No, Hope wants me as much as I want her.

However, it is going to be complicated getting involved with her. If I had known that I would eventually give in to the temptation of bedding her, I would have asked either Hudson or Wayne to employ her.

I shake my head and chuckle. Putting her in the same radius as my womanizing friends would be disastrous. I turn on the bed, remembering the first time I saw Hope at the mall. Her gorgeous body was the first thing that attracted me to her, even though I hadn't seen her face. It sent a surge of pleasure running through me. Maybe I'm into curvy ladies after all.

Working with her, seeing her every day, taking in her jasmine scent has almost driven me crazy. I thought I could maintain my distance and remain aloof. But who was I kidding? I would have gotten to this point, eventually.

What am I doing?

If things don't work out between us, Hope would be the one at the disadvantage. I would continue with my business, but she could not work with me again.

Dare I do this to her?

The thought of another man having Hope fills me with so much jealousy, I gasp. I

have already noticed the way some of my staff look at her when they don't know I'm watching. Hope is particularly friendly with my marketing executive, and it grates on my nerves anytime I see them together. Most times, I feel like telling him to stay away from her and that she's mine.

Is she really? Isn't she entitled to choose whoever she wants to date?

Damn! I shouldn't have kissed her in the office. Now, I can think of nothing else. How will I be able to take it when she smiles and interact in her usual friendly manner with other men after kissing me like that? I should have stayed away from her. But the burning feel of the kiss we shared stays with me throughout the night.

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I toss and turn, having one provocative dream after the other about Hope.

By morning, I know that there's only one thing to do. I'm going to have mind-blowing sex with Hope. I'll take her to sensual heights she hasn't otherwise known. I'll make her so sated in bed she won't be able to think of anything else. The usual tightness in my loins as I rise from the bed isn't a surprise to me anymore. In fact, I welcome it now because it makes me look forward to all the things I want to do with Hope.

Definitely, I'll consider her feelings and she'll have a say in our relationship, but I will not take no for an answer. I know she'll refuse us having an affair since I'm her boss, but I won't let it deter me. I'll wear down her defenses until she agrees to put both of us out of our sexual misery.

With that thought in mind and with determination etched on my face, I stroll into my bathroom.

Chapter Fourteen

Hope

“What's the hurry?” Debra asks as I cram the toast she made me into my mouth.

I try to answer, but my mouth is stuffed with food. Aria giggles in her seat as she watches me eat like a starved animal. Taking my cup of coffee, I pour the black liquid in my mouth to help with the bread's movement down my throat.

When I'm finally able to talk, I say, "I'm almost late for work."

Debra, who is helping Aria with her food, frowns, and says, "But it's not eight yet."

I nod and rise from the chair. "I know. Christian has an early morning meeting. I have to prepare for it, and I regrettably woke up late."

I turn away so my sister can't see my facial expression. I don't want to tell her I woke up late because not only did I think of my boss and the way we smooched in the office yesterday, but I also dreamed of him making passionate love to me. If she finds out, I'm certain she will tie me to my chair and forbid me to go back to Clause Enterprises.

But, I have to. This is the first time I feel alive after so many weeks of despondency. I won't miss going back to the office for the world. Things might be a little awkward with Christian as he wants us to have a secret affair. I don't mind, I think there's something hot about sneaking around with my boss.

I can't believe I'm having such thoughts. Something I used to find shameful in the past is now appealing to me. Maybe, an alien has taken over my body. I giggle as I rush up the stairs to my room to get my jacket and purse. Ray already left because he won't be working in the office today but at one of Clause's remote branches.

I kiss Debra and Aria goodbye and leave the house in a hurry. Even though I'm running late, I took special care in choosing my outfit this morning. I chose a sky-blue shirt and paired it with a navy-blue skirt that fell slightly above my knees and clung to my hips. I know I look good and I hope Christian thinks so, too.

Quickly, I flag down a cab, glad it's only snowing lightly. I plead with the cab driver to hurry and I relax on the backseat, thinking about how my first meeting with Christian will be after smooching with him in the office the previous day. Knowing

him, I'm sure he will act all professional, but his eyes will definitely give him away. I get the feeling that Christian relishes ogling my body, and I enjoy every moment of being the object of his desire.

I pay my fare and slide out of the cab when it pulls up in front of the impressive Clause Enterprises. Very few cars are parked in front of the building as it's still quite early. Tightening my jacket around my body and folding my arms across my chest to ward off the cold, I hurry across the parking lot into the building. I smile at the receptionist at the immense lobby as she too is just resuming for the day. My heels click noisily on the floor as I hurry toward the elevators.

Potted plants flank the bank of elevators. I stare at them unseeingly after pressing the elevator button. My thoughts are on my forthcoming date with Christian. I wonder where he intends to take me. My breath catches in my throat as I wonder what we'll do after the date.

Will I go with my boss to his apartment just to have mind-blowing sex? I can't really say, but I'm afraid I just might. After all, it's all I've thought of since last night.

The brass elevator door slides open and I step into the elevator. Just as it's about to close, a hand stops it and my heart stops also. Christian, with a broad smile on his face, enters the elevator and the door closes.

My pulse races immediately and I'm afraid I'm going to lose my breath. The silence between us thrums, only permeated by the sound of Jingle Bell blaring from the loudspeakers, which the receptionist has just put on. I clutch my purse tightly as I feel the heat radiating from Christian's body. Why of all the people who work there does it have to be him to share an elevator with me? And in the morning after our necking in the office.

I open my mouth to at least greet him, but the words die in my throat when I notice

Christian's intense gaze on me. My mouth instantly runs dry and my heart thumps loudly against my chest. The sexual magnetism between us is so blatant I feel my panties getting wet instantly. I don't know who moves first, but suddenly Christian stops the elevator and I find myself in his arms.

I lean into him, desperate to feel the heat emanating from his body. Christian's lips descend on mine with an onslaught that leaves me breathless. As usual, shocking sensations run through my body. His mouth moves expertly against mine and a moan escapes from my throat. I really love Christian's kisses. His tongue dashes into my mouth and entwines with my tongue in a rhythm as old as time. He lifts his mouth for a second before crashing it down again against mine in a savage onslaught. Slowly, I feel myself moving as he backs me against the elevator wall. My breath becomes uneven when he unbuttons my black wool jacket. I don't mind as I enjoy the feel of his erection against my stomach. My hands rise to caress his hair. I feel my breath becoming ragged when, after unbuttoning my coat, Christian's hands caress my breasts through my silk blouse, and I moan with pleasure as wetness leaks from my core onto my panties.

Christian elevates his head to stare at me with lust-filled gray eyes. "I ache to be inside you," he huskily whispers. "I've been in torment since yesterday," he confesses hoarsely. I bite my lip to keep from telling him how much I want him, too. I just might beg him to take me right here in the elevator. "I'm fighting the urge to fall on you like an animal in heat. You have no idea how sexy I find you. But I want us to go slow."

To hell with going slow. I want to feel him inside me. I am so hot for him I just might beg on my knees.

I'm lost for words and his mouth catches mine again. Powerless to resist, I lean into him again. His hands shift from my breasts to my hair, massaging my scalp.

“I can't wait to see your glorious hair spread across my pillows,” he whispers against my mouth. “And these gorgeous breasts against my chest. They are the right size for my hands.” He cups my breasts again and gently rubs them.

My knees become weak and my legs go rubbery. I can hardly breathe.

“I...” What do I say? I’m looking forward to it? That’s crazy.

Christian gives me another explosive kiss before pulling away. I watch with parted lips as he takes in deep breaths and lets them out slowly. I see that he’s trying to put his need under control, yet I stand there with wobbly legs doing nothing about mine. A little shamefaced realizing how wanton I must look to him, I straighten and try to put a semblance of order to my hair.

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“Now, that’s a proper way to say good morning,” Christian mutters beside me and I duck my head. I resolve inwardly to make sure I either come earlier than this to the office or make sure Christian is already here before I arrive for work. Although I want him desperately, I don’t want him to think I’m some cheap woman he can grab and smooch at will. Where’s my self-respect?

After putting my hair and my clothes in order, I stand seemingly aloof from Christian, aching aware of him.

“Ready?” he asks as he reaches to press the elevator button.

I nod, avoiding looking at him. When the elevator takes us to our office floor, I scramble out, praying Clara is already there. I’m afraid the canoodling might continue if we’re alone in the office.

I let out a small sigh of relief when I see the old woman’s smiling face. Her brows rise when she sees Christian walking behind me. I quickly purse my lips, swollen from Christian’s devastating kisses.

Christian and I carry on as if we didn’t share scalding kisses in the elevator and set each other on fire. The rest of the day is sheer torture for me because everywhere I look, I see Christian. He doesn’t help matters by catching my eyes now and again with the promise of continuing what we started in the elevator reflected in them. I make a lot of mistakes that day, but he doesn’t say a word of complaint. He knows the effect he has on me, and that annoys me greatly.

By the time I get home that day, I’m an immense mass of nerves. I’m afraid that

Debra will take one look at me and know what's going on with me. Fortunately, she's busy doing something with Aria; she doesn't pay me much attention. I go up to my room and go over the things that happened that day. One thing I'm afraid of is falling for Christian if all he wants from me is sex. I don't mind having sex with him but falling in love with him is a definite no-no. It will mess up our working relationship.

I let out a heavy sigh. What am I going to do?

Chapter Fifteen

Hope

"You look stunning."

A smile spreads across my face at Christian's words. I know I do because I spent quite some time preparing for the date. I went to a hair salon in the mall to get my hair washed, conditioned, and straightened, and I love the way it hangs around my shoulders.

The burgundy chiffon-bell-sleeve sheath dress falls just above my knees. I paired it with a pair of heeled dark tan knee-length boots that bring out my dress's color.

The low cut of the dress accentuates my breasts with tantalizing glimpses of my cleavage. I feel so sexy in the dress that hugs my curves. The dress is complemented by a gold pendant that belonged to my mom and a gold clutch. I stared at myself in the mirror and couldn't believe I gained my confidence back after what Terrance did to me. When I held on to him, sobbing my heart out, begging for him not to leave me, I never knew that someday I would get my self-assurance back. It feels great.

"It's not that you aren't always stunning," Christian adds, "but tonight, you look very sophisticated."

A smile spreads across my face, and I look away from him to the exquisite décor of the exclusive restaurant. I hear one can't get a reservation there unless one books months ahead. So, it's quite surprising that Christian managed it in a few days. Christian chose a secluded part of the restaurant, but I enjoy a view of the entire place. Lovely spidery chandeliers hang on the spiral ceiling. Heavily decorated small Christmas trees stand in the corners of the restaurant, offering the spirit of the season, while garlands and Christmas lights spread across one of the walls. They did the décor in shades of red, gold, and green.

I like the Christmas feeling of the place as sharply dressed waiters and waitresses move around the tables and chairs, attending to customers.

I return my gaze to Christian and find him watching me with those mesmerizing and scorching eyes of his. My throat runs dry once more. When he picked me up earlier, his black suit impressed me, along with his pale blue shirt and gold tie. My mouth never fails to water when I see him in a suit. Tonight isn't any different.

Silly butterflies flutter in my stomach as his face slowly breaks into a grin. I recall opening the door to him that night and his eyes roaming my body with an appraisal that left my knees weak. Since I told Debra that I was going out on a date with someone from work, even though her eyes told me she didn't believe me, I hurried away from the front door into his Ferrari. The cool interior of the posh car helped to quench the raging fire inside me. But then, his musky scent filled the car and ignited the fire in me again.

Darn! The tightness in my stomach threatens to be my undoing as Christian continues to smile at me as if he knows what his magnetic presence is doing to me. How do I get myself to stop behaving like a shy schoolgirl on her first date?

I reach for the glass of vintage wine Christian ordered, and take a sip to quench the fire inside me.

"Do you want to order now?" he asks in his smooth voice.

I nod. Eating will keep me busy and stop me from ogling him. "Yes, please."

He gets the attention of the waiter who has been hovering. I sigh. The perks of being a wealthy man. I study the menu for a minute and order chicken and salad while Christian orders steak and salad. He also orders more wine. I wonder if he intends to get me drunk.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" I can't help asking.

Christian lips lift with a rakish smile. "Would I succeed?"

I shrug with a smile. "I don't know, but be warned, when I'm drunk, I sing off-key in a high pitch voice. You'll probably send your bodyguards to bundle me out of here."

More laughter erupts from his throat.

With great curiosity, I ask, "Have you ever been drunk?" I don't see him as they type to get drunk; probably tipsy, but never drunk.

He lifts and drops his shoulders in a careless shrug. "A couple of times."

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“And I bet you were all calm about it. You simply asked your driver to take you home, right?”

He grins. “I never get drunk in public.”

“Lucky you.” Then eyeing him with a twinkle in my eyes, I say, “You trashed your house, didn’t you?”

He chuckles. “No, that would be juvenile. I usually hit the gym, run on the treadmill, or jog outdoors whenever the weather permits. Exercise is not just a means for me to stay healthy, but it also lets me blow off steam,” he replies.

“I agree, sometimes, that’s the best way to let out pent up frustration. It’s like that whenever I do yoga.”

Christian nods, and gives me an enigmatic grin.

Our orders are brought and we eat in relative silence for a while. The food is so delicious, I savor the taste.

“I know this might sound cliché for a first date, but please tell me about yourself.”

I fork salad into my mouth and chew delicately before answering. “What do you want to know?”

He shrugs. “Everything. Your childhood, your past relationships, your life in general.”

“And you’ll return the favor?” I ask. No way will I pour my life out for him and he’ll keep mute about his.

Grinning, he replies, “Sure.”

I tell him about growing up in Cedar Crest. I talk about my late parents and being a close-knit family before their demise. I also mention falling in love with Georgia and the joy I felt at making it my second home. Lastly, I mention Terrance and how we broke up. Telling him about hitting rock bottom before moving back here is emotional for me, but I pull through.

He smiles and throws my question back at me. “What do you want to know?”

"Everything," I answer.

“I’ll try,” he replies and dabs at his lips with the white cloth napkin. “I grew up in Denver. I lost my parents to a fire when I was ten years old.”

My mouth drops open like a fish out of water. “Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

He shrugs. “It happened a long time ago. They took me into foster care, but it didn’t quite suit me. They’d returned me to the orphanage several times before I had had it with the system. I ran away one day and never looked back. I crawled the streets of Denver until an old couple visiting friends in Denver found me and brought me here. By then, I was fifteen and had lost several school years. Undeterred by the number of years wasted and fueled by the love the Gibsons showed me, I went back to school. When I graduated from high school, I lost my foster dad to colon cancer and they diagnosed my foster mother with Alzheimer’s disease. I had to take care of her and fend for myself. I did odd jobs to see myself through college. My foster mom died after I got a degree in business administration.”

I blink away the tears from my eyes, grateful Christian doesn't notice them as he's staring down at his empty plate. I understand the sorrow of losing one's parents, but losing multiple loved ones?

"It was hard starting my business as I had no capital. I didn't let that stop me, though. I carried on with doing odd jobs until I had enough money to rent a place and, as they say, the rest is history."

I look away as I blink rapidly. What an inspiring story.

"Please don't wet those lovely brown eyes of yours for me, beautiful. I might have started in the pits, but I'm no longer there."

His words bring a smile to my lips and push back the tears. I'm a little embarrassed at being teary-eyed on a date with this handsome hunk.

"I'm sorry." I offer him a tentative smile.

He returns the smile. "It's fine. It shows me a side of you I didn't know."

I get flushed and he laughs. After that, as the evening wears on, I enjoy a delightful time with Christian. He talks about himself, mostly his work, and I'm enthralled by his business acumen. I listen in rapt attention as he mentions some places he visited for business deals. He gets me to talk about growing up in a loving family and the escapades I had with Debra.

By the time we have dessert and coffee, I know the beautiful date will soon be over. I want it to last forever, but Christian doesn't give any hint of whether he wants us to continue it somewhere or have another.

As he escorts me out of the restaurant with his hand on the small of my back and

almost all the eyes in the place on us, I'm a little disappointed. He helps me into the Ferrari before strolling to the other side. My thoughts are all over the place as I wonder if this is it. I console myself with the memory of him saying he wants us to take things slowly.

Christian pulls up in front of my family house and helps me again with the car door. What a gentleman he is. He walks me to the front door and I hope Debra isn't listening at the other side. I wouldn't put it past her.

"Thanks for a wonderful evening," I say immediately as we reach the sturdy wooden door.

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“I had a fantastic time. We’ll do this again soon.”

My heart leaps with joy. I open my mouth to tell him I’ll look forward to it when he steps forward and gently takes me into his arms. With my heart thumping, I wait for the kiss that is bound to leave me feeble in the knees. Christian doesn’t disappoint as he lowers his head and seizes his lips with mine. His mouth explores mine, moving over it like a prized possession. When he finally lifts his head and smiles at me, I cling to him for support. I like that he’s breathing heavily, making me know I’m not the only one affected by the kiss. After standing there, holding each other for what seemed like ages, I pull away and clear my throat.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. See you at the office on Monday.”

He walks away and I long to invite him up to my room to continue from where we stopped.

I watch until his car is no longer in sight. Suddenly, the front door opens and Debra drags me into the house. Her eyes narrow and her lips twitch.

“So, Clause is the ‘some guy at the office,’ huh?”

I release a sigh. I didn’t want to tell her about Christian because I was afraid she would say it was a bad idea.

Folding her arms across her chest with a twinkle in her eyes, she says, “Tell me all

about the date.”

I groan.

Chapter Sixteen

Hope

I arrive at the office on Monday almost late because I don't want to chance another encounter with Christian in the elevator. Fortunately, he's already in his office when I walk in. He's talking to Clara about some files. He coolly greets me, but I read the male appreciation in his eyes. We work as if nothing hot is brewing between us.

A few minutes before my lunch break, Christian tells me I need to sit in on an important lunch meeting with a prospective client. I enjoy the meeting as, once again, I'm reminded of how brilliant Christian is with business. I love the way he pulls back his hair from his forehead when he's deep in thought and the narrowing of his eyes. I also love the way his suits fit him to perfection, drawing attention to his muscular body and the sheer masculinity that is Christian Clause. The confident way he speaks about the business and the aura of power he exudes send warm flushes through me. I feel his eyes on me during the meeting and he surprises me with a sensual wink. I drop my pen and quickly bend to retrieve it.

After the meeting, Christian walks out with his new business partners while I sit at my desk wondering what gifts to buy for Debra and her family for Christmas. I also wonder if I should get Christian something. We're not officially dating, but it would be nice to buy him a gift.

I'm on the phone attending to an issue when he walks back into his office. Clara goes to him when he buzzes for her while I continue with my work. I'm focused on typing my boss's dictations when someone walks into the large office. I catch a whiff of the

person's perfume before I lift my head. My lips slightly part when I see Katherine standing before me, looking like a million dollars in a silver sequin dress.

"Is Chris in?" she asks without so much as a greeting, staring down her nose at me with cold eyes. I feel a chill from the icy gaze she fixes on me.

I nod. Without even waiting for me to inform him of her presence, she walks toward his office. I don't make any move to stop her. Why bother? I don't think Chris will be upset with me for allowing her into his office without prior notice.

Clara comes out of the office a short while later and she leaves for the second floor to attend to something.

Jealousy burns inside me, but I control myself. Christian isn't dating her. If he was, he wouldn't be all over me. I'm silently happy that we already had lunch so he won't take her out on a lunch date.

I struggle to focus on what I'm typing as I don't like that woman in there with Christian. He might not be my man to the entire world—yet—but I can't help being protective of him. I force myself to concentrate on my work as it's what I'm being paid to do, not fantasize about the boss. As I'm typing, I discover a part I don't understand in the notes I made earlier.

As Clara isn't in the office, I decide to ask Christian and quickly return to my desk in case a visitor walks in. Hurrying, I raise my hand to knock on Christian's office door but the door is partially open. I push it open further and walk into the room. My steps grind to a halt when I see Katherine in Christian's arms. It looks as if they were about to kiss before I came in. My jaw drops and I can't help the look of betrayal that reflects in my eyes as they pull apart. Christian turns away while Katherine looks at me with fury.

“How dare you barge in here like that? Chris, is this how uncultured your employees are?”

Expecting Christian to defend me, to tell Katherine she’s out of line for accusing me of being without manners, my eyes widen when he looks at me coldly.

“What do you want, Hope?”

I’m shocked at the iciness in his tone.

“Are you deaf?” Katherine asks and draws closer to Christian who had moved away.

I struggle to keep back the angry retort that comes to my mind. My eyes shift from Katherine to Christian. I’m disappointed at the indifferent way he stares back at me. Gone was the way he looked at me that morning and during the meeting.

“Keep whatever brought you here for later,” Christian aloofly says. “I’ll attend to it later. I won’t need you for the rest of the day.”

As it’s obvious he wants to be alone with his mistress, I nod.

“Yes, Mr. Clause.”

Although I’m tearing apart at the seams inside, I lift my chin, turn around and walk regally out of the office. Tears sting my eyes as I stride out of the office. I’m glad they can’t see me tearing up.

Jealousy burns inside me even though I have no right, as Christian hasn’t promised me a future. Heck, he hasn’t even asked me to be his girlfriend or anything. All we’ve done is sneak around smooching.

I walk back to my office, grateful Clara isn’t back. I hastily blink back the tears, angry with myself for caring so much I’m almost shedding tears, which is crazy.

I have allowed myself to get in too deep when Christian didn’t even ask me for a relationship. Anger surges inside me at the way Katherine treated me. Who did she think she was? I hated the possessive way she held on to Christian.

“Are you all right?” Clara asks as she walks back to the office.

Quickly, I school my features and offer her a small smile. “I’m fine, Clara. Just a little tired.”

“Why don’t you take a brief break? I’ll attend to Mr. Clause whenever he needs something.”

“Thanks, Clara.” I don’t bother telling her he won’t need any of us in a long time, probably until the close of work.

I have to evaluate things now. This is one of the reasons it isn't advisable to have anything to do with your boss or coworker. I shouldn't have forgotten that rule. Knowing Christian is in there with Katherine, doing what I had no idea of, is driving me crazy. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Everything in me wants me to type my resignation, go into Christian's office and throw it in his face. I control myself. I can't allow the incident to get to me. I'm a grown woman who can handle anything thrown at me.

With that in mind, I pull myself together. I even manage a professional smile when Katherine walks out of the office plastered to his side about an hour later. I watch him walk her to the elevator and lower my head when Christian returns to his office. I'm a little surprised because I assumed they would leave together to finish what they started in the office.

My heart aches even more since Christian didn't spare me a second glance. I look at my wristwatch and I grimace because it's still many hours before the close of work, and I have little work to do to keep me busy.

Later, my heart flips in my chest when Christian requests my presence in his office. I wonder what he wants. To apologize, fire me, or tell me there'll be no more kissing and dates between us.

Whatever, I'm ready. Smoothing down my black pencil skirt, my heels click on the floor as I walk toward the double wooden doors. I take in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Chapter Seventeen

Christian

Staring at Hope standing there looking as sexy as ever, I feel the usual warm flush that rushes up my body whenever I see her. Remorse wells up inside me for the way I treated her earlier. I wasn't angry at her, but at myself for allowing things to go too far with Katherine. One minute she was talking to me and the next, she was trying to kiss me. And of course, Hope chose that unfortunate moment to enter the office. I know she must think something is going on between me and Katherine. Something is going on, but I can't tell Hope as it's between me and Katherine. It's strictly business, but not one Hope should be privy to.

I listen as Hope, without me even saying anything, rattles off my schedule for the following day and the work she has done so far that day.

"You have a meeting with some of your personnel at four."

"Cancel it," I say, and rise from my chair.

She nods and lifts her pad to scratch something out. Then she raises her head to wait for further instructions from me. At that moment, something tightens in my chest and I realize once more that I enjoy working with Hope. She's a hard worker just like me, brilliant, and never complains no matter what I throw at her. Sometimes I make her stay past the close of work to handle issues for me, but I have never once heard her grumble. In fact, she has dedicated herself so much to her job, she understands almost everything about the business in such a short time. Sometimes, she completes my sentences, guessing my train of thoughts regarding what I want her to do.

Smiling, I say, "I think I owe you a raise."

Her delicately carved brows shoot up. "Oh."

I nod. "I'll speak to the accountant as soon as we get back."

She frowns. “Get back from where?”

“From our trip to Gray Rock.” I shrug into my suit jacket as I explain. “We hold a conference every year in a ski resort for entrepreneurs in Colorado. Do you ski?”

She shakes her head.

A grin spreads across my face. “I look forward to teaching you.”

I expect her to give me that sweet smile of hers, but her face remains impassive.

“When do we leave and return?”

I frown, wondering what’s wrong. “Thursday. We’ll be back on Sunday.”

She nods and slightly turns toward the door. “If that’s all...”

“Hope, please wait,” I call before she opens the door. Crossing the short distance between us, I walk up to her and search her stony face.

“Hope, I’m sorry I was short with you earlier.”

She shrugs. “It doesn’t matter. You’re the boss.”

“No. It matters. I didn’t mean to speak to you curtly. You caught me at a bad moment.”

“Obviously,” she mutters.

Never in my life have I felt the need to explain myself to a woman before. But now, I desperately want Hope to know and believe nothing is going on between me and Katherine.

I place my hands on her shoulders, but she shrugs them off and moves away. Frustrated, I run my fingers through my hair.

“Hope, Katherine is an old friend. I’m helping her with something I can’t tell right now because it’s a matter of confidentiality.”

Hope folds her arms across her chest, which pushes up her breasts, but I don't think she realizes it as there is still coldness in her eyes I don't like.

"You don't have to explain things to me. It's none of my business."

I shake my head. "Hope, it is my business when you get upset with me. I hurt you and I'm sorry."

When she still stares at me, I get desperate. I want her to smile at me and tease me the way she used to. I understand now that Hope is beginning to mean much more to me than I thought. I have never been so worked up about a woman believing me before or desiring her to smile at me. More and more entranced by her by the minute, I throw away my work ethics and say, "Let me make it up to you. Let's go out. We could go to Denver and have a pleasant time in the city."

She drops her arms. "I have work to do."

Grinning, I say, "Didn't you just say I'm the boss?"

She still doesn't smile, and I let out a frustrated sigh.

"Fine. I want you to take the day off."

She nods and turns around. "I'll get my things and go home."

I gently place my hand on her arm and whirl her around. "I'm trying to make it up to you, Hope. I have never given a damn whether a woman believes my explanation in the past. Please accept my apology and don't make a mountain out of a molehill."

As she stares at me with indecision in her eyes, I take a step back from her and allow her to make up her mind. I have apologized and explained and even offered to take

her out. It's the best I think I can do. For now, at least.

"And you promise to keep your hands to yourself?" she asks with narrowed eyes.

Laughter booms from my throat. I can't promise that, not when I want to draw her into my arms right now.

"I promise not to do what you don't want me to do."

I can see she's fighting whether she should forgive me and move beyond the uncomfortable situation.

"That's not an answer," Hope says.

I shrug. "It's the only one I can give."

She nods and turns away. I'm not having any of that. I drag her into my arms and fasten my lips on hers. She struggles, but I hold her firm.

Solemnly, I say. "You're the only woman I want to be with. If you can't believe that, then there's no point in our trying to get to know each other anymore."

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She chews on her bottom lip. Slowly, she nods and I smile. I give her a quick kiss again before I walk back to the table and reach for my cellphone.

“Have you been in a helicopter before?”

Flecks of gold tinge her brown eyes, showing her excitement. She shakes her head and I grin. Swiftly, I make arrangements for a ride in my helicopter to Denver.

The rest of the day will always remain a blissful memory for me. Since we are trying to be discreet, we tell Clara we’re going for a business meeting. We walk separately out of the office and meet in the elevator where I fight to keep my hands off her. My driver takes us to my helipad at the airport. After being strapped in, Hope screams as we are lifted off in the air. I adore watching her face fill with a mixture of fear and excitement as we fly over Cedar Crest. In a matter of minutes, we’re in Denver and exploring the city. The spirit of the season is embedded everywhere we go. Carolers gather at street corners singing Christmas carols. Christmas decorations cover almost all the buildings. Christmas shoppers move in and out of a large mall. They stationed a large mechanized Santa Claus and two elves at the city center saying ‘Merry Christmas’ to everyone who drives or walks by.

We go to Denver Zoo and I feel like a small boy seeing the animals. It brings back memories of the time I visited with my parents. The cold air from the drizzling snow gives me an excuse to put my arm around Hope. Later, we visit the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. We have an early dinner at a restaurant in Larimer Square before heading back to Cedar Crest. I can’t remember the last time I enjoyed myself.

I drop Hope off at her sister’s place, but not before I kiss her goodnight, which leaves

the two of us breathless, unsurprisingly. It's difficult getting sleep to come this night because I can't stop thinking about Hope. As my eyes finally close in sleep, I ask myself one question.

Am I falling in love with Hope?

Chapter Eighteen

Hope

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing?" Debra asks as I put finishing touches to my packing.

I raise my head and smile at her. I understand her concern. I've gone out on three dates with Christian now, and I haven't really told her everything about it. I don't know why I'm keeping things to myself. She knows everything about Terrance. Perhaps I'm unsure of what exactly I feel for him. I'm still discovering him and what we share.

"Yes, Deb. I know you're worried about me, but please don't be. Traveling with Christian is part of my job description."

"I know that." Then, giving me a knowing look, she says, "You know that's not what I'm talking about. I'm afraid for you, Hope."

Pretending as if I don't know why, I say, "Why? It's not a big deal."

Cocking her brows, she asks, "It isn't?"

I shake my head. "We're going to have separate rooms if that's what you're worried about."

Sighing, she drags me into her arms. “Please be careful.”

Smiling because I know I won’t be, I pull out of her arms just as Aria comes into the room with a painting of me, her parents, and her. I praise Aria’s artwork, kiss her cheek, and bid them goodbye.

My heart is in my throat as I make my way down the stairs. I know the inevitable might happen during this trip, and I’m ready for it. I don’t care about the consequences for now. It’s like I’ve been waiting for this trip forever.

It’s snowing and I hope it doesn’t affect the trip. Christian takes my breath away clad in a gray cashmere sweater that matches the color of his eyes, blue jeans, and black boots. I like how his eyes rove my body as I’m dressed the same way as he is, in a brown jacket, blue turtleneck top, blue jeans, and brown boots.

He whistles. “You look good enough to eat.”

His driver helps me with my luggage and we’re soon on our way to the airport. Excitement thrums inside me as we board the plane first-class to Gray Rock where the resort is. I have never flown first-class before and pleasure flows through me as I settle on the comfortable leather chairs. Hardly have I sat down when a hostess brings me a glass of champagne and warm face towels. The flight is short but beautiful as I savor the delicious breakfast served, as well as the sight of Christian’s handsome face.

An SUV is waiting for us at the airport when we land. It drives us to the breathtaking ski resort. My mouth drops at the picturesque town surrounded by huge mountains covered in snow.

“It’s like a postcard,” I tell Christian.

He laughs. “We change the venue every year. This is one of the best.”

I’m even more stunned when he tells me he booked us a private cabin. Thrills race through my body at having our own private place instead of sharing a large one with those attending the conference.

I gasp when the vehicle meanders its way up a steep road and I catch sight of the cabin.

“It’s magnificent,” I cry, gawking at the glass and wood building. “It looks as if they brought it out from the pages of a magazine.”

Christian chuckles. “You should see the inside. I knew you would like it when I saw the brochure.”

I turn in my seat to stare at him with suspicion. “When did you rent it?”

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“When I decided I wanted you.”

My mouth runs dry as the car pulls to a stop in front of the building. Christian helps me out of the car. In the blistering cold, I stand there staring at the cabin encircled by a wooden porch and roof. Glass windows from the ground to the ceiling cover one part of the cabin.

I can't wait to see the inside. With my hand in Christian's, I climb the porch steps while the driver carries our luggage. Our boots make squishy noises in the snow.

The scent of cedar and mint assails my nostrils as I step into the hallway with Christian. The warmth makes me smile as Christian leads me to the sitting room. I draw in a sharp breath at the cozy scene before me. A humongous brick and wood fireplace covers one part of the wall. Red and green Christmas stockings decorate the fireplace from end to end. Comfy looking leather sofas with matching chairs surround the blazing fireplace. Hot cocoa, hot tea, and spicy apple cider, along with different coffees, are in substantial supply on an oak coffee table.

“This is beautiful,” I comment as Christian helps me out of my jacket.

“I'm glad you like it. I aim to please,” Christian says and hands me a cup of hot cocoa.

“I am pleased,” I say, and we share a laugh.

We enjoy a leisurely time before heading to the conference hall in the middle of the town. I smell Christmas in the air and sing along to the Christmas songs blaring in

several speakers across the town. We meet with other participants. I grit my teeth as I see some women openly checking out Christian and being flirtatious with him.

During the next three days, I get used to women ogling Christian and flirting with him. My consolation is that Christian doesn't respond to any of them. He has eyes and ears only for me, which I totally like.

The conference is so fun and educational I don't want to return to Cedar Crest. Christian tries to teach me how to ski, but I'm too frightened to learn. He draws me into his arms and with his intense gaze holding mine says, "Trust me. I'll never hurt you or let any harm come to you."

The breath flows out of me at his words. It sounds more like he's talking about us than skiing. I don't mind anyway, so I allow him to teach me without fear, which ends up being a fun and stimulating experience as we share an ardent kiss after.

The days are fun, but the nights are sheer torture as Christian's room is across from mine. Whenever we return from a night out, we tell each other a chaste good night even though I know we're burning for each other. I see it in Christian's eyes and I wonder what he's waiting for. Is he afraid I'll turn him down? He doesn't want to mix business with pleasure as this is supposed to be a business trip? Every night I wonder what runs through his mind as I toss and turn on my soft bed. I have never wanted a man the way I want Christian. I don't think there's any shame in admitting it.

On our last night there, after a wonderful time in town dining in a classic restaurant and dancing, we return to the cabin. I turn to tell Christian goodnight. He catches me off guard by drawing me into his strong arms.

"Finally, business is over. It's time for pleasure."

My heart slams against my chest at his words.

“Even though it’s freezing, I have been taking cold showers to help me sleep every night so I can focus on why we’re here. But no more. Tonight is ours.” Then a frown crosses his handsome face. “That’s if I’m not overstepping my boundaries.”

For an answer, I stand on tiptoe to place my lips on his. That is all the encouragement he needs as his arms wind tighter around me and he deepens the kiss.

I moan with pleasure as I have so much missed having his arms around me. I lean into him, kissing him with the same fervor. I raise my hands to curl them around his neck and then link them in his beautiful hair. I feel the thick bulge of his erection against my stomach and thrills shoot through me.

Is this really going to happen? Am I going to have mind-blowing sex with my boss?

Oh, yes, I am.

His scent is intoxicating, and I inhale as he backs me against the wall, tantalizing my senses so much I feel like ripping his clothes off him. His hands move all over my body, grasping my breasts, and then he cups my ass cheeks and lifts me a little to feel the full effect of his stiff shaft. I almost sob with joy at the size of him.

My pebbled nipples poke painfully against my blouse. I massage Christian’s head as his lips move from my mouth to my neck. My panties are so wet I don’t know if they’ll ever be dry again. I want him so badly; I don’t think I can wait. I have always fantasized about him making slow passionate love to me, but right now, I don’t care about such finesse. I want him hard and fast.

Christian’s hands do wonders to my breasts as he caresses them. The breath comes out sharply from my throat when he lowers his head further and catches my hard

nipple through my sweater. Sensations build up in my body, leaving me shivering and moaning. My hands tighten on his head as he teases one nipple, then the other. As if his lips aren't doing enough to my senses, his hand reaches down and strokes my inner core through my leggings. I let out a small cry when he unexpectedly stops.

Grinning, he huskily says, "I want to take you right here and now, but I have dreamed so much about your gorgeous body spread against my bed, we have to take this to my room."

I don't care where he wants us to go, as long as he extinguishes the fire burning inside me.

I try to tell him yes as I see he's waiting for a reply but my throat is clogged with passion. All I can do is nod. A broad smile spreads across his face. He dips a little and I'm surprised when he swings me into his arms without breaking a sweat. He carries me down the hallway to his room. Our lips mesh again when we enter his room. He gently lays me on the bed and I feel like a prey on his chopping block. And I love it.

He reaches for the hem on my blouse as I unbutton his shirt. We start slowly but then seconds later, we're tearing the clothes off each other's bodies and flinging them across the room.

"Damn, you're exquisite." Christian whistles as his hot gaze travels all over my body standing naked before him.

He's all I imagined he would be, too, with his firm body and a six pack that has me drooling. Not an ounce of surplus flesh on him.

When his hand lifts one of my breasts, it is all I can do not to beg him to suck it. He doesn't need any urging as his lips find my nipple and his hand clutches my other

breast and squeezes it hard. I bite my lips as tears glaze my eyes from the pleasure coursing through my body. Christian lifts his head after torturing my nipples and breasts with expertise.

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I run a hand across his taut stomach. My hand moves from his stomach and trail down to cup his rigid length. He pulses in my hand, making me feel heady. His hand grips my hair.

“Please, no more,” he hoarsely says as I continue to caress his rigid shaft.

He swiftly switches our positions on the bed. When his hands slowly travel all over my body, realization dawns after some seconds: I have known this guy only like a month. Yet, I’m about to have sex with him and he’s my boss. Is this wise? Although I’m strongly attracted to him, does that mean I have to jump into bed with him just like that?

All coherent thoughts disappear from my head when his finger slides into my wet core. Damn, I believe I have died and gone to heaven as he strokes me. My back lifts from the bed.

Damn it, he’s good!

Whimpering, my fingers find his hair and tighten in its silky strands. The sensations running up my body become so intense I convulse rapidly. His lips reach for mine again and we share an explosive kiss that leaves me all stimulated again.

He reaches for the drawer on his bedside table and brings out a condom which he quickly rolls up his rigid shaft. With his gaze holding mine, he parts my thighs and elevates my buttocks with his muscular hands.

I lick my lips with anticipation as the tip of his manhood brushes against the opening

of my core. Slowly, he pushes himself inside me, filling me in ways I have never experienced before. He is so big; my body stretches to accommodate him.

“Fuck, you’re so tight!” he rasps, closing his eyes with lines of strain marking his forehead.

He plunges deep into me and my back arcs. The feeling of having him inside me is heavenly. His movement is slow and gentle at first. And then, tension builds up and his pace increases. He thrusts into my core, filling me completely. My fingers rake his back as he pounds into me with ferocity. He’s marvelous in bed and I love it. My breasts jiggle as his movements increase. A strong feeling builds in between my thighs again and increases with each of his thrusts.

I shudder violently under him even as he continues pounding into me as I reach my climax. His breathing grows more ragged, his strokes increasing until sensations wrench his body. He lets out a groan. Then he falls on the bed beside me.

“That was amazing,” he whispers into my ear.

It definitely was, and I can’t wait for us to do it again later. Right now, I’m so sated all I can do is smile at him and yawn.

He laughs and cuddles me in the curve of his arm. I close my eyes and go to sleep, loving his arms around me. I wake up sometime in the night to find his hands stroking my body.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he mutters before capturing my lips. I switch our positions and ride him as if my life depends on it. By the time I fall on him, panting, I come to a realization.

I can’t deny it anymore. I’m in love with Christian!

Chapter Nineteen

Hope

“Deb, can I talk to you?” I walk into the kitchen two days after returning from my trip with Christian.

“That’s my cue to leave.” Ray rises from the stool at the counter with a wide grin on his face.

I laugh and pat his shoulder as he walks out of the kitchen. Debra turns from the sink where she just finished doing the dishes.

With a glint in her eyes, Debra says, “Have you come to tell it all?”

I sigh. When I returned to Cedar Crest two days ago, Debra wanted me to tell her everything that went down with Christian. I was still too much in a glow to share with her what transpired between us. Christian gave me the following day off after coming back so we could rest. Debra and I couldn’t talk the previous day because she had to take Aria to the pediatrician. Aria is fine now. I only just returned from the office an hour ago.

Seeing Christian and knowing what we shared during the trip kept me self-conscious all day. I made mistakes. Thankfully, Christian was out all day in a series of meetings, so I didn’t see much of him until Katherine came to visit. I struggled very hard not to show my insecurity and jealousy. When they both left just before the close of work without Christian glancing in my direction, I couldn’t help getting worried.

“Do you want some coffee?” Debra asks when I don’t reply, lost in my thoughts.

I nod absentmindedly. It’s time to make a decision about Christian, and I need my

sister's help in order not to let my heart do the thinking for me.

I smile at Debra as she places the cup of coffee on the counter. I take it and sip from it with my thoughts still whirling around my handsome boss. The hot liquid is welcome as it spreads warmth through my body.

“So, what's up?” Debra asks as she lowers herself on a stool opposite me.

“I'm in love with Christian.” I don't mince words as I'm desperate for answers.

Debra's eyes widen and then she lets out a low whistle.

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“What am I going to do?” I question, chewing on my bottom lip.

Debra offers me a smile. “I knew you were in love with him when you didn’t want to talk about him. You wanted to keep the blissful feeling to yourself.”

I let out breath. “Please, Deb, don’t start. I’m at a crossroads here.”

She frowns. “I don’t see why.”

“Do I quit or do I continue to work for him? I’m afraid of being hurt, Deb.”

Her frown thickens. “Why do you think he’ll hurt you? From what I heard of Clause, he doesn’t date his employees. You’re the first.” She shrugs. “Unless those others were in secret, but I don’t think so as it would have gotten out.” She reaches out and takes my hand on the counter. “Just because Terrance hurt you doesn’t mean every man is out to do the same.”

I shake my head. “It’s not that simple, Deb. There’s another woman.”

“What?”

I tell her about Katherine and why I feel insecure about her.

My sister frowns. “You know Christian won’t purposely hurt you, right?”

I shrug.

Her eyes narrow. “Did something happen between you two after the trip?”

“Sort of, but it’s complicated.” I release a weary sigh. “I think there’s more between him and Katherine than he’s telling me. I found her all over him in his office. And they went out together again today.”

Debra scoffs. “Fuck Katherine. I don’t see the problem. Christian is single and you are single, so what’s stopping you from telling him how you really feel about him?”

My lips part with surprise for a moment until I remember my sister had taken the bull by the horns and told Ray her feelings before he did.

I don’t think I’m that brave. Lowering my head, I whisper, “I don’t want to be rejected.”

“Oh, Hope.”

“I don’t want a repeat of what happened with Terrance,” I truthfully admit.

Debra squeezes my hand. “I understand, but please stop doubting yourself, Hope. What makes you think Christian will reject you?”

I don’t know why I suddenly become teary-eyed. Meeting Christian and falling in love with him has turned me maudlin.

“You’re beautiful, smart, and classy,” Deb tells me with a bright smile on her face. Then she whistles. “And you’ve got a body I wish I had. You’re thick in all the right places.”

I smile through my tears. Debra has always wished she had my curvy figure.

Shaking my hand, she says, “I’m not just saying all this because you’re my baby sis. It’s the truth. You’re a strong, gorgeous woman any man would be proud to call his own.”

“Thank you,” I reply, feeling my face flush. I have never learned to do well with flattery.

“Tomorrow, when you get to the office, lay your cards on the table. Tell him no more sneaking around. If he wants to date you, he has to do it publicly. And you need to know if this Katherine will be in his life forever. If she is, then a line needs to be drawn about her touching him. However, don’t make him choose between his so-called old friend and you. Men don’t like that.”

I nod, happy to have finally shared my misgivings with her. I’m so relieved I rise and go around the counter to throw my arms around her.

Pulling away, I smile. “I’m so sorry for not telling you what was going on with Christian.”

She chuckles. “You think I didn’t know?”

Laughter rumbles from my throat. “I was afraid you would frown at me dating my boss.”

Debra smiles. “Why would I do that when I see the effect Christian has on you? You came back to Cedar Crest looking as if your world has crumbled. About a week into working with Christian, your whole demeanor changed. It was as if you finally had a purpose in life again. And then you started glowing and didn’t want to say anything. So, I knew something was going on.”

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I laugh again. I should have known better than trying to hide things from Debra.

“Thank you for everything, Deb. If you hadn’t invited me to come back here, I would have still been in Georgia feeling sorry for myself.”

Winking at me, Debra says, “What would you do without me?”

I throw my arms around her again. “Absolutely nothing.”

We laugh together and I tell her about the conference and how much I enjoyed myself with Christian.

“All will be fine,” she tells me, and I believe her.

“Merry Christmas, Deb.”

“Merry Christmas, Hope.”

Chapter Twenty

Christian

“Would you like to come in?” Katherine asks me as I pull into her driveway.

I shake my head. “I have made other plans.”

“Oh, come in, Chris. We’ve got to celebrate. I have my business back successfully,

all thanks to you. I have champagne and caviar.”

I smile. “I’m sorry, Katherine. I have to be somewhere else.”

Her delicately carved brows shoot up. “Where else could you possibly go on an evening like this instead of spending it with me?”

I don’t think it is any of her business, so I keep quiet. I wish she’d just exit the car. The snow is beginning to build up, and I want to get the hell out of there.

“Chris,” Katherine purrs and I inwardly groan. I don’t have time for this. “You and I have known each other for a long time now. I want you to know that I care a lot about you.”

No! I can’t do this. Not tonight.

Before I can tell her I’m not interested in hearing what she has to say as I have to leave, Katherine leans into me from the passenger seat and tries to kiss me. Hastily, I pull back.

“What do you think you’re doing?” My voice is tinged with fury.

Katherine, her face reddened, sits back and lowers her head. “I’m just trying to show you how I feel.”

I grit my teeth as I regret not telling her off when she unexpectedly tried to kiss me in my office a short while ago. So, now she thinks I’m available for her to grab and try to kiss every time? It’s shocking as she has never been this bold and needy in the past.

“Katherine, I’m in love with someone,” I quietly say into the thick silence that

follows her admission.

She gasps and twists in her seat. “What did you just say?”

“I’ve fallen in love with Hope.”

Her shriek resounds in the car, drowning out the quietly playing Christmas carol on my speaker.

“Your PA?”

I nod. “She’s more than just a PA to me.”

Katherine stares at me as if I’ve gone crazy.

With a solemn voice, I say, “Katherine, we can no longer have secrets between us. I hurt Hope the other day because I didn’t want to tell her why she has been seeing us together. I love her, and I’m secretly dating her. So, I can’t lie to her and keep things from her. I also don’t want you to come between us.”

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Katherine looks at me with eyes of betrayal. I'm not moved by them because I never promised her anything. All I promised to do was to help her. I never planned on having an affair with her.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing," she finally says in a strangled tone.

I shrug. "Hope is the number one priority in my life right now, and I won't do anything to jeopardize having a successful relationship with her."

"But how can you fall in love with your PA, Chris? You told me your work ethics don't allow that. You've fired countless women who came on strongly to you in the past. Why Hope? Why now?"

A smile curls my lips. "Because Hope is different. She's everything I want in a woman. She's all I've been seeking for in a woman."

"But I thought you and I could have something going after helping me. I thought we made the perfect fit. I thought we had a future together as we've known each other for so long."

I hear the pain in her voice and I grimace. I don't like hurting women, but in this case, I can't help it.

Turning to regard her with rueful eyes, I sigh. "I'm sorry, Katherine. You and I will always be good friends, nothing more."

She sniffs and I feel terrible. I reach into my jacket and offer her my handkerchief. I

didn't know her feelings for me ran so deep. My friends told me she put green lights out for me, but I didn't see any of them because I had eyes only for Hope.

"Are you going to be okay?" I question as she dabs at her eyes with my handkerchief.

She nods. "I'll be fine. Forgive me for being silly." She laughs a little. "I can't recall the last time I cried over a man."

"I'm sorry."

"I understand. Hope is a lucky woman. I wish you well, Chris."

"Thanks, Katherine. That means a lot to me."

She smiles and says, "I'm always here, I'll always be here waiting for you in case it doesn't work out between you and her."

"Katherine—"

She vigorously shakes her head. "I know how love is, trust me. One minute you're all over the person and the next, you can't stand the person. So, in case that happens with you and Hope, I'll be right here waiting for you."

I release a tired breath. Katherine isn't making it easy for me and herself. I have to spell things out bluntly to her.

"Katherine, I'm sorry, but nothing can happen between the two of us. Having known each other since high school, we would have been a couple by now."

"I understand," she replies in a small voice.

“Now that our business is concluded and we have no further dealings, I don’t think we should see so much of each other again.”

She nods without saying anything.

“I want to focus on my relationship with Hope and see where it leads.”

“That’s fine.” She smiles a little. “I’ll miss hanging out with you, but I understand. If you were my man, I wouldn’t want another woman flocking around you either.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

She leans in and places a kiss on my cheek. “Goodbye, Chris.”

I watch as she tightens her mink coat around her body and leaves the car. She waves at me when she gets to her front door. I nod at her and drive out of her driveway, feeling as if the weight of the world has been lifted from my shoulders.

As I drive down the street flagged by houses decorated with Christmas lights, the snow falling, Silent Night playing on my radio, and thoughts of Hope filling my mind, I decide Christmas is my favorite time of the year.

Chapter Twenty-One

Hope

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“I think the kitchen is squeaky clean now, Deb,” I tell my sister as I wipe my hands on the drying cloth.

Debra smiles at me from the counter she’s cleaning in circular motions. “That was therapeutic.”

“It sure was,” I hastily concur.

After talking about Chris, Debra and I reminisced about the good old days. We talked about our late parents and our childhood. As we talked, we moved around the kitchen, cleaning it like we used to do with our mom. It’s a few days to Christmas, and it’s custom to turn the place inside out to prepare for all the cooking that will be done on Christmas day.

I go to my sister and give her a big hug. “Thanks, Deb. I sure needed that.”

She smiles and kisses my cheek.

I put the kettle on the gas to have a cup of hot cocoa before I go to bed. Ray comes into the kitchen.

“Someone is here to see you, Hope,” he says with a smile.

A frown marks my forehead. Who is visiting at this time of the night?

Ray sees the question in my eyes and says, “It’s Clause.”

My eyes widen and my lips part. “What?”

Ray nods. “He’s in the living room.”

I just stand there in shock for some minutes, wondering why Christian is here.

“Please bring him to the kitchen,” Debra inserts before I can get my vocal cords working. “My kitchen is squeaky clean and cozy. They’ll have a wonderful time discussing things while you and I snuggle in bed.” She winks at Ray, who bursts into laughter.

They both turn to look at me.

“Hope?”

I sigh. Why not? I needed privacy for what I had to say to Christian.

“Okay.”

They smile and hold hands as they exit the kitchen. I wish for what they have and more with Christian.

My heart is in my throat as I take the kettle from the gas and quickly make two cups of hot cocoa. I take a packet of marshmallows from the cupboard. I turn around and Christian is at the kitchen entrance, looking as handsome as ever in a gray turtleneck sweater, a black jacket, and black jeans.

The marshmallows fall from my hands. “Christian.”

A slow smile covers his face. He nods at the kitchen. “This is lovely.”

I look around the kitchen decorated with white and red bows, with small flower vases at the windows. Yes, it is indeed a cozy scene for two lovers to rub minds.

“Thanks,” I reply, for want of anything better to say.

I pick up the marshmallows and point at the cups of cocoa on the counter.

“Do you want some?”

He nods and strides forward to sit on a stool by the counter.

I put some marshmallows in his cup and mine. We sit there sipping our hot drink in companionable silence for some minutes. It stretches my nerves taut.

At last, Christian says, “We have to talk, Hope.”

My heart slams painfully in my chest. My hands tremble as I put my cup back on the counter. I force my eyes to meet his. I’m lost for words as an expression I can’t describe reflects in his eyes.

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Christian rises and my eyes enlarge as he walks around the counter. He gently takes my hands and lifts me from the stool.

“Hope, I love you.”

My lips part with shock. Christian’s hands tighten around my body.

“I don’t want to sneak around anymore. I want the entire world to know I love you and you’re my woman.”

I can’t believe my ears. All I do is gawk at him, not knowing what to say. I secretly feared that all he wants from me is sex. Joy wells up inside me, causing tears to sting my eyes.

“Do you really mean that?”

He smiles and nods. “I mean every word. I see you being my wife and the mother of my children.”

“Oh, Christian,” is all I can say as tears of elation spill down my cheeks.

He wipes my tears with his hands and captures my lips with his in a stunning kiss. I drown as his lips move expertly against mine.

And then, like a bolt of lightning striking me, I remember what had made me indecisive all day. I wrench my lips from his.

“What about Katherine?”

He frowns. “What about her?”

I take a step back. “You left the office with her today and as usual, she was all over you.”

Christian runs his hands through his hair. “Sweetheart, Katherine is an old friend. We met in high school and lost contact until after college. I have never dated her and I don’t have any intention of doing that.”

My eyes narrow. “Then why have you been seeing her if nothing is going on between the two of you?”

“She had a problem with her business. She was almost at the point of bankruptcy, but she didn’t want anyone to know. So, she asked for my help. With a few investments and investors here and there, she’s back on her feet again.”

I chew my bottom lip, looking at him with skepticism. I don’t want what happened with Terrance to happen again. Christian might wake up someday and tell me he’s going back to Katherine.

Christian places his hands on my shoulders. “Hope, darling, I know you’ll find it hard to believe me because of Terrance.”

During the night we spent making passionate love in Gray Rock, we talked for a long time about our lives and past relationships. He didn’t mention Katherine that night, but I kept wondering as the woman was still in his life.

He cups my cheek. “I promise you, Katherine and I are just friends. True, she wanted something other than friendship, but I have made it clear to her that it will never be

because I love you and want to be with you.”

His head descends and he renders me breathless again. I’m smiling like a ninny when he raises his head. I clasp his face in my hands and laugh joyously.

“I love you, Christian.”

His eyes widen. Then he shakes his head. “You don’t have to say it because I did.”

I laugh heartily. “Now you doubt me?”

He looks so cute in his uncertainty; I kiss him.

“I fought real hard not to fall in love with you, but I failed woefully.”

He chuckles. “Me, too.”

“I have been so frightened that you’d break my heart and leave it in tatters. I thought all you wanted from me was sex.”

Christian throws back his head as laughter rumbles from his throat.

“I started with wanting only that, but I knew instinctively that you were different. I couldn’t stop thinking about you. When I kissed you for the first time, it became worse. You were in my mind, my heart, and my dreams. Everywhere I went, I saw you. For the first time since I started my business, I found something better I wanted to do.”

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I can't stop smiling.

“To make it official, I have to ask. Will you be mine from now till eternity, Hope?”

I nod with a wide smile on my face. “Forever and always.”

Epilogue

Two Years Later

Hope

“You're so adorable,” I coo at my month-old baby son as I gently place him in his cradle.

His smile, so identical to his dad's, melts my heart yet again. I curl his small hand around my finger. He's the replica of his dad, with blonde hair, silver eyes, and the promise of handsome features when he's older. The only thing my son took from me is my nose and my natural tan color.

I sing to him, still amazed that I'm the mother of such a wonderful son. And the wife of Christian Clause. As I think of my husband, my face brightens with joy.

Two years ago, Christian and I tied the knot in a beautiful Christmas wedding. Surrounded by family and friends, the event was glorious. Christmas has never been the same for us after that. It has become even more special as we not only celebrate finding each other and our love, but our wedding and now the birth of our son. I feel

so blessed and happy; I find it hard to believe sometimes.

“Is Mrs. Clause ready for our wedding anniversary?” Christian walks into the nursery, looking debonair in a tuxedo.

I turn to give him a loving smile. “Yes. I’m just putting our little angel to bed.”

He whistles at my strapless dress with a slit in the middle of my thigh, and I laugh.

“Little angel?” Christian chuckles as he places his arm across my shoulders. “He screams like a banshee when he’s hungry.”

I laugh again. It’s all I do these days. We stand there staring at the product of our love with the eyes of proud parents. I had a relatively easy pregnancy and labor with Christian by my side every step of the way. We watch Jayden sleep for a moment before we join our family and friends who came to celebrate with us in our large home that Christian built for me.

Debra, Ray, Aria, and her one-year-old brother, along with some of our friends, are there. After our marriage, I couldn’t work with my husband anymore. So, Christian and I discussed it, and he set up a small computer firm that I manage. My employees and I are like a close-knit family and it’s wonderful to see them here. Christian’s friends are also here with their wives.

“Look at you all glowing,” Debra tells me as I take little Adam from her. “Motherhood definitely suits you.”

My face flushes with happiness as I reply, “Truly, it does. I have never felt so fulfilled in my life.”

“Motherhood does that to you.” Her eyes twinkle. “Coupled with being married to your one true love.”

I nod and shift my gaze to my husband, who is conversing with his friends. If anyone had told me two years ago that I would find love again and be blissfully happy, I wouldn't have believed it.

We have a wonderful time with everyone, eating, singing Christmas carols, dancing and playing games. I check on my son repeatedly, loving how much of a quiet baby he is.

Later on, when Christian and I are alone, watching the falling snow from our balcony, wrapped in each other's arms, I sigh with content.

"Have I thanked you today for coming into my life?" Christian asks and I giggle because he asks me that question often.

I turn in his arms and place a kiss on his lips. "No, but I thank you for coming into mine."

He chuckles and his arms tighten around me. "Sometimes, I feel as if I'm in a dream, and I don't want to wake up."

"Me, too. Happy anniversary, Christian."

"Happy anniversary, Hope. Get ready for one hundred years together."

Laughter bursts from my throat.

I kiss him. "Merry Christmas, darling. I love you."

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart. Love you always."

The End