

CRIMSON  ROMANCE

CONTEMPORARY

Christmas Dinner

Robyn Neeley

Author of *Destination Wedding*

Christmas Dinner

Robyn Neeley



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To my loving grandparents and one sweet kitty.

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PROLOGUE

The Letter

One Month Before Christmas

Today, there was a letter in the mailbox. Betty reached in for the velvet white envelope, her feeble hand trembling. It was addressed to her and her husband, Bruce. She clutched the envelope and climbed back up the hill to their log cabin. Cool, white mist wrapped around her legs. Once she reached the top of the hill, she could no longer wait. She opened the envelope and pulled out a piece of matching velvet white paper.

Her hand flew to her heart. Her granddaughter Amanda would be arriving next month.

She had so many wonderful memories of her second grandchild, particularly during this time of year. As a little girl, Amanda had always been the first to try out the frozen pond out back, ice-skating for hours upon hours. She was also the first downstairs on Christmas morning, sliding down their wooden banister to make her entrance. She loved this holiday—she took after her father in that regard.

Amanda grew up to be a TV news anchor and was working in Wilmington, North Carolina. She abruptly moved there from New York two years ago to get a fresh start. For the last two Christmases, her seat at the dinner table remained empty. Amanda told her parents that she couldn't get the time off from work, but Bruce and Betty knew better. It broke their hearts.

Betty entered the house and walked into the kitchen. Bruce sat at the square oak table engrossed in his crossword puzzle. She waved the letter slowly.

“Is that for us?”

She nodded. “It says Amanda will be arriving next month.”

“Amanda?” His eyes widened, and he set his pen down. “How old is she now?” He looked up toward the ceiling. “Thirty?”

She nodded and handed him the letter.

“I'm surprised she's joining us so soon.”

Betty watched her husband study the paper closely. He rose and peered out the kitchen window in the direction of the mailbox. “Maybe it's a mistake?” he asked, hopefulness in his voice.

Without a word, Betty reached over and claimed the letter from Bruce's shaky hand. She folded it, placing it carefully back in its envelope. It was best to leave him alone with his thoughts.

She walked into the living room and took a seat in her favorite rocking chair. Setting the envelope on a nearby end table, she picked up a pair of knitting needles and yarn.

The red and green meshed string immediately attracted a buff-colored tabby who sauntered over from her napping spot near the stone fireplace. The cat jumped onto Betty's lap, rubbing its soft head against the ball of yarn.

Forcing a smile, she set her needles aside and began petting the purring feline. "Sydney," she said, patting the cat on its head. "Amanda's coming home next month. Won't you be happy to see her after all this time? She'll be here in time to join us for Christmas dinner."

With that realization, a tear rolled down her cheek.

CHAPTER ONE

December 22

The mayor of Wilmington was high on top of the naughty list this year. News anchor Amanda Turner was going to make sure he received a well-deserved stocking full of coal to hang in his jail cell.

She stood in the control booth and reviewed her notes. Minutes ago, her script had been successfully uploaded into the teleprompter. She was finally ready to break the news. For months, she had worked tirelessly to expose Mayor O'Malley for mishandling his reelection funds. Lavish vacations, special gifts for his wife, and expensive outings around town with local celebrities were just a few ways he spent his supporters' donations. His inexcusable behavior was about to be revealed. Amanda would make sure that the honest, hard-working people of Wilmington knew the truth and that WENC news was on their side.

Her producer, Jeff Wakefield, tested out the shot of Jenny Jenkins, a field reporter stationed outside the mayor's office where the press conference would later take place.

"Good morning, Jenny," Amanda said, leaning over Jeff's shoulder. "You look great. Ready to break the story?"

"I'm ready." Jenny gave them a thumbs-up signal. "Talk to you soon."

Jeff turned to pat Amanda's back. "Santa Claus certainly came early for us, didn't he?"

She laughed. "Yes, he did." Busting the mayor had been a long time coming. It was a real team effort—with the exception of one particular colleague—her tall, dark, and arrogant co-anchor who was now ten minutes late.

Rumor had it he'd had some fun at the staff Christmas party last night. Not that she paid attention to office gossip—nor had she attended the event. She wasn't a fan of Christmas these days. Besides, she was way too busy taking down the mayor.

She set aside her backup notes and fished out her compact from her purse to check her makeup one last time. The news station didn't have a professional makeup artist for the on-air talent, but her assistant, Lacy Cavanaugh, had given her a hand this morning to make sure her face was flawless.

Suddenly, a blue eye appeared in her mirror.

She jumped.

"Good morning, Brenda Starr. Ready for your big moment?" Tate Ryan stood directly behind her. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

Amanda snapped the compact shut, crossed the studio to the anchor desk, and took her seat. Her eyes zoomed in on his tie. "Seriously?" She pointed to the red and green stripes.

“What?” Tate sat in his chair and spun around.

“Your tie.”

“Just trying to be festive. Do you have something against Christmas?”

Amanda ignored him. She always wore royal blue on Wednesdays, and he knew it. Lacy always sent him an e-mail each afternoon, reminding him what color to wear the next day. It helped ensure they didn’t clash on camera.

He’d worn the tie to get a rise out of her. Typical Tate. She smoothed her straight blonde hair along her jaw line. Well, it wouldn’t work today. This was her moment, and nothing he could say, do or wear was going to ruin it.

Jeff stepped up to the desk. “Nice work, you two. You’re quite the dynamic duo.”

“Thanks,” Tate responded and flashed a smile toward Amanda. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. It figured Tate would try to take some of the credit. It really didn’t surprise her. No matter. Jeff had agreed to let her break the story.

“All right. Let’s give the mayor a Christmas gift he can rewind and replay into the New Year.” Jeff’s eyes twinkled. “Ho, ho, ho . . .”

“Break a leg, Ace.” Tate winked.

Ernie, their cameraman, signaled. “Three, two, one.”

Amanda stared into the camera and smiled brightly. “Good morning, Wilmington. I’m Amanda Turner.”

“And I’m Tate Ryan. Your morning news starts right now. Thanks for joining us.”

She took a deep breath, her expression serious. This was it. Her time to shine. “In breaking news —” She paused, waiting for her next few lines to appear on the teleprompter.

Something was wrong. Where was the next line? The words on the screen stopped moving. The machine appeared to be stuck.

She looked down at the table and her heart galloped. Her backup notes were not on the desk. *Dammit.* She must have left them in the control room. This couldn’t be happening. Not today. *Please work. Please work.* Improvisation was not her strong suit. *You can do this. Say something.* “In breaking news . . .” she repeated. That was it; her voice stalled out much like the teleprompter.

“In news you’re hearing first on WENC,” Tate interjected.

Ernie swung the camera over to Tate.

“An investigation has uncovered that Mayor Chris O’Malley allegedly used reelection funds for personal use. Our Jenny Jenkins is reporting live from outside the mayor’s office where a press conference is scheduled for 10 A.M. Jenny, what are you hearing? Will the mayor be addressing these allegations personally?”

Amanda’s jaw dropped. She was unable to comprehend what had just happened. Tate had broken her story! She motioned for him to toss it back to her, but he either didn’t see her or didn’t want to.

All she could do was listen as Tate fired one question after another to the reporter. Three minutes later, he wrapped up.

“Thanks, Jenny. We’ll continue to provide coverage on this explosive story as it develops.”

The camera zoomed in on Amanda, snapping her back to the moment. The teleprompter was working and running the next few lines. Words originally meant for Tate, but were now hers.

Humiliated, she forced a smile and read the next line. “In other news . . .”

• • •

Tate chuckled and removed his tie. He didn’t care for bright red—and with green stripes, he could easily be mistaken for one of Santa’s elves. That is, except for his height. He only wore the tie to mess with Amanda. Opening his desk drawer, he pulled out a more suitable royal blue one and put on.

She was infuriated with him. No question about it. After the newscast, she’d stomped away from the anchor desk without saying a word. How was her freezing under pressure his fault? She should have thanked him, not given him the cold shoulder.

His door suddenly flew open.

Speak of the devil.

And she was still as gorgeous as ever—even with imaginary darts spewing from her beautiful green eyes. He was a glutton for punishment.

“What the hell happened in there?” Amanda burst in and slammed the door.

The clock above the entrance shook off center. Tate calmly smoothed his tie, rubbing his hand up and down his chest. This ought to be good.

“Hello, and you’re welcome.” He moved to straighten the clock. A benefit to being tall. What he really needed to do was move the timepiece to another wall since Amanda slammed his door often.

“You’re *welcome*? You want me to thank you? You just humiliated me on live TV.”

“No, I just *saved* you from humiliation. Big difference.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Did you jam the teleprompter?”

“Excuse me? You think I sabotaged you?”

Amanda cocked an eyebrow. “Well?”

“You really think I would do that? Aren’t we on the same team? You know—*dynamic duo*. I stepped in when you clearly needed some help.”

“I was fine,” she retorted.

“Right,” he said skeptically. “Not so great at thinking on your feet? I could give you a few pointers.”

“I don’t need any help, especially from you.” She grimaced and narrowed her eyes. “You didn’t

give me time to recover.”

“Amanda, we were headed toward dead air. Now *that* would have humiliated not only you but the entire station. Did you want that to happen?”

“No, of course not. I would have said something. I just needed a second. You didn’t give me a chance.”

“Look, I was trying to help you save face. What’s the big deal?” He lifted his tie and pointed it toward her. “Better?”

“Enough.” She gritted her teeth. “I couldn’t care less about the color of your tie, the suit you’re wearing, or the color of the dress on your bimbo last night.”

He threw back his head and gave an exaggerated laugh. “For your information, it was pink—hot pink.” It was a lie, of course. There had been no bimbo or a hot pink dress last night. He’d gone home alone—like he had every night since he’d started working with Amanda. But she didn’t need to know that.

Amanda shook her head and glanced up at the clock. They were scheduled to be back in the studio to cover the press conference. “This conversation is not over.” She opened his door.

“It never is with you.” He walked up and faced her. This woman knew how to get under his skin. They were inches apart. Her vanilla scented perfume enticed his nostrils. What he wouldn’t give to swoop down and devour her neck. When it came to Amanda, there were so many things he really wanted to do rather than argue, but now wasn’t the time to act on his feelings. She’d most likely slap him.

He lifted his hands and squeezed her shoulders. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a press conference to cover.”

CHAPTER TWO

Later that evening, Amanda shifted in her stool at the Singing Surf Tavern on the waterfront and reflected on the day's events. She sipped her white wine and closed her eyes. The cold liquid flowed down the back of her throat. Soon it would do its magic and erase the miserable day.

She laughed bitterly. How could one ill-timed malfunction cost her the opportunity of a lifetime? At least her station had been the first to break the story. Maybe she was being too hard on Tate; perhaps she should've thanked him for jumping in when he did.

But there was the little matter of him not tossing the story back to her. Not only did he break it, appeared he enjoyed doing so. The way he gloated afterwards, believing he had saved the day. What was his deal? He hadn't lifted a finger during the investigation but had gallantly walked around the newsroom all day like he was Tom Brokaw.

She swirled her wine inside her glass. Why, at thirty-three, was he working in Wilmington? Why not a bigger market? He was talented and well liked. There was no denying that their ratings had improved since his arrival in January. Viewers really took to him—at least the focus groups indicated they did.

Her phone buzzed. She grabbed it from the bar counter. Her younger brother, Alex, had sent her a text. The message, *Check your Facebook*, appeared on the tiny screen.

That was vague. She touched the icon. There were no new messages. Perhaps her very pregnant sister, Quinn, had posted something on her wall about the baby. Amanda's finger slid up and down, scrolling through the statuses. Jen, a production assistant, was making macaroni and cheese, and writing out her Christmas dinner shopping list. David, Amanda's friend from church, was at the dog park. She laughed. It amused her how some people used the online platform to broadcast the most mundane events in their lives. *Who really cares what you're planning to make for Christmas dinner or that you're picking up your dog's sh—?*

Wait a minute. Her heart stopped and her fingers trembled. Brad Sullivan had changed his status from single to *engaged*.

This had to be a cruel joke. Her ex-boyfriend was getting married? How could this be? Mister "I'm afraid of commitment" was engaged? To whom? It was only two years ago that he'd been her boyfriend.

Brad wasn't just an ex-boyfriend—he was her only ex-boyfriend. They had grown up together and had known each other all their lives, but it was only when she started working at their hometown news station after college that they began dating.

While Amanda worked the eleven o'clock weekend shift, Brad had enrolled in the police

academy program and, shortly after graduating, became a police officer for their town. They were together for five years.

Amanda wanted to get married. There was no question in her mind that Brad was the one. They talked about it, but Brad seemed to always have a reason why it would be better to wait. He had made all the excuses under the sun from wanting them both to be better established in their careers to needing to save up enough money to buy a house.

She never understood his logic. She was an anchor and he was a police officer in the town they grew up in—how much more established did they need to be? Her parents would have helped them build a cabin on their land, but he'd said he was too proud to accept their help.

Two years ago, she thought Brad was finally ready to propose. Amanda drained her glass. Staring into its bottom, she thought back to that awful Christmas Eve that had changed everything.

• • •

Amanda could hardly wait. She brushed back the red velvet curtains in her childhood room and peered out the second story window at the decorated lawn below. Her gaze fell on the red and gold sleigh at the end of the driveway. The sleigh was part of the elaborately decorated lawn that brought thousands of visitors to her parents' home in Bath, New York each Christmas. It would be the perfect spot for Brad to ask her to marry him. They had shared their first kiss in that sleigh.

Just days ago she had seen him leaving Bath Jewelers with a gift bag in hand and had ducked into an alleyway so he wouldn't see her. She'd always dreamed about getting engaged on Christmas Eve just like her grandparents had. Christmas was a special holiday for the Turners.

Brad's squad car pulled into the driveway. She squealed with excitement and took one last glance in the mirror, approving her last minute change from her family's mandatory Christmas sweater to a formfitting winter white one, dark jeans, and brown riding boots. A much better outfit to say the all-important "yes" in. Brad would love it. Dabbing her lips one last time with gloss, she headed to greet her man.

From the top of the banister, she could hear the sound of many voices talking over the Christmas music. Christmas Eve was the biggest day of the year for her family—her parents ran a Christmas tree farm, and every Christmas Eve they provided Christmas trees for those in need. The evening always ended with a celebration at the Turners' with the volunteers who'd helped out throughout the day. It would be wonderful to share her good news with all of her family and friends.

Amanda made her way down the spiral staircase taking two steps at a time. In the foyer to her right, groups of her mother's volunteers chatted and munched on Christmas cookies. They were all wearing matching red sweaters with tiny embroidered Christmas trees on the front. The same as the one she ditched upstairs. She moved into the living room. Over by the fireplace were Brad's fellow

police officers. Her parents stood near the tree.

Her father greeted her. “Hi, honey. Everything okay?”

“Hi, Dad. Everything’s fine.” She scanned the crowded room, her heart beating rapidly. “Great turnout tonight. Have you seen Brad?”

“He’s over there under the mistletoe.” Her mother nodded toward the foyer entrance. “Better go kiss him before your grandmother does.” She chuckled.

Amanda laughed. Her mother adored Brad. She had let it slip this week that he had stopped by to talk to her dad.

She nudged Amanda. “Looks like Quinn is enjoying Mark’s company.”

Amanda spotted her older sister on the sofa laughing it up with Brad’s older brother. What a flirt. They were both teachers at Hammondsport High School. She was glad he was here. The Sullivan brothers were very close. They had lost their parents at an early age and were raised by their grandparents. Unfortunately, both grandparents had since passed away. Amanda’s parents had always treated both Brad and Mark like family. Soon Brad would be an official member. She smiled, watching her sister flirt back. Maybe someday Mark would, too.

Amanda grabbed a candy cane from a dish on the coffee table and twirled it with her fingers. It wouldn’t be long now. The sleigh was ready. Her family and friends were here to celebrate afterward. Amanda guessed there had to be at least fifty volunteers in the house, if not more.

Amanda whispered to her mom. “I think it’s time.”

Her mother grinned.

Amanda tucked her hair behind her ears and headed toward the hanging mistletoe. Brad, who was still wearing his police officer uniform, greeted her with an uncomfortable expression—he wasn’t one for crowds. She had fantasized about this very moment for five years, but never in her fantasy was he wearing his police duds or looking as disheveled as he did now. He was still incredibly handsome, with his brown hair, chocolate eyes, and square jaw.

She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. “Tradition,” she chirped, pointing to the mistletoe.

Brad shifted, appearing uncomfortable. “Hey. Can we talk outside for a minute?”

“Sure.” Amanda grabbed the duffle bag with the blankets. Her eyes caught her mother’s, and she raised her hand nonchalantly, touching her ring finger.

Her mom hurried over to the large bay windows. Amanda knew her mother planned to have a front row seat to the proposal.

She followed Brad outside and shut the front door. The frigid air immediately hit her face. It was a perfect winter’s night. She’d remember this feeling for a long time to come, and one day tell the story to their children and then their children’s children. She smiled at the thought.

“Amanda, I wanted to wait until after Christmas, but, um . . .” he stammered and looked away. “Oh, man. This is really hard.”

She nodded. "I know." Grabbing his hand, she gave it a reassuring squeeze. Brad wasn't the best with words but *Oh, man. This is really hard* wasn't quite where she had envisioned he'd start. Hadn't he practiced?

"Why don't we go down to the sleigh?" she suggested. "I have some blankets in the bag."

"I think here is fine."

Her gaze darted over toward the living room windows. Her parents quickly turned their backs. Their blatant attempt to witness the proposal was so transparent. She should've just brought a row of chairs outside and charged admission.

She linked her arm with his. "Come on, honey" she coaxed. "It's so beautiful down there with the lights."

Brad broke their link but then grabbed her hand. His eyes were fixed on her.

Something wasn't right. His hand shook in hers. Was he really *that* nervous? She would just have to put Brad out of his misery and get engaged on the porch. That was fine. With the twinkling white Christmas lights outlining the house, it was still pretty romantic, plus her family would have a better view of the proposal.

"Whatever you need to say, I'm listening," she reassured him. "Let's just step over here." She moved to the right, a better angle for her family to see. She noticed the backs of her brother and sister were now next to her parents'.

Brad sighed again. "You mean the world to me . . . I . . . um . . ."

"Is there something you want to ask me?" She didn't know how much longer she could stand out in the cold without the blankets or his body to snuggle up to. If he couldn't spit it out, maybe they could get engaged inside by the fireplace. *Good Plan B.*

Brad pulled his hand away and jammed it into his coat pocket. "Amanda, you are wonderful and we've had a lot of great times together."

This was it. She watched as he fished around his pocket. The ring must be really buried in there. She could see her younger brother, Alex, watching with a smart aleck grin.

Brad continued. "I guess what I'm trying to . . ." He took his hand out of his pocket. The small object fell out of his shaky hands into the snow. He bent down trying to find it.

Before she knew what she was doing she blurted out, "Yes I will marry you, Brad Sullivan."

She looked down. Her eyes widened. Brad was not holding a ring but a small key. *Her apartment key.* "What is this?" she asked.

"I think we should take a break."

Just then the door flew open and her family burst out. She glanced around in horror. All of the guests had congregated in the foyer. Many of them holding plastic champagne glasses.

Her father slapped Brad proudly on the back. "Congratulations, son. Welcome to the family."

Her mom came over and hugged her. "Let me see. Let me see." She grabbed Amanda's hand. He

eyebrows furrowed. “Dear, where is your ring?”

Humiliated, Amanda rushed into the house and up the stairs to her room.

• • •

It had only gotten worse from there. The news that Brad had bought an engagement ring but then changed his mind and dumped her on Christmas Eve had spread like wildfire. Daily errands were torture; the whispers and glances of pity were just too painful. She needed a fresh start. A month later she landed the job in Wilmington and didn’t look back.

But while her relationship had ended that night two Christmas Eves ago, a new one began. Quinn started dating Mark, and they eloped in Las Vegas six months later. They were now about to have a baby. The fact that Quinn was now Brad’s sister-in-law was difficult for Amanda to swallow. There was no clean break. Her family tried to be supportive and encouraged her to come home this Christmas. She’d thought she was finally ready to do it. Until now.

She knew it was a mistake earlier this year to accept Brad’s friend request on Facebook. This proved her theory that one should never friend her ex-boyfriend until both were happily married—and even then, one should reconsider.

“Thanks a lot, Alex,” she mumbled, annoyed at her brother for sending the text in the first place. Was he trying to give her a heads-up? He could have called to break the news.

“I’ll have another, please.” Amanda waved her empty wine glass and glanced up at the mounted television. Their explosive local story had made national news. “I really need to get out of this town,” she muttered.

“Excuse me?” The bartender picked up her glass. He was wearing a Santa hat.

“Oh, nothing.” She pointed at his head, changing the subject. “Do they make you wear that?”

“Nah, I just like to get into the Christmas spirit.” He grabbed a bottle of wine, refilling her glass.

“Christmas spirit,” she echoed dryly. She remembered that feeling. It was only two years ago that it was her favorite time of year—two heartbreaking years. “Thanks.”

She took a long gulp and went back to brooding over Brad’s status update. What if she ran into him and his fiancée this weekend? Oh, God. What if she *knew* her?

“Hey, Santa, think you could bring me a boyfriend to take home this weekend?” she asked sarcastically. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a flicker of a man in a suit. She knew its owner immediately.

“Why, Ace, are you taking resumes?”

She spun around and shook her head. Tate had taken the empty seat next to her. Her knees briefly touched his. “What the—where did you come from? Are you following me now?” She drank her wine. “I hate you,” she mumbled.

“I’ll take that as a *no*.” He pointed to her fresh glass. “I see you’re celebrating. Mind if I join you?”

She pushed off her seat. “Sorry, I was just leaving.” Her legs wobbled, and she felt a little tipsy. When had she become such a lightweight? She sat down to regain her equilibrium. “On second thought, I was here first.”

The bartender came over. “Sir, can I get you anything?”

“A stocking full of coal would be appropriate,” Amanda interjected sweetly. She glared at Tate and raised her finger directly at a group of women on the other side of the bar who were looking their way. She suspected they were gushing over Tate. Most women did.

“See that cougar in the tight sequined silver top and black hooker stilettos? I’m sure she’s one of your fans. I’d bet my paycheck she’d love to have the great Tate Ryan make her night.”

Tate nodded to the woman and pulled Amanda’s arm down. She felt his hand linger.

“I think I’ll pass.” He signaled the bartender and said, “Hey, buddy, could I get a Manhattan?” Then he turned back to Amanda. “Okay, talk to me, Mandy. Why so glum?”

“Don’t call me that. My brother calls me Mandy, and I’m angry with him right now, too.” She stood once again and reached for her purse, determined this time to get away from her co-anchor. “I think I’ll get a table—for one. Merry Christmas, Tate,” she said flatly.

She walked over to the dining area and scanned the room for an empty table. There was one near the window. She plopped down in a chair.

Tate sauntered over.

“Oh, no. No, no.” She raised her hand in protest. “You are not sitting here.”

“Look, you can’t still be angry with me for what happened earlier.”

“Why can’t I?”

“Ace, you know I didn’t sabotage you.” He pulled out a chair and took a seat.

Amanda sighed. “I know.”

“Listen, let’s order some dinner. My treat. I’m starving, and I’ll bet you are, too. We’ll eat, and you can tell me why you’re here drowning your sorrows because this can’t all be my fault. Start from the beginning. I’m a great listener.” He scrolled through his iPhone. “Was it really that bad of a day?” he asked, glancing up.

“You can’t be serious. You did not just ask me that.”

Tate shrugged. “It’s one story. There will be others.”

“Not like this one.”

“You really believe that?”

Amanda shrugged. “I don’t know what I think anymore. Let’s just order. Will you promise to leave me alone after we eat?”

“Deal. Okay, where to begin? All right, why do you hate me? No. Wait.” Tate jerked his hand up

in the air in a halt. “Don’t answer that. Let’s start with a softball question. Why do you hate the holidays?” He grabbed the other menu on the table.

“I don’t hate the holidays.”

Tate smirked. “Amanda, you pretty much tell anyone who wishes you a Merry Christmas to go to hell.”

“That’s not true.”

“Not to mention I had to twist your arm for you to do the kick-off story on this year’s toy drive.”

“That hardly makes me a scrooge. I agreed to it, didn’t I?”

He pointed at the window. “Speaking of toys, did you see that huge Santa and sleigh on the flatbed truck in the parking lot? It’s filled with all kinds of fun things. What do you think they’re doing with all those toys?”

Amanda followed his gaze out the window. In the darkness, she could just make out a life-size Santa and sleigh. God, she hated sleighs.

She could also see Tate’s reflection in the glass. The man certainly knew how to wear a suit. Why did he have to be so incredibly good looking? His eyes met hers, causing her cheeks to warm. She glanced away and reached for the breadbasket. “Does it really matter?”

“I’m just trying to lighten the mood.” He flipped his menu to the other side.

She sighed. He was right. It was common knowledge around the station that she wasn’t a big fan of the holidays.

“You’re right. I do get somewhat uptight this time of year,” she admitted. “I was planning on going home tomorrow, but now I don’t know—”

Tate looked up and interrupted. “You’re not going home for Christmas? Why?”

“I don’t know what to do. My mother will kill me if I don’t. My older sister’s about to have a baby.”

“Everything okay?”

“With her, yes. It’s just I received some unsettling news about my ghost from Christmas past.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” She slid back in her chair and took a drink. “It’s just hard to be single during the holidays, I guess.”

Tate studied her. “I wouldn’t have pegged you as the type of woman who gets down in the dumps for being single this time of year.”

“I’m not.” She paused. “Well, maybe I am a little. You think you’re headed down this precise path to achieving all of your carefully planned out goals—good grades, great college, solid career, the guy, perfect marriage, great sex—”

“Why, Ace, I could help you with that last goal.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. Of course he could. She continued, “Adorable kids and a nice house.”

She sat up in her chair. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy in Wilmington. I’ve got a wonderful career, good friends, and my beautiful beachside condo bought and paid for. It’s just . . . I don’t know. You think everything is on track and then a—”

“Teleprompter jams,” he finished.

Her eyes started to water. “Something like that.” She immediately looked out the window to hide the evidence. Tate could not see her cry.

“So how long has it been since you’ve been home?”

“Two years.” Amanda grabbed a piece of bread and broke it apart.

“That’s nothing. What’s kept you away?”

“Long story.” Amanda grimaced and shoved the bread in her mouth.

“Might help to talk about it.”

She swallowed. “If you must know, my boyfriend of five years dumped me two years ago on Christmas Eve in front of all my family and friends.”

“Ouch.”

“Tell me about it.” She picked up her glass and swung it up in the air. “Then I get a text tonight telling me to check my Facebook, and guess what?” she asked, her voice rising. She didn’t wait for Tate to respond. “The bastard’s getting married!” She slammed her glass down. “Freakin’ engaged.”

“Is it really the end of the world?” Tate motioned for the waiter to bring Amanda a glass of water.

“Clearly you’ve never been in a relationship.”

“You just said you were happy here.”

“I am.”

“Are you still in love with him?”

“No.” She shook her head. “He might have broken up with me, but I realized we really weren’t meant to be. It’s just . . .”

“Just what?”

Amanda stared at Tate. Why was he so interested in her love life? “I guess I don’t understand why Brad gets to have his happy ending before me. Two years ago he didn’t want it.” Her eyes watered. This time she couldn’t hide the evidence as one tear slid down her cheek. “At least not with me.”

Tate grabbed a napkin from the table dispenser and handed it to Amanda. “Let’s turn this around.”

“How?” She sniffed, dabbing her eyes.

“Okay, here’s how I see it. Your sister is radiantly pregnant and about to pop out your mother’s first grandchild. Is your brother in a relationship?”

“Yes, with my best friend from high school.”

“I see. It’s all making sense. There you will be at Christmas dinner, sandwiched between both

couples. You have a great career and some would say a pretty good life here down south, but the humiliation of what happened with Brad will be the unspoken elephant in the room all weekend. Am painting an accurate picture?”

With each stroke of his verbal brush, he certainly was. “I think you should order your dinner to go,” she said icily. It had obviously been a bad idea to share her love life with Tate.

“I think I can help—no, I *know* I can help you.”

“Help me? How?”

“If you brought a new man home, it would show everyone that you’ve moved on.”

“Maybe, but it’s not like I can rent one.” She thought for a second—could she?

“No need.” Tate reached for his drink and took a sip. “You can take me—free of charge.”

Amanda studied Tate. Was she hearing things?

“Take me home with you and introduce me as your boyfriend. I’ll fill that seat at Christmas dinner this year.”

“I was kidding with the bartender.” Amanda scoffed. The idea of bringing home a handsome boyfriend was intriguing. It would prove to everyone she was over Brad and past the humiliating breakup. But this was Tate. Handsome, yes. Her boyfriend? She didn’t think so. He rattled her on Monday. They’d never pull it off.

“Well, just think about it. We can leave tomorrow.”

“Why on earth would you want to spend Christmas with my family pretending to be my boyfriend? Don’t you have to ingratiate yourself to your own family? Or did they not invite you home this year?”

From his uncomfortable expression, she could tell the last question stung. “I’m sorry. Your family is none of my business.” Reaching for her wine, she took another sip. She wasn’t completely heartless during the holidays, despite what he and apparently everyone else around the news station thought. She was also no one to judge when it came to going home for Christmas.

“Consider the offer an olive branch—an apology for my contributing to your bad day,” Tate said.

“That’s not necessary.”

“I think it is. Plus, it would be nice to get out of this town for a bit,” he said, glancing at the gaggle of women from earlier who continued to circle the bar. “Meet some new fans.” He locked his eyes with Amanda’s. “Do we have a deal?”

“No,” she shot back and drained her wine glass. “Absolutely not.”

CHAPTER THREE

She'd definitely said no. At least she thought she had. So why was Tate sipping coffee at a dining room table still wearing his suit from yesterday, and why was she lying on a couch in a Boston University sweatshirt with North Carolina State shorts? The red and white school colors combo made her dizzy.

Amanda reached up and touched her forehead. A soft piece of satin material brushed against her cheek. She looked down to see a royal blue tie wrapped around her wrist.

Tate's tie.

Oh, no. What have I done?

She shut her eyes tightly and yanked the blanket over her head. "Where am I?" she murmured, realizing she was on a black leather couch and not her beige suede one. Was Tate sitting at *his* dining room table? This couldn't be his place, could it? Did they?

Think, Amanda, think. They'd been at the bar and had a couple drinks. There was Tate's tongue in cheek offer of great sex. Why was his tie snaked around her wrist? Did last night get kinky? "We don't even like each other," she whispered, sinking deeper into the couch.

"Good morning, Boss! Time to wake up."

Amanda whipped off the blanket. Lacy stood in front of her with a coffee mug in her hand.

"Lacy!" Never had she been happier to see her assistant. "Thank you, Lord." This must be her apartment. "I mean, thank you, Lacy. I could really use coffee right now." She took the mug.

"I'm out of milk so it's strong. It'll help you open your eyes."

Amanda inhaled the rich aroma. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Um, Lacy, why is Tate here?" Amanda nodded in his direction. He was talking on his phone. "And why am I here?" She rubbed her temple. What a night. She vaguely remembered a Santa hat and inhaling smoke.

Lacy plunked down in a matching black leather recliner across from the couch, bringing her knees to her chest. "You don't remember? He brought you here last night. You wouldn't tell him where you lived."

"I wouldn't?"

"Nope. You were in pretty rough shape. I put you to bed in my roommate's room. She's at NC State for the weekend."

"Explains the shorts," Amanda mumbled.

"Tate slept on the couch," Lacy quickly added.

“Then why am I on the couch?” Amanda asked.

“Hey, Lois Lane.” Tate was off the phone and walking over to Amanda. “Or wait . . . Should I say Candy Cane? Lacy, what on earth did you give her to wear?”

Lacy giggled. “What do you mean? It’s my favorite BU sweatshirt. I bought it my freshman year.”

“Amanda, I think you have something of mine.” He grinned mischievously and pointed to his tie still coiled around her wrist.

She immediately pulled it off and flung it at him. “Lacy was just about to tell me how I ended up on the couch where, apparently, you were sleeping?”

“I got this, Lacy.” He winked and turned to Amanda. “You came out here earlier this morning mumbling something about needing to make sugar cookies for the tree deliveries. What was that all about anyway? I got up to use the bathroom, and when I returned . . . well, there you were snuggled up on the sofa. Out like a light.”

Amanda sipped her coffee. His recount of how she’d ended up on the couch was innocent enough. She would have preferred that her assistant didn’t see her after a few drinks, but at least she didn’t make a mistake with Tate.

“I really do need to go.” She set her mug on the coffee table. “I still need to pack. I should have been on the road by now. Lacy, would it be too much trouble to take me to my car?” She stood up and looked around for her clothes. She hoped her Nissan was still at the Singing Surf.

“Sorry, Boss. My roommate has my car. She drove to Raleigh last night. I’m sure Tate can take you.” Lacy retrieved Amanda’s suit from the back of the recliner and handed it to her.

Tate stood. “Sure. No problem. I’m headed out of town for the holidays myself. Packed and ready to go. I can drop you off at the bar and jump on the highway.”

“Thanks,” Amanda muttered.

“Where are you off to, Tate?” Lacy asked, picking up Amanda’s coffee mug.

“Nowhere special. Just visiting extended family up north and getting a little skiing in.” He yawned. “Can you be ready in five minutes, Ace?”

“Fine.”

She dressed hurriedly in the bathroom and rushed out the door. Tate and Lacy sat on the building’s front steps. *Well, what’s going on here?* She couldn’t hear what they were saying, but something suspicious was going on. Amanda watched them hug.

Seeing Amanda, Lacy pulled away from Tate and stood. “Well, I should probably get ready for work. The bus comes in twenty minutes. Happy holidays,” she said, giving Amanda an enthusiastic embrace. She whispered in her ear, “Open your eyes. This is going to be your best Christmas yet.”

Amanda smiled wryly. Why was this going to be the best Christmas yet? What had Tate said to Lacy? And why did Amanda need to open her eyes?

“Bye, Lace.” Tate rose from the steps and gave Lacy a quick wave. He reached inside his coat pocket for his keys. “Ready?” He started down the path to his Jeep, not waiting for Amanda’s answer.

“What kind of game are you playing?” Amanda called out, hot on his heels. “Visiting family up north? You don’t mean *my* family, do you? Please don’t tell me I agreed to take you home with me?” She tied her coat tightly around her waist, trying to block out the frigid air.

Tate smirked. “You know, I’m starting to think you’re grumpy all the time. Okay. I’ll tell you what happened. We had dinner together. You had one too many glasses of wine. I wanted to drive you home, but you wouldn’t reveal such classified information as your street address. There was no way I was going to let you get behind a wheel.”

“So, how did we end up at Lacy’s?”

“Look, Nancy Drew, I called Lacy, using your phone, to get your address. Check it if you don’t believe me. You snatched the phone from me. Might I add this is after you grabbed the Santa hat off of the bartender’s head and tried to set it on fire with the candle on our table.” He reached out and touched her shoulder. “You really have issues. We’re lucky you didn’t burn the place down. The owner practically tossed us out.”

Amanda pushed his hand away from her. That explained why she vaguely remembered the Santa hat and inhaling smoke. Whatever. The bartender looked ridiculous in that hat, anyway. She did him a favor. “All right. Go on.”

“You demanded that Lacy pick you up and told her that her job depended on it. It was late and rather than continue arguing, I agreed to drive you here. Shortly after we arrived, you passed out.” He unlocked and opened the passenger door. “Lacy and I stayed up and watched TV for a while. I fell asleep on the couch until you commandeered my spot earlier this morning, and to the recliner I went. End of story.”

Amanda got in his Jeep. She didn’t believe for a second that he was telling her the complete story. What was their embrace back there about? They were hiding something.

“So I didn’t agree to take you home for Christmas?” she asked as soon as Tate jumped in the other side.

“No,” Tate admitted. “You didn’t.”

“Thank God.” She massaged her aching head.

“Hey, you really are in rough shape. Anything I can do, Ace?” Tate asked, shoving his key into the ignition.

“Don’t you think you’ve done enough this week?” Amanda shot back. “Maybe when I return you can break another story and put the final nail in my career’s coffin.” Her head was about to split in two.

“There will soon be other news for you to break—probably more on this story, in fact. How about a Christmas truce?”

“Fine,” she conceded. She needed to let it go. The teleprompter jam really wasn’t his fault. Besides, he was right. There would be more news on the mayor’s downfall after the holidays. She would insist on taking the lead.

They sat in silence as Tate drove the two miles to the bar. Red and green holiday decorations saturated Wilmington’s historical district storefronts. Poles decked out with red and white ribbon.

Maybe she should hibernate in her condo and ride out Christmas weekend. She could tell her family she had the flu and shouldn’t be around her pregnant sister. It wasn’t a total lie. She closed her eyes and fought back the sick feeling in her stomach. The last thing she needed to do was throw up in Tate’s Jeep. He’d never let her live it down.

Minutes later, her body leaned to the right as Tate swerved into the bar’s parking lot. Finally. “What the . . .” Tate raised his voice.

“What?” Amanda flung her eyes open and sat up straight. “Oh my God. My car!” The life-size Santa statue and sleigh display from last night had crashed into her car’s front hood, shattering her window. Toys and shards of glass were scattered all over the ground. The sleigh was turned over on its side next to the car. Kris Kringle’s red velvet behind and black boots were lodged halfway through her front window.

Flying out the Jeep, she ran over to her Nissan. She bent down and picked up a small brown teddy bear, a casualty from the sleigh.

“Wow!” Tate joined her. “Now *this* could be the best reason yet for you to hate Christmas.”

“You don’t think one of the mayor’s supporters did this for revenge?”

Tate considered it for a second. “Nah, but I have a feeling we’re about to find out what happened.” He nodded in the direction of the tavern.

Amanda recognized the man walking toward them. It was Richie, the tavern’s owner. “Ma’am, is this your car?”

“Yes. I left it here last night. Do you know who did this?” she asked in disbelief.

Richie pointed over to the flatbed truck and stammered. “Well . . . um . . . er . . . We were fixing to take the sleigh off this morning when my son, Drew, accidentally put the truck in reverse and hit the gas too hard. It went flying onto—”

“My car,” Amanda finished. Her eyes were fixed on her violated Nissan.

“I’m awfully sorry. We’re going to pull the Santa out and call for a tow truck. Can I have them take it to a garage for you? I’ll take care of the repairs.”

Amanda shrugged. “Yeah, I guess it’s not drivable.”

Tate snickered. “You think? Hey, I’m going to get us some coffee while you’re sorting this out. I’ll be right back.”

“Thanks.” She turned to Richie. “It can be towed to the Nissan dealership on Market Street. Hold on a second.” She walked quickly over to the Jeep and pulled a business card out of her wallet. “Here

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