



Sophie
PEMBROKE

The
Kiss Before
Midnight

contemporary
romance



Sophie Pembroke
The Kiss Before Midnight:
A Christmas Romance

Аннотация

Heading home to Liverpool for Christmas, Molly Mackenzie isn't just looking forward to the mulled wine and mince pies – she's got high hopes for who she'll find under the mistletoe this year! Unable to forget the delicious near miss with her brother's best friend, Jake, last New Year's Eve, Molly's got a new resolution at the top of her list: seduce Jake and get this crazy chemistry out the way before it has serious repercussions on the rest of the Mackenzie family. Only Molly has underestimated the magic of the holiday season... The more stolen moments in the snow that she shares with Jake, the more determined she is to make it a whole lot more than just a kiss before midnight. It wouldn't be Christmas without the festive warmth of a heart-meltingly romantic novella from Sophie Pembroke!

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The Kiss Before Midnight

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For my magical mum on her 60th birthday this December 25th. Wishing you many more happy years of mince pies, fortune telling fish and Christmas miracles.

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Chapter 1

CHRISTMAS EVE EVE

Molly Mackenzie couldn't help but think that free Prosecco in the office, while awesome in theory, might just end badly. She'd only been at the company for six months, and the bosses had already found reasons to celebrate at least once a fortnight on average. But usually they went down to the local pub, where the only electronics that stood to get damaged by spillages was the karaoke machine.

Molly knew she was still getting used to the idea of nine to five office work, but she hadn't honestly expected it to involve *more* alcohol than working in a hotel with two fully stocked bars.

"It's Christmas Eve Eve!" Jenna announced, sloshing bubbles over the side of her plastic cup as she hopped up to sit on Molly's desk. She leant back against the cubicle wall, and it groaned ominously.

"I'm not sure that Christmas Eve Eve is really a thing." Molly grabbed hold of the flimsy partition to try and keep it upright.

"Of course it is!" Jenna straightened up with indignation, and the cubicle wall creaked back into its usual position. "It's the eve of Christmas Eve, and well worthy of celebration. Hence the Prosecco."

Who could argue with that kind of logic? Grinning, Molly lifted her own plastic glass to tap against Jenna's, sending another

waterfall of bubbly over the edges of the overfilled cups. It might be miles away from her dad's traditional mulled wine, but it *was* tasty. Molly licked her fingers. No point wasting good Prosecco.

"Ooh, I think you're giving Bobby from accounts ideas," Jenna said, eyes wide.

Molly lowered her hand from her mouth. Quickly. "No time for ideas," she said, checking her watch.

"Are you sure?" Jenna asked, doubtfully. "He's pretty cute, you know."

Molly glanced over as casually as she could in the direction of the accounts team. They'd set up some sort of Prosecco fountain with a tower of plastic cups. Not exactly the Great Gatsby champagne saucer tower, especially since the glasses seemed to be held together with zebra print paperclips. Any interest the pretty cute Bobby had displayed had disappeared in the face of experiments with alcohol, and the chances were Jenna had been making it up anyway. Another thing Molly had learned over the last few months; if there was an office drama to be drummed up, Jenna would usually be behind it.

"I'm sure," Molly said. "Besides, even if I was interested, my train leaves in an hour. I need to head out soon." Especially given the light snow that had started falling half an hour ago. Her mum had been texting her weather updates all day. The last thing she needed, two days before Christmas, was to get stuck in the snow on a train somewhere. Almost home, but not quite.

She would miss her dad's mulled wine and mum's mince pies,

for one thing.

Last Christmas, she'd been living at home, but a training course in Manchester had meant she only got home on Christmas Eve – the same day her brother Tim had arrived from Edinburgh. Their sister Dory had flown in from New York with her surprise new boyfriend on Christmas Day.

This year, Mum seemed very keen to have them all home and safe before the twenty-fourth, to avoid any last minute surprises. Especially since it was the first time in seven years that Molly wouldn't be working either Christmas Day or New Year's Eve at the Liverpool hotel that had taken her on part-time at sixteen.

Tim was easy; he'd moved back in with their parents when his contract ended in Edinburgh that summer – conveniently two short weeks after Molly moved to London. And Dory and Lucas's flight should be landing any time now.

It was going to be the perfect family Christmas.

Jenna groaned. "God, how long are you going to be gone again?"

"Until the second of January." Just like Molly had told her eighty-four times already.

Jenna's despair grew more dramatic, her drink tilting dangerously close to Molly's computer. "That's forever! You're going to miss everything fun about living in London over the holidays. My New Year's Eve party most of all! It's the *only* place to be in London on December 31st."

Molly wasn't entirely convinced Jenna's party actually rivalled

Trafalgar Square or fireworks on the South Bank, but she let her friend keep her illusions. “Sorry.” She gave her an apologetic smile because it was easier than explaining that, actually, there was no place she’d rather be this Christmas than home with her family. Well, her family and Jake.

“You know I’d love to be there,” she went on, “but I’ve got family stuff to do. My sister and her boyfriend will be over from the States, so my parents are planning another big party for New Year’s Eve, since last year’s was such a success.”

Well, for most people anyway. For Molly it had managed to be simultaneously one of the best – and then worst – parties ever. All thanks to Jake Sommers.

Jenna leant in closer, her eyebrows knitting with suspicion. “Your family. That’s the whole and only reason you’re going home for ten long days.”

“Nine and a bit, really.” Just enough time to soak up all the family-ness, that feeling of home, before she came back to London.

“You’re avoiding the question.” Jenna straightened up, her eyes wide, and waved her Prosecco at Molly accusingly. “It’s not your family at all, is it? You’ve got a guy waiting at home for you! It all makes sense now.”

“Jenna, you know I’m single. Unless you count Bing Crosby singing White Christmas on the stereo, the only guys waiting at home for me are my dad and my brother.” Although, she couldn’t deny the rather expensive, definitely lacy and barely

there lingerie she'd stuffed into the top of her case that morning, in a last minute fit of optimism.

Jenna kept staring, and Molly felt the lie start to strain and then break inside her. "Well, and Jake, I suppose. But he's practically family." Except for how last Christmas, Molly had suddenly looked at Jake in a totally different way to how she looked at Tim, her *actual* brother.

"A secret family member you've never ever mentioned before, even though I've heard everything about your brother and sister and your great-aunt Mabel!" Was it the Prosecco or the indignation making Jenna's voice rise in volume with every word?

"People are staring," Molly muttered, trying not to catch the eye of any members of their audience. How weird was it that Jenna could be her closest friend in London, and not know about Jake? Lara, her actual best friend, had known him almost as long as Molly had. And had been the first person she'd called on New Year's Day to tell her everything.

"Then you better start telling me all about Jake, hadn't you? Before I start *asking more questions*." Jenna shouted the last part for extra effect.

Molly downed her Prosecco. "Okay. Fine. Jake is Tim's best friend – has been since they were, like, five – before I was even born. His parents died when he and Tim were eighteen, just before they left for uni, so Mum and Dad invited him to ours for Christmas that year. He doesn't have any other family, really,

so we've just sort of adopted him into ours, ever since." She shrugged. "He's part of home for me. No big deal."

Jenna's eyes narrowed. "That's it. He's like a brother to you. And there's never been even a hint of anything more between you?"

How did Jenna always manage to zero in on the things Molly didn't want to admit to? Like the slight lie on her CV about her fluency in French, or the fact that she accidentally kissed Stefan from marketing after one too many tequila shots at the karaoke bar six weeks ago?

"I knew it!" Jenna declared triumphantly. "You're blushing. Tell all, immediately."

Dammit! Fair skin and a huge capacity for embarrassment just wasn't a fair combination.

"Fine." Molly dumped her empty glass on a passing tray, carried by one of the senior account managers, and snagged another full one. "So we might have kissed. Just a little bit. Last New Year's Eve."

Understatement of the year.

"And this New Year's Eve...?" Jenna leered at her, just a little bit.

Molly shrugged. "Probably nothing. I haven't seen him since, and we've never talked about it. We were both pretty drunk. He might not even remember."

Even if Molly was never going to forget. How could she? The slide of his hands up her arms, then down to her waist. The heat of

his mouth on hers. The strength of his chest, pressing up against her. The wall at her back the only thing holding her up.

No. If Jake had forgotten all of that he wasn't human. Or – and the thought sent a cold shiver running through her – it hadn't been as incredible for him.

“I think you're giving up too easily,” Jenna said, leaning back on her hands, her Prosecco finished and thoughts of another drink long since abandoned for the obviously more interesting pastime of tormenting Molly. “I think you should go after him.”

Molly shook her head, trying to forget about the ridiculous lingerie in her bag. “It's a bad idea.” Even if her subconscious obviously thought it was a good one. And, she had to admit, it hadn't *seemed* bad, in the early hours of January first, with tequila still coursing through her veins and the heady lust of possibility making it impossible to think straight.

“Why?” Jenna's eyes widened. “Was it that bad?”

“No,” Molly groaned. “It was that good.”

“Then what's the problem?”

The problem, of course, was what had happened next. The door had opened and Jake had wrenched himself away before anyone saw them. By the time Molly had managed to open her eyes properly, he was gone, and her brother was staring at her with suspicion.

Jake had avoided her the rest of the night.

“He's not interested,” Molly said, wishing her friend wouldn't push the point – but knowing she probably would.

“He kissed you. That’s a pretty good indicator of interest.”

“Apparently not.” She’d believed it could be, for the first couple of days, and had even made a stupid resolution – to get Jake into bed by the end of the year. But then he’d failed to reply to her most casual, long time friend texts, and hadn’t even shown up to her ‘Molly’s Moving to London!’ party.

She might not always be that great at subtle, but even Molly could take a hint that heavy.

Jenna frowned, and reached out to steal Molly’s cup for a sip of Prosecco. “This is actually a thing, isn’t it? I mean, I was just teasing, but you actually have a thing for this guy, don’t you?”

“No. Absolutely not.” Molly grabbed her drink back.

“Liar. I bet you’ve been lusting after him since puberty.”

Except she really, really hadn’t. It was just this last year that she seemed to have gone crazy – the first year in forever when she hadn’t seen Jake with any kind of regularity. Maybe this was just absence making the heart grow... lustful.

“No.” Molly spoke firmly, then winced. “Just the last twelve months.”

“Aha!” Jenna pointed a slightly wobbly finger at her, and Molly buried her head in her arms on the desk. One kiss, and she’d lost her mind over a man who’d only ever been a friend.

“I know, I know, I’m pathetic.” The words came out rather muffled, thanks to the fluffy cardigan she’d thrown over her work dress that day.

“Not pathetic.” Jenna tugged on her hair to make her look up.

“You just need a plan to get what you want.”

“You think?” Was that hope in her voice? God, she really *was* pathetic. How clear did the guy need to make it that he wasn’t interested before she moved on?

And no, kissing Stefan at karaoke *really* didn’t count as moving on. Not least because it hadn’t caused even one per cent of the tingles her hurried encounter with Jake had.

“So, he’s going to be there all Christmas, right?” Jenna asked.

Molly nodded. “Normally he just arrives on Christmas Eve and leaves on Boxing Day – he doesn’t live that far away, and his office is in the city. But with Tim moving away to Switzerland for his new job in January, I think mum said she’d talked Jake into staying with us until New Year’s Day.”

“Perfect! That gives you nine and a bit days to win him over.” Jenna smiled in a way that Molly had already come to mistrust. “In fact, I’m going to set you a holiday challenge. Your mission, and you have no choice but to accept it, is to seduce that man! And then come back and tell me all about it, obv’s.”

“What, are you going to double dog dare me?” Molly asked, forcing a laugh. She wasn’t serious, right?

“If I have to!” Jenna leant closer, as if about to impart some vital, probably inebriated, wisdom. “Look. You’ve been a single girl in London for more than six months now, yeah? And you’ve barely shown a hint of interest in anyone - apart from that blip with Stefan at the karaoke. Which means that being hung up on this Jake guy is affecting your chances of meeting a great guy

and having some incredible sex. Right?”

Molly blinked. “You think that if I sleep with Jake over Christmas it will enable me to have more sex with other men down here in London next year?”

“Exactly!” Jenna patted her on the head like a proud teacher.

“There’s a flaw in this plan somewhere.” Except, she was a grown up now, right? Twenty-three, single, living it up in London. She had a proper job in a real office – not just working the same reception desk at the same hotel she’d been a chambermaid at when she was sixteen. She could totally do one-night stands and meaningless flings, right? Especially since she no longer lived with her parents.

So why hadn’t she? Could it be because of one stupid kiss with Jake? Maybe she did need to get him out of her system.

“Don’t be pessimistic!” Stealing Molly’s cup of Prosecco, Jenna hopped off the desk. “Come on, you’re going to miss your train. Go forth and seduce that man!”

Laughing, Molly stood, pushed her chair under her desk, double checked her out of office autoreply was on and shut down her computer.

“And I want a full debrief the moment you get back,” Jenna added, pulling up the handle of Molly’s case and handing it to her. “So don’t get too attached – you’ve got a life here now, remember?”

“If there’s anything to report, I promise you’ll hear it.” It was a fairly safe promise, Molly decided. After all, the chances of her

managing to get Jake alone long enough in her parents' four-bed terrace in the suburbs, with Dory and Lucas *and* Tim all home too, were phenomenally slim.

“Merry Christmas everyone!” Molly called out, as she headed for the front door. “See you in the New Year.”

When, no doubt, everything would be exactly the same as it was now. Unless she did something to change that.

Chapter 2

Molly couldn't forget Jenna's dare as she lugged her suitcase down the escalator towards the Northern Line, shaking the snow from her hair as she went. Even amongst the crowd of Christmas Eve travellers, with the scarf that had been essential outside in the winter chill now making her overheated neck itch, she couldn't help but remember that kiss, one more time.

Come to think of it, the memory probably wasn't helping the overheating any more than the overcrowded tube was. She had to put Jake Sommers completely out of her head, and focus on her journey home.

She stood all the way to Euston, crammed up against the door and clutching the handle of her suitcase for dear life, then struggled up the escalator into the overground station. Dragging her case behind her, she wove through the holiday season crush, past at least ten people in Santa hats and avoiding a group of guys in suits warbling Silent Night, all the way to platform five.

The queue to get onto the train stretched right back to the main concourse, and Molly mentally thanked her mother for insisting she book ahead to make sure she got a seat. Sure, she thought as she handed her ticket to the inspector, there would probably be someone sitting in it by the time she got there, but hopefully the festive spirit would prevail and they'd give it up once she waved her ticket in their face.

The only problem was, once she was settled into her window seat, with the businessman beside her tapping away on his laptop, there wasn't much *to* do but watch the snowflakes drifting down outside and think about Jake.

Not just Jake, though. That line in her diary, the one she always started keeping daily on the first of January and slipped to monthly updates around mid February. The last line under the heading *Goals For The Year*.

The first two goals she'd actually knocked off by the summer. New job? Check. Move to London? Check.

But goal number three, which should have been the easiest of them all if that December 31st kiss had been anything to go by, had remained elusive.

Sleep with Jake Sommers.

A little hard to achieve when she hadn't actually been in the same room as him all year, and not even in the same city most of the time.

Why had she even added that to the list anyway? Without it, she was two for two on the real, important things she wanted to achieve that year. Getting away from Liverpool and starting her own, grown up life in London had been a goal for so long that she'd started to doubt she'd ever make it. But she had. On her own terms, without any help from anyone.

Sure, maybe her tiny shared flat wasn't a New York penthouse with weekends on a charmingly rustic farm with a fabulously gorgeous rich American, like Dory had somehow landed, but it

was hers and she'd made it there herself. And that counted for a hell of a lot, especially to Molly.

But still, the last goal at the front of her journal nagged at her. She couldn't pretend she hadn't set it; that wasn't how things worked. Every New Year's Eve when they were kids, Molly, Dory and Tim had huddled together in the girls' room to make their resolutions. Sometimes they were joke ones – like the year Tim resolved to convince their mum to believe in aliens. Sometimes they were things that mattered, like exams and friendships. And sometimes they'd forced them on each other, like the year she and Dory ganged up to make Tim give up smoking when he was fifteen.

They'd stopped some years ago, and Molly wasn't even really sure why. Probably it had something to do with them all being in different places for New Year – different friends, different jobs, different parties, even different cities. But Molly always set her goals for the year – even though her track record for meeting them wasn't great. This year was the first year she stood a chance at a clean sweep. But not with the memory of Jake Sommers's kiss and the unfulfilled resolution hanging over her head.

Outside the window, the snow that had been light and magical in London was growing heavier and more threatening. Beside her, Mr Businessman stopped clicking keys long enough to look up and say, "Well, it looks like getting a taxi will be fun tonight."

Molly wasn't worried about taxis. Her dad drove one of those, for heaven's sake. But if he was out on a job and the *trains*

stopped running then she might be in trouble. Well, not trouble, exactly. Dad would drive into the city to pick her up from Lime Street station if the local line shut down, but it wouldn't be fun for either of them. Liverpool city centre two days before Christmas was *not* a place anyone wanted to drive around if they didn't have to. Especially since she knew her dad had taken Christmas week off to spend with the family.

"I'm practically retired now, Moll," he'd said, last time she called. "What's the point of getting to my age if you can't sit back and enjoy it, eh?"

Which didn't mean he wouldn't do a few jobs, when it suited him, Molly knew. Especially on the days when it was to his benefit to be out from under her mother's feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry to report that due to the inclement weather, there will be no local or national trains departing from our final stop, Liverpool Lime Street. There will be staff on hand to advise you on local hotels and taxi firms, and we hope to have all services running again tomorrow morning." The crackly announcement sent waves of muttering through the carriage.

"Damn it," Molly murmured, reaching for her phone. She'd *known* she should have booked an earlier train, but Jenna had been adamant that she couldn't miss the work drinks that evening.

She tried the home phone first, but there was no reply. Firing off a text to her mum, she called Tim next.

“What’s up sis?” The sound of a fruit machine paying out in the background put pay to any hopes of her brother picking her up.

“You’re in the pub?” Maybe he’d be somewhere in the city centre and they could travel home together. That could work. He could carry her damn suitcase for one thing. Brothers had to have some uses, right?

“Yeah.” He said it as if anyone with half a brain would be. “It’s Christmas Eve Eve. Why aren’t you?”

“You know Christmas Eve Eve isn’t really a thing, right? Never mind. Look, I’m on the train into Lime Street now, but the trains to Crosby aren’t running. Which pub are you in?”

“The George and Dragon. Wanted to be within staggering distance. Hey! Guess who’s here tonight!”

“Someone sober enough to pick me up from Lime Street?” Molly asked, without much hope.

“God, no. You’re shit out of luck there, sorry. No, Lara’s here! Wanna talk to her?” He passed the phone over before he could reply.

“Tell me you’re nearly home!” Lara yelled down the phone. “I need my best friend back!”

“Almost,” Molly promised. “Or I would be if I could get someone to pick me up from Lime Street. Are you going to come round tomorrow?”

“Have I ever missed mulled wine and mince pies at your parents’ house on Christmas Eve?” Lara asked, making it clear

through her tone that Molly was an idiot for asking.

“Not willingly,” Molly admitted. “Good. I can tell you all about London.”

“Yeah. Great. Here’s Tim.” The phone line went muffled, then crackly, then Tim was back.

“Is she okay?” Molly asked, frowning at her reflection in the window. “She sounded... off.”

“That’ll be the cinnamon flavoured vodka,” Tim guessed. “They’ve got this special offer on tonight. I have to tell you about it—”

“Tim,” Molly interrupted. “I kind of had a reason for calling. The about to be stuck in Lime Street thing? Do you know where Dad is? No one’s answering at home.”

“He’s gone to pick up Dory and whatshisname from Manchester airport. Guess he might be a while if the weather’s bad.”

“Lucas. You know his name is Lucas.” A while, in this case, could mean anything up to a couple of days. Damn it.

“Yeah, whatever. And Mum’s over at Auntie Susan’s at some sort of girls’ party thing. Ann Summers or what have you.”

“It’s a cooking party,” Molly said, finally remembering. “And God, thanks for that image.” She sighed. “Okay, well, if you speak to either of them, tell them I’ll try and get a taxi home, if I can find one in this weather.” She dreaded to think how much it would cost, but she just wanted to get home. It was Christmas, after all.

“No, hang on Moll.” Tim sounded suddenly sober, the big brother swooping in to take care of things again. She should be grateful, Molly knew. After all, hadn’t she called hoping for his help? But the assumption that she couldn’t even be trusted to get a taxi on her own grated.

“It’s fine, Tim. You’ve been drinking, and so has Mum probably.” It was Christmas, after all. Half of Britain was probably plastered. “Dad’s miles away. I can just grab a taxi. It’ll be fine.”

“Just wait a min. I’ll call you back in five.” The phone went dead in her hand. Apparently it was Super Tim to the rescue again.

Fingers still wrapped around her phone, she stared back out of the window. The flakes were bigger, heavier now, like the granddaddies of the little flurries they’d had in London. These snowflakes meant business.

“Well, at least it will be a white Christmas,” she whispered to herself. Dad would be pleased. He always complained that it wasn’t really Christmas without a snowman in the back garden.

She jumped as her phone buzzed, but it was a text, not a call.

Couldn’t get through – are you in a tunnel? Anyway, all sorted. He’ll be there to pick you up at Lime Street when you arrive. See you in the pub! Tx

He? Which he?

Molly felt her breath start to freeze in her lungs as she realised there was only one person Tim would call for a favour like this

on Christmas Eve Eve.

Jake Sommers.

Chapter 3

Jake ended the phone call with rather more than the required force, cursing hands free technology for the first time in its existence. He'd almost ignored the call from Tim anyway – not because he didn't want to talk to his best friend, but because he knew Tim was in the pub, probably sloshed, and Jake was going to *be* there in an hour or so, anyway. What did they need to talk about at this point? They had a whole week of festivities to enjoy together. Himself, Tim and Tim's family, all pretending that Jake was one of them, even when everyone knew he wasn't.

He was, as ever, the poor orphan child, given a place out of the snow with mulled wine and mince pies and happy people, for the holidays.

Not that he was complaining – far from it. Without the Mackenzies, he'd have no family at all. He was happy to take what he could get – and grateful that what he'd been able to get was as warm, welcoming and loving as Tim's family.

But it did come with a sense of obligation – one he suspected was probably entirely in his head. Still, it meant that when Tim called, he answered. And when Tim asked him to pick up his little sister from Lime Street station on a snowy Christmas Eve Eve (as if that were even a real thing) he said yes, no questions asked. Because Molly should be like a little sister to him, too, given everything the family had done for him over the years.

Jake cursed the still falling snow. Because thinking of Molly as a little sister? Practically impossible these days.

He tried. Really he did. In the twelve months since he'd last seen her, he'd listened to Tim and his parents talking about how well she was doing, how her move to London could be the making of her, and all he could think was that she was two hundred miles further away from him now.

He had yet to decide if that were a good thing or not, but he knew his body had very strong feelings on the matter.

His body's feelings were why he'd been avoiding her. Why he hadn't even been able to go to her leaving party, making excuses about being away with work instead. Why, whenever he'd been working down in London this year, he'd ignored the scrawled address Tim had given him, tucked in the back of his work folder.

He'd always known that he had an issue with temptation. All the things he knew were a bad idea – one more drink, staying out just a bit later, chasing that girl he knew would break his heart... Jake just wasn't very good at saying no. As a teenager, he'd spent a lot of time giving in to temptation – especially after his parents died. But, after five years of hard study at university, he hadn't wanted to jeopardise that during his two years of on the job experience before he qualified as an architect.

So slowly, he'd started resisting. Going home when he'd promised himself he would. Knowing his limits. Turning down the opportunities that looked fun, but he knew would bring more trouble than anything else, in the end.

Which was just as well, really, as it was that year, when he came home for Christmas, that he'd suddenly realised that Molly wasn't a little girl, or an awkward teen anymore. Away at university herself then, she'd grown into the sort of woman he'd buy a drink in a bar, charm, and take home for the night.

The thought of other men doing that to sweet little Molly Mackenzie made something burn, deep inside him.

But it wasn't something he could do anything about. She was a grown woman, and not quite his sister, but close enough. Close enough, that he could never dream of being that guy in the bar, but not so close that he could pull the big brother card and keep her safe from those sleazebags.

So, he'd become an expert at resisting temptation, knowing that if he gave in once, he'd give in forever – on everything. He'd held himself in check, over and over – until last New Year's Eve.

Jake's lips tightened as he swerved the car into the station car park, flakes still falling fast and thick on his windscreen. Twelve months of trying to forget the moment he'd let down his guard and given in to that temptation, and here he was, forced by his own rules of family and obligation to spend time alone in an enclosed space with the woman.

The woman whose mouth he could still taste under his, if he didn't concentrate on forgetting. Whose curves he could still feel pressed up against him. Whose soft, sweet skin still kept him awake at night.

It was, Jake had found, much harder to forget those things

when he was alone in the dark.

It was dark now, night having swooped down with the snow at four thirty. The glitter of snowflakes in the streetlights gave Liverpool's station a magical glow it couldn't claim to possess most of the year. He parked his car where he was pretty sure there were some double yellow lines hidden by the snow, and was about to call Molly's mobile – a number he'd had programmed in his phone since the day she got it, but had never actually used – when he saw a figure hopping down the steps outside the station. Despite the knitted hat pulled down over her wavy auburn hair, and the thick grey coat hiding her body, he knew her instantly.

She was almost at the car before he realised he should get out and help her. God, he was failing at more than just resisting temptation today.

“Hey,” he said, stepping out of the car. Cold, wet misery seeped into his socks over the top of his probably now ruined leather shoes. He held back a wince. “Need a hand with that?”

Molly flashed him a smile that shone brighter than the snow under the streetlights. “I've got it.”

She popped open the boot and heaved her oversized suitcase inside without much effort, while Jake hung back with wet feet and a general feeling of uselessness. He had to get a handle on whatever it was that made him so... un-Jake-like in her presence. Yeah, so he'd kissed her. But she was still just Molly. Just Tim's kid sister. The girl who'd hung around and bugged them when they were teenagers.

The woman he'd pressed up against the wall of her childhood bedroom, his mouth firm and wanting against hers...

No. He really, really couldn't be thinking about that right now.

Slipping around to the other side of the car, he opened the passenger door for her, unable to keep his gaze from fixing on the line of her neck under her hair, and the single snowflake that had landed on her skin and was melting, trailing down her throat, under the collar of her coat...

Swallowing, Jake forced a smile as Molly slid into her seat, slamming the door behind her rather harder than he'd intended.

Back in the driver's seat, he checked his mirrors obsessively, and prepared to pull out, very aware of all the extra hazards the weather presented.

"Thanks for coming to get me," Molly said, and he risked a glance up at her. Her lip was caught between her teeth, plump and pink, and it made him want to kiss it, so damn much. "You really didn't have to. Although I don't suppose Tim gave you much of a choice."

"You know your brother," Jake replied, before he realised that sounded like he hadn't want to come and fetch her. Which, actually, he hadn't. But he didn't want her to know that. "And it's fine. I was nearby, anyway." Sort of. Well, not really.

"No you weren't." Molly smiled, and Jake stopped paying full attention to the road for a second, before wrenching his gaze back through the windscreen. A second was all it took to cause an accident – hadn't he learnt that lesson from his parent's death?

He couldn't allow himself to be distracted by a pretty smile, or anything else, while driving. Okay, fine, a stunning, heart stopping smile.

"How do you know that?" he asked, not looking at her.

"I can tell." She shuffled around in her seat a bit, obviously getting comfortable, her huge leather bag settled on her knee. Between that and her case, she must have been loaded down, getting to the station alone.

Suddenly, Jake felt a spike of guilt in his chest. Why hadn't he offered to come and pick Molly up anyway? Just because he was undergoing a particularly strong surge of unbrotherly-like feelings, didn't mean she should have to suffer. It just meant he needed to control them better.

"How can you tell?" he asked, because that didn't make any sense at all.

Molly shrugged. "I've known you too long, Jake. I can tell when you're lying."

Jake's shoulders froze, his hands gripping the steering wheel too tightly. If that was true, he was definitely in trouble.

Suddenly, he really, really wanted to get to the pub with Tim. And take a long, cold walk home afterwards.

-

Okay, this was weird. Molly's gaze fixed on Jake's white knuckles, clenching the steering wheel for dear life. Did he always drive like this? She didn't remember him doing so, but then, his parents *had* died in a car crash. Maybe that made

him nervous. Or it could just be the snow – it had to be pretty treacherous to drive in. Not that she'd ever tried.

Or maybe, just maybe, it was her doing that.

Running her gaze up his arms, she took in the jumper he was wearing – a red one she thought her mum had bought him last year – and the hard lines of his shoulders under it. Almost as if he were steeling himself for something.

Probably, a conversation with her about what happened last New Year's Eve.

In fact, he was probably rehearsing it in his head. Getting his 'I love you like a sister, I'm sorry if I ever gave you the impression of something more' lines straight, all ready for her.

Well. That just didn't suit Molly's purposes at all.

"Are you all ready for Christmas?" she asked, a determinedly cheery note in her voice.

"Uh, yes. I think so." His head turned, just slightly, as he glanced at her, and Molly saw the surprise in his expression. "You?"

"Mostly." She sighed. "I have a lot of wrapping to do tomorrow, though. Just hoping that Mum's bought extra paper, as usual."

"I'm sure she will have," Jake said, although from the puzzlement in his voice Molly suspected that he'd had all his presents' gift wrapped when he ordered them online. That was his usual M.O.

She hunkered down in her seat a bit more. He was a successful

architect now, in high demand across the country. He could probably afford that convenience, more than he could spare the time to actually go shopping himself. He certainly wouldn't have spent hours trawling the tiny independent stores of north London looking for the perfect, purse friendly, present for every family member.

A reminder of just how different they were. It was easy to forget, sometimes. To think that Jake was just another member of the family, brought up by a taxi driver and a teacher, just like Tim. But he wasn't. He came from a family of high earning professionals, and he'd continued the trend. He'd sold his parents' home and built himself a new one, pocketing the cash that came from selling a house in an up-and-coming suburb and heading out to the fancier county of Cheshire, a forty minute drive away.

Molly stared out the window at the snowflakes again, feeling their chill this time more than she had on the train. Shouldn't this feel more like home, now she was so close? And it wasn't like the expensive heating system of Jake's sleek car couldn't overcome the cold. But suddenly she felt like she wasn't quite a fit in either place – London or Liverpool. And certainly not here, in a too expensive car with a man who was embarrassed by how much he'd wanted her, once.

The Prosecco had worn off hours ago, and suddenly Jenna's plan seemed ridiculous.

Of course she wasn't going to be able to seduce Jake Sommers before midnight on New Year's Eve. And she'd humiliate herself

beyond the telling of it if she even tried.

The only problem was that this didn't make her want to try any less.

They drove in silence for longer than was really comfortable, until the house and streets around them became familiar, and Molly knew they were nearly home. As they approached The George and Dragon, she realised that her window of opportunity to talk to Jake alone, without her entire family trying to eavesdrop, was closing rapidly.

"Pull over here," she blurted out, without really processing the thought first.

Jake raised an eyebrow, but turned carefully into the pub car park, which wasn't quite what Molly had intended but would do in a pinch.

"You want to go see Tim first?" Jake asked, cutting the engine.

"No. Well, yes, maybe, actually." No one would be home, she realised, unless mum had headed back early because of the snow. They could totally have had this conversation at the house, in private, without snow clogging up their windows and making things even more claustrophobic than ever.

"O-kay." Jake frowned, a puzzled line forming between his brows. "I'll be honest, Moll, I'm not following."

Moll. He'd called her that as a child, as a girl, as the annoying tagalong little sister of his best friend. When he'd kissed her, he'd called her Molly, drawing the word out like her pleasure.

Clearly, they were back to annoying sister territory.

“Look, I don’t mind if we go see Tim or not. I just wanted... before we see everyone else and it’s all family all the time and everyone is listening and stuff. Do we, I don’t know, do we need to talk about last New Year’s Eve?” The words bubbled out of her until she wasn’t sure they even formed a full sentence. But the way Jake’s face stiffened up, his frown lines deeper than ever, she knew he understood what she meant.

She held her breath and waited for an answer.

Chapter 4

Of course she wanted to talk. Jake had never met a woman who didn't. Who couldn't just move on and repress like a normal person.

"It was a year ago, Moll. Can't we just chalk it up to too much of Tim's tequila and forget about it?"

"Sure," she said, in the sort of voice that made it very clear that she wasn't sure at all. "If that's what you want."

"I'm not saying... all I mean is... it's not like that has to, you know. Change anything, I guess." God, he sounded like her. Was babbling catching? He'd never had to worry about it before.

"I didn't mean, well, change. I just... you've been avoiding me this year."

Jake winced. Kind of hard to deny that one. It was a miracle no one else had called him on it, really. "Not avoiding, not really," he lied. "I just didn't want things to be weird for you."

"It was weird not having you at my goodbye party." Molly sounded so small and sad; he felt the guilt that had needled him that whole night pricking him again.

"I'm sorry. I should have been there." A true brother would have been. One who wasn't harbouring inappropriate thoughts about his almost-sister.

"Yes, you should." She flashed him a quick, sharp smile. "So, if we're making things not weird... how do you suggest we go

about that?”

“Well, not kissing again should help.” Why had he said that? Oh God, really, had he lost control of his mouth altogether? Because as he said the words, his gaze dipped automatically to her lips. Her tongue darted out to moisten them, and he could almost taste her by just watching and remembering. And now kissing her was the only thing in the world he could think about doing.

“That should be easy enough I guess.” Was her voice really so breathy, or was his imagination messing with him?

“Yeah. I mean we managed it for twenty-plus years before, right?”

“Exactly.” Was she staring at his mouth, too? Why couldn’t they have had this conversation in the house, preferably with her parents in the next room as a constant, painful reminder why he shouldn’t be doing this? Or even thinking about it.

“So, we’ll just go back to being... friends.”

“Yeah. Friends.” With the memory of how close he’d come to stripping off every inch of her clothing still fresh – not to mention how much he still wanted to do so – he really wasn’t going anywhere near ‘I’m like your brother.’

“Who just happened to, well—”

“Yeah. That.” Jake cut her off. If he heard her say the words there was no way he’d be able to keep up with the resisting.

“Okay then,” Molly said, and Jake nodded.

Which meant the conversation should be over. They’d decided

everything they needed to, agreed to put things behind them. So why were they still in the car park? Why were her eyes still so dark in the light of the falling snow? Why were these car seats so damn close?

“Jake...”

She didn't need to say any more. He could read every iota of longing in her eyes. Could she see it in his? Saying the words was one thing, but sticking by them? A whole different proposition.

He was going to tell her *no*. Really he was.

Except a banging on the window interrupted him.

“Hey, you two! Excellent timing!” As the snow slipped down the windscreen, Tim's beaming face appeared; he was clearly plastered and full of Christmas spirit. “Saved me a walk home!”

“Guess we're not going to the pub, then,” Jake muttered, as he opened the car door. Which was a shame, because he could really, really use a drink around now.

-

Molly watched Tim and Jake undertake a snowy man hug, before her brother stumbled into the back of the car, tipping almost entirely sideways as he grinned at her.

“Moll! You made it! At least I'll have one sister home for Christmas this year.”

“Dory will be here too,” Molly pointed out, only half paying attention. Jake had settled back into the driver's seat, and she could smell his aftershave. It made her want to lick down the line of his throat, and she really couldn't be having those thoughts in

the presence of her brother, however drunk and oblivious he was.

“Not if her plane gets snowed in and can’t land.” Tim sprawled across the backseat as Jake started up the engine again. “Then it’ll just be the three of us and Mum and Dad.”

“More mince pies for me, then,” Jake said, not even glancing over at Molly. She tried not to feel offended by that.

He’d been about to kiss her, she was sure of it. Or, in honesty, she’d have totally kissed him. One way or another, kissing had been about to happen.

And now it wasn’t.

“She’ll get here,” Molly said, staring out at the snow. “You know Dory. She won’t let a bit of weather get her down.” After all, this was perfect Dory they were talking about. The over achieving big sister who had departed for London the moment she graduated from university and landed the sort of job mum could boast about. Then, not satisfied with that, she’d moved to New York for her dream job and dream fiancé. And then – then! The ultimate insult to less successful younger siblings – she’d lost it all, lied to her family for *months*, and still somehow managed to return home for Christmas last year with a rich, gorgeous, besotted boyfriend and the promise of an even better job lined up.

It really, really wasn’t fair.

Tim had almost dozed off in the backseat by the time Jake pulled into the driveway of her parents’ house. Her dad’s cab was still missing, but the lights were on in the kitchen and lounge,

which meant that mum had to be home. Philippa Mackenzie was obsessive about turning everything off before she left the house – even unplugging small appliances – in case of fire. The Christmas tree lights in the front window wouldn't be twinkling if she wasn't there.

“Are you ready?” she murmured to Jake as the car stopped. She wasn't even really sure what she meant by that – but he seemed to know. His face, so smooth and expressionless on the drive from the pub, suddenly tightened, and the nod he gave her was too sharp, too precise.

Was this hard for him too? Not really knowing where they stood? It seemed to be.

That made Molly feel ever so slightly better about the whole thing.

She got out of the car first, treading carefully on the snow to get to the boot and pull out her case. The last thing she needed was Jake being chivalrous and carrying it for her – the chances were that, the way she felt tonight, it would send her hormones into overdrive and she'd throw herself at him right there and then. Which would mean her brother and probably her mum would witness her humiliation when her advances were knocked back.

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