

KIMANI™ ROMANCE

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

NANA MALONE
SHERYL LISTER

UNWRAPPING
THE
HOLIDAYS

**Sheryl Lister
Nana Malone**

**Unwrapping The Holidays:
Hot Coded Christmas /
Be Mine for Christmas**

Аннотация

Desire is rising—and hearts are melting—in these sizzling holiday stories
Hot Coded Christmas by Nana Malone Nothing says Christmas quite like...computer coding? That's how CEO Jamie Reed plans to spend the holidays, holed up in an upstate New York guesthouse, desperately trying to save her company. She didn't count on sharing this secluded wonderland with her business rival, Cole Nichols. But the sexy tech billionaire just might be the one to make all Jamie's winter wishes come true...
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Hot Coded Christmas

by Nana Malone

He reached for her and took her hand. "One dance, Jamie. Call a truce and it's one dance. And you don't even have to leave your spot. No one is watching you here in the corner."

She stared at his hand for a moment, then lifted her gaze up to meet his. With a sigh, she slid her hand into his and let him pull her into his body. "Fine. If it makes you go away. Just one."

He nodded and pulled her closer against him, relishing how they fit together. “How about for a little while we just forget everything?”

Be Mine for Christmas

by Sheryl Lister

The moment the sexy stranger wrapped his arms around her, sensations Maya never experienced coursed through her body.

Her nerves were already on overload from his verbal play at the table. She tried to pull away, but he tightened his arms around her and held her closer to his hard body. She resisted for a short moment, then brought her arms up around his neck and melted into his embrace.

At length he said, “My apologies. I should have introduced myself first. I’m Ian Jeffries...and you are?”

She lifted her head. “Maya. Maya Brooks.”

NANA MALONE is a USA TODAY bestselling author. Her love of all things romance and adventure started with a tattered romantic suspense she borrowed from her cousin on a sultry summer afternoon in Ghana at a precocious thirteen. She’s been in love with kick-butt heroines ever since. And if she’s not working or hiding in the closet reading, she’s acting out scenes for her husband, daughter and puppy in sunny San Diego.

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Unwrapping the Holidays

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Hot Coded Christmas

Nana Malone

To Erik, thank you for that long-ago Christmas in London. I will forever remember my gift of apple jelly. You've always known how to make me happy.

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading Hot Coded Christmas. After over a decade in the software world, I have a soft spot for my computer geeks. Hot Coded Christmas was a chance to revisit my old teams. Though I don't think any of my old engineers were nearly as hot as Cole!

Next up for me, I've got many more books. So sit back, relax and happy reading!

If you want to chat with me, I'm pretty easy to find!

Nana

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[Chapter 1](#)

Jamison Reed loved everything about Christmas.

From the decorations, to the songs, to the food, and yes, even fruitcake. She embraced it all. But now, as she watched her employees enjoy the Christmas party she'd catered, a long shadow cast a damper on her holiday.

How long would she be able to keep them all employed? Thanks to what she called the great screwup of her existence, she had fifty people she needed to take care of, and going into next year, she had no idea how to do it. No, that wasn't true. She had a Hail Mary plan, but what would she do if it didn't work? This was what she got for believing in love. A shattered heart and a drained corporate bank account.

Her head of marketing, Becca Long, sidled up to her, carrying two cups. "Eggnog for your troubles?"

Jamie gave Becca a small smile. "Thank you. Are you having fun?"

"Of course I am," she said, tossing her glossy dark hair over her shoulder. "I love the annual Christmas party. I love seeing who's drinking too much. I'm starting a pool on who's going to have the biggest hangover tomorrow. And I'm taking bets on who's going to lose their decorum first, once the music gets pumping." She shrugged. "There's at least one every year who

forgets that this is a work party. But, yeah, I'm having fun. Way more than you. You look worried, boss lady."

Jamie sighed. That's because she was worried. Her small gaming company, Cyberpunked, had been having serious financial troubles. Their latest game had done extremely well, especially as it captured an audience of strong, sassy girls. But not exceptional enough to pull them out of the red. They had an investor in the wings willing to drop a ton of cash into the coffers, contingent on the potential of the next game. They'd evaluate everything based on their demo product.

They were willing to take a gamble if Cyberpunked's demo of the game garnered strong reviews and excitement. Only problem with that was, the demo was scheduled for mid-January and there was still a lot of testing to be done.

Jamison forced a smile for Becca. "I'm good, I promise. Just a little worried..." Becca was more than a friend though. She was a long-standing employee at the company. Over the years they'd grown close. But still, Jamie tried to shield her from the worst of it. From her epic blunders.

"If this is what good looks like, then I don't want any part of it. You look exhausted, girl. When was the last time you slept?" The petite brunette spread her arms open in front of the converted warehouse that served as Cyberpunked headquarters. The abundance of decorations made the space look like Santa had relocated the North Pole to their offices. "This is all great and everything, and I am so grateful that you did all this for us.

I know you've been bending over backward to take care of the team, but you have to take care of yourself too. Don't think I missed how late you've been going home, or the midnight emails. Or how early you get up in the morning. I know you're killing yourself. And it pisses me off when I think about why."

Jamie shook her head. "No, Becca. Don't worry about me. Don't stress about anything. I promised to keep this place running and I will."

"Come on, Jamie, level with me. At least tell me how bad it is."

Jamie sighed. The truth would have everyone running for the unemployment line. "It's not good. But I don't want anyone to worry about it. When you guys all decided to stay, I can't even tell you what that meant to me. So, I'm going to handle it. You just focus on enjoying your Christmas holiday. We still have a couple of days to do everything we can for the game release, but then I want everyone to go and enjoy their two-week holiday. I'll take it from here."

Becca pursed her lips. "You do too much. But I know you're not going to listen to me." Her friend crossed her arms. "At least do me a favor and promise me you're going to do your best to enjoy the holiday?"

"I'll definitely try," she lied smoothly. She would enjoy her time off. It would just be a working holiday.

Becca didn't look like she believed her, but still her friend gave her a bright smile. "If you say so. Now, you drink your eggnog. I'm going to see if I can find a single hot guy in this crowd and

some mistletoe.”

Jamie had to laugh. With her good looks, Becca would have lots of takers.

“Enjoy.” If the only thing Jamie had to worry about was finding someone to kiss for Christmas, her life would be so uncomplicated. It was kissing that got her in this mess in the first place. Matter of fact, mistletoe kissing had gotten her into a lot of trouble.

She took a sip of her eggnog, letting the cinnamon do its job to perk her up. Otherwise, she’d be groaning. She’d been an idiot, letting love enter into a business relationship. She and Brandon had started Cyperpunked over four years ago before they graduated college. By the time they were ready to don the cap and gown, they’d already put out a hugely successful game.

She’d thought they were on top of the world. How wrong she was. The two of them had met at Carnegie Mellon University their freshman year. She’d been one of the few women in her engineering class, and he’d been one of the rare attractive, sociable guys. And that year they’d had nearly every class together. They’d gravitated toward each other and bonded over their love of gaming. He’d always called her his sexy, cute gaming girl. Well, that had only lasted for so long.

After school, they’d moved to New York, where the start-up community was huge and funding was everywhere. They’d had a good run, but things had eventually fallen apart and it seemed Brandon had found another attractive, tech-savvy girl, because

he'd left her for one of their interns. She'd come home from South by Southwest Festival to find him gone. He'd left a note. He'd wanted more excitement out of his life. What he'd really meant was he wanted an upgrade in girlfriends.

And to add salt to the wound, instead of just letting her buy him out, there'd been a fight over their clients. Since he was in charge of sales and marketing, he'd managed to convince some of their biggest clients that he was the brains behind the shop.

His leaving hadn't been her fault. She was self-possessed enough to know that. But putting her company in a vulnerable position, that was her fault. She hadn't made him sign a freaking noncompete, the legal document that would have protected her stake. And she'd paid dearly for it. Not only had he taken their clients, but he'd also taken a good chunk of their employees with him. While she'd been building the business, he'd been polluting the well. When she'd fallen in love with him, she hadn't seen him for the master manipulator he was. And it had cost her too much.

Jamie had taken the high road, and refused to address the negative comments swirling on social media and around the building. Since she wouldn't respond, so many of them thought she wasn't in it to win it. They also worked with him directly, so why wouldn't they believe what he'd said? They'd eventually left with him.

With the team she had left, they'd managed to survive for the last year on the residuals from old games and revenue from some new games, but they were struggling and everybody knew it.

Especially Teched. The tech giant was breathing down her neck, eager for a takeover. They'd offered her a buyout, but she knew they would dismantle her company and fire half her employees. That was the general strategy of takeovers. She'd made her team a promise to keep the company going and she intended to keep it.

She wasn't ready to give up yet. Their last game had been hotly anticipated and the critics had loved it. It was doing well, and had stemmed the bleeding, but she needed a major infusion of cash pronto or there was no way she could keep the doors open.

She'd vowed that she would streamline her lifestyle before she would cut her team, but that promise was looking like a mistake. She'd eventually moved into the room at the back of the office to save on rent. How had she let this happen?

Stop it. You can do this. You can do anything. Besides, it's Christmas and you believe in miracles. So all you need is a miracle at Cyberpunked.

And her wish she would get. In two days, she would leave for her hometown in upstate New York. Since her family was away in France for her cousin's wedding, she'd hole up at Mountain Villas Lodge and work. She'd always wanted to stay there when she was a kid. She'd concentrate on the game and enjoy herself as much as she could. Her prayer would be answered, she knew it. It had to be. Because she wasn't going to give up on her company or herself.

[Chapter 2](#)

Cole Nichols pulled his Range Rover into the paved driveway of Mountain Villas Lodge.

The outer log facade gave the lodge a country effect, but he knew better. Inside, every room was state-of-the-art with the most modern of amenities. The main building housed two restaurants, a bar, a giant hearth and seating areas.

They were nestled at the base of the mountain and when the snow fell thick, guests were immediately transported to a winter wonderland beautiful enough to rival any Disney could create.

A good portion of upstate New York had already seen its first snow. His family had bought into the lodge when he was a kid, so they always stayed in the owners' suite. He'd grown up just thirty miles from here, but this tiny town seemed like a lifetime away from the suburban hub he'd known. Or the urban setting he'd moved to. Out here, in Mills Spring, it was miles to the nearest neighbor. And deer, foxes and rabbits often made an appearance on the premises.

This year though, he'd be without his family or his would-be ex-fiancée. And right about now, he preferred it that way. Alone time with his laptop and the finest Scotch on earth was all he needed at this point.

The biting winter air snaked its way into his peacoat and he shivered. He'd left his damn scarf on the train from the city. But he'd survive. It wasn't like he was going to be leaving the property much.

He was taking a break from people. He needed solitude

from everything. His Thanksgiving proposal hadn't quite gone according to plan so he was still smarting from that.

He wasn't a big lover of the holiday seasons and he wasn't going to miss not being with his family. His mother and stepfather had gone to Europe to ski this Christmas and he wasn't really in the mood for social-climbing ski bunnies at the moment.

He tried to shove the thought of his would-have-been fiancée out of his head. But he couldn't let go of the burn of rejection. She'd turned him down. Him. Cole Nichols. No one turned him down. But it wasn't so much that she'd turned him down, it was the reason she'd given him. That with all his money and connections, and his business, that she didn't think he could give her the lifestyle she wanted.

She wanted carte blanche to the accounts. And that wasn't going to fly on any day with him. She'd run through the monthly allowance he'd set up for her in a matter of days.

She liked to shop, and party and she wanted to look the part of a billionaire's girlfriend. He was generous, but it didn't matter how much he gave her, it was never enough.

Everyone had warned him about her. But like a fool, he thought he could change her. Control the situation.

She'd already replaced him with someone richer...older too. Someone who wouldn't bat an eyelash at her gold digger tendencies.

Fine by him. He wished her a lifetime of saggy butt wrinkles. Good riddance. He had work to do. And one day, she'd regret

walking away from him. Truth was, he was more excited by the thought of his business goals right now anyway.

Teched was in the process of acquiring a small gaming firm that was bucking the system. Normally, he let his VP of acquisitions handle the takeovers and buyouts, but this damn CEO had been rejecting their offers for over a year. So Cole had gotten involved.

At first he thought it was funny that they declined. He knew the company was struggling, but somehow the owner had managed to keep Cyperpunked moving along. Cole would have preferred to avoid a messy situation, but all attempts to acquire them had been refused.

Fine by him—he liked a little fight anyway. Sooner or later they would buckle. He was going to spend the next two weeks gaining some leverage and applying some pressure.

He wasn't a fan of the word no. When it came to business, his father had taught him that someone who said no hadn't yet learned the benefits of saying yes. His father had also instructed him that when the cost outweighed the benefit, to walk away. Never get into a fight simply because someone irritated you. Maybe he hadn't learned that lesson so well.

In business, it was rare people said no to him. And when they did, he usually was able to make them see things his way. There had been some deals he walked away from that became problematic, but not often. Cyberpunked was falling into that category. But for some reason he couldn't let it go.

He'd spent a year pursuing the company and so far, they'd rejected every offer he'd come up with. It equal parts infuriated as well as intrigued him. He'd found them out a few years ago with their game Spyder. The gaming kids had gone crazy over the realistic design and 3-D-level graphics. When he'd played it himself, he'd fallen in love with the labyrinth of scenarios and challenges in the game. The designers were smart. And they were playful and innovative too.

He'd made an attempt to secure the company then, but they'd refused to be bought. Six months later one of the partners took off with some of the major clients. The newly formed company built their own games and components for large game manufacturers as well. But the games they put out weren't as appealing as Cyberpunked's were. They were missing some of the nuance and complexity. Despite having the better product, Cyberpunked had limped along ever since.

The only logical conclusion was that the creative force behind that operation was the one left running the shop. And Cole wanted the shop. Well, mostly he wanted that key person on his team. The rest of the employees would probably be let go, or placed somewhere in his firm, but he didn't care about that. Cyberpunked thought they could fight the inevitable. But he knew better. He didn't give up on anything. And he wasn't going to start now. Come January, Cyberpunked was going to be part of Teched. They just didn't know it yet.

Chapter 3

As soon as Cole opened the door to his suite, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He grinned when he saw who it was. “Jake, what’s up, man? Tell me you have good news.”

“Define ‘good news’,” Jake replied.

“Why is it every time you sound like that, I get the kind of information that puts me in a bad mood?”

His VP of acquisitions gave a humorless chuckle. “Because it’s usually something comprised of the word no.”

Cole ground his teeth. He at least wanted to do some skiing this afternoon before the work began. “What the hell is the matter now?”

“The latest offer to Cyberpunked was denied.”

He pinched his nose. “Seriously? What the hell is their problem? The last package was beyond generous. Hell, it was practically a Christmas gift. I even made concessions for the engineering staff to be hired on.”

Jake was silent for a moment. When he finally spoke, his words were slow, as if he’d measured each one before speaking. “Cole, maybe it’s time to think about letting this one go. At least for the time being until they fall apart on their own. The terms are better for us if they come crawling for a bailout. I don’t like this version of Tched, us chasing after a nothing game company. Hell, they have less than fifty employees. They aren’t worth the effort. This is all ego to them.”

Give up? The hell he would. “No, Jake. J.L. Reed is a genius. You played the game. You should understand.”

“Look, I’m not saying the designer’s not good. I’m just saying, we’re getting nowhere. Right about now, the resources you’re expending trying to get that company to pay attention to us are far outweighing the benefit. You don’t usually get so stuck on something. This is going a step above and beyond. Maybe—”

Cole was quick to jump on the hesitation in his friend’s voice. “Maybe what?”

“I’m just saying that maybe some of this has to do with Clarissa. You weren’t able to hold on to her, good riddance by the way, but now you’re desperate to attain this company. Maybe because the owner is female you think she should fall in line just like every other woman in your life.”

Jake had been spending too much time with his psychologist girlfriend. That’s what Cole thought. “You know, I appreciate the concern, but I know what I’m doing. We’ve been talking about a game division for years. This is the best foray into that.”

Jake sighed. “I hear you, but what about the company that split from Cyberpunked? They are one-half of the outfit. And maybe they’ll be less of a pain in the ass.”

Cole was silent for a minute as he poured himself a glass of Scotch. Most guys his age were indulging in craft cocktails. He had zero patience for adding basil and egg whites to a drink. And his tolerance was low for Jake right now. “Jake, have you ever known me to take less than the best?”

His friend sighed. “No.”

“Then why would I take second best when the real brains are

at Cyberpunked?”

“Okay. I hear you. I’ll have another offer drawn up. Maybe it’s time you asked for a personal appointment. Persuade the CEO to meet with you. Maybe she’s old-school and needs a face-to-face. I know she declined to meet with the proposal team. But a meeting request from you directly could tip the scales.”

For the first time in the conversation, Jake was saying something that made sense. Cole could really state his case then. And in person, there were few people who would tell him no. “Best thing you’ve said to me all day.”

“Okay, I’ll get on it. And Cole?”

“Yeah?”

“For once, try and enjoy the holiday.”

Like hell that was happening. “Not likely, but you get me that company for Christmas and it’ll go a long way toward improving my mood.” Everywhere he went, people tried to insist he should be festive. Relax. But they didn’t understand how much he hated the season. It had been years since he could enjoy it.

“Working on it.”

As soon as Cole hung up, he didn’t even get to pick up his glass before the room phone rang. “Yes?”

It was the front desk. “So sorry to disturb you, Mr. Nichols, but there is a problem that needs your attention.”

“Really? Can’t the on-site manager handle this?” He’d hired a management company so he could stay in the background of everything. If his mother had her way, she’d have nothing to do

with the place. Too many memories of his father.

“Not this time, sir.”

“Fine, I’ll be right there.” So far his relaxing vacation was anything but.

* * *

This was not happening. “What do you mean you are overbooked? That is not possib—” Jamie had to stop herself from cussing out the guy behind the reservation desk. He looked young. Like just-out-of-high-school young. Screaming at him would get her nowhere. And she was so worked up she might trigger an asthma attack.

She tried some yoga techniques to regulate her breathing. Nope, that didn’t work. She was still furious. “So what do you suggest I do? You’re looking at my reservation aren’t you? I mean it’s there, but somehow you’re telling me that you have nowhere to put me?”

His hands shook as he stammered. “I—I—I’m so sorry, miss, but there are no empty rooms. One of the guests extended a week and that was meant to be your suite. I’m terribly sorry. We’d like to comp you a free stay—”

She could feel the pressure building and could almost sympathize for the kid...almost. Except now he was offering her something that would be useless. Forget Zen. She needed to work. Right now. “Okay. Sure, what’s going to happen is you’re going to comp my next stay, though why I would ever stay here after this is beyond me.”

"I wish I had a solution for you. If I had a room available I'd rent it to you."

Still mad, she was feeling punchy and so exhausted from the trip. "Well, then, you're going to go and get in your car and take me to your place and you will find some other accommodation for the week."

His eyes went wide. He thought she was kidding. Or crazy. Truth was she was that desperate. "M-m-my place?"

Jamie nodded. "Yep. When do we leave?"

"But—but where would I stay?"

Jamie smirked. "Well, since you don't seem to care about where I'll stay, I am finding it hard to give two figs about where you'll stay." She shouldered her bag. "Okay, I'm ready to go when you are."

Poor kid looked ready to pee himself. Be nice, Jamison. It's not his fault. She sighed. "Okay, look, I'll let you have the couch." Somehow that didn't mollify him. Go figure.

"You can't stay with me."

"What happened to the holiday spirit? You're going to turn a defenseless woman out onto the streets with nowhere to go?" She was far from helpless but he didn't know that. Her mother had sold their house three years ago to move to California. Otherwise she'd just go home. She could hack her way into some hotel's reservation system, but since it was the holiday season, hotel rooms were scarce. She wouldn't do that to someone.

"No, I—"

A deep baritone came from behind her. Smooth as silk, and low and mellow enough to warm her from the outside chill. "What seems to be the problem?"

The kid's whole body sagged in relief as if thrilled to be able to hand her off to someone else to handle.

Jamie, on the other hand, tensed. She knew that voice. Knew it well. It had been years, but she'd never forget it. She whirled around. Cole. Freaking. Nichols. The object of every schoolgirl fantasy. Come to life...in the flesh. But unlike her fantasies...he was clothed. Bummer.

Also, unlike her fantasies, he was likely to speak...which would ruin everything.

He blinked at her and his brows quickly furrowed.

Jamie tipped her chin up. Was he really going to act like he had no idea who she was? Not that she should be surprised, but still.

He stared at her for a moment too long, but Jamie was determined not to give in. She wasn't looking away. If he was going to stare, then she could stare too.

First thing she noticed was that he looked good. But then Cole Nichols had always looked good. He'd been a football god, the kind of guy that even smart, ambitious girls noticed. Problem was he was also brilliant. His skills were phenomenal enough to have been in competition with her for every single academic award or acknowledgment in high school.

He had played football with her brother, Matt, and like the

other guys on the team had spent a good deal of time at her house because her mother was team Mom, but it wasn't like he and she were besties. He was always there, either he nipping at her heels or she chasing him. Until their paths connected and crossed at that end-of-semester party.

You will not think about that party. No. That was ancient history. What she did allow herself to remember about Cole was he was good-looking, rich and, oh yeah, an asshole.

But that was a long time ago. He might have changed.

Jamie took a step forward, but instead of marble-tiled floor, her foot caught nothing but air. In the seconds between being on her feet and falling backward, so many thoughts ran through her head. Thoughts like: This would only happen to you. And: Maybe you'll get lucky and the floor will swallow you. And finally: Of course the next time you see him and you're flat on your behind.

Though a final look at his face before her rear made contact with the marble told her all she needed to know. From the look on his face, nothing had changed.

She used several inventive curses to illustrate just how she felt, and he whistled low. "Looks like Jamison Reed finally grew up. Who taught you to swear, Jamison?"

Okay, in her case, she was going to look him in the pecs, then work her way up to his eyes. Yeah, hell of a plan. "It's Jamie. And in case you were wondering, I'm fine."

His lips quirked into a wry smile. "I see some things never change."

No. Apparently they didn't. Because he looked just as mouthwatering as he had the last time she'd seen him, seven years ago.

He'd cut his hair though, a style that was shorter on the sides and a bit longer on top, sort of a messy mohawk. It was stylish, just like his peacoat and Cole Haan boots. She recognized the boots because her brother had the same pair. Just her luck. Cole Nichols was still more gorgeous than the devil himself...and he was speaking to her...after seven years.

Jamie blinked hard to clear her head and not think of the last time she'd spoken to him.

"Sorry. Are you okay?" His voice was soft, gentle...almost.

Besides her bruised behind? She was not going to tell him about the state of her butt. "I'm fine. Or I will be when your employee over here realizes that until he finds me a room, I'll be bunking with him."

Cole chuckled low as he helped her up. "That won't be necessary. Since you're in the predicament because the property screwed up, you can stay in the owners' suite...with me."

Her eyes went wide. She might not have heard that correctly. Stay with him? Like, as in, with him, Cole Nichols? She shook her head "I—I—I can't do that." Especially not given she remembered every single detail of the last time they'd spoken.

He narrowed his eyes and Jamie got the impression that no one ever told him no. But when he spoke, his voice was calm, restrained. "Well, for starters, you won't find another hotel with

vacancies this close to Christmas. And second, the main suite is nearly a thousand square feet. I don't need that much space."

"B-but we...you...I—" She was a smart woman who knew words. Lots of words. Just not ones she could think of right now. "I have work to do and intrusions will be distracting and..." Her voice trailed.

His lips twisted into a wry smile. "I see the cat's got your tongue. But call it the holiday spirit or whatever." He shrugged then bent down to help her retrieve the contents that had spilled from her purse. As he shoved her phone and her inhaler back into her purse and handed it back to her, he asked, "Have you got any other options?"

Her inner adult scowled at the inner giddy teenager who was excited about this development. She was annoyed. But she could do this. Especially as she had no other choice. Jamie sighed. "Fine. Merry Christmas, roomie."

Chapter 4

You are an idiot.

The last thing on earth Cole wanted was company this holiday. Jamison Reed kind of company. Especially not since she practically screamed Christmas, with the red-and-green-colored stripes in her hair and her reindeer sweater. Oh yeah, and she signified everything he wanted to forget about that time in his life.

But where the hell else is she supposed to go? Yes, that. And this was Jamison. Matt Reed's little sister. Back in high school,

Matt had been his tight end on the football team. And his sister had always been around at team functions. And she'd outsmarted him for half the scholarships the school had to offer. Every time an academic competition was announced, the two of them were right there, neck and neck. Until his life turned upside down.

They hadn't exactly run in the same circles, but she'd always been there. As Cole walked her back to the suite, the bellboy trailing in their wake, he tried not to remember all the little details he knew about her.

Things he didn't need to remember. Like she was only eleven months behind her brother so they'd been in the same year in school. Details like how cute she was. Spunk and brains in a tiny package. Barely five feet three inches, she'd been a little dynamo.

But the number one thing he really didn't want to remember? That smart mouth of hers. Yeah, probably best he didn't think about her mouth.

She was one of those happy, bubbly kinds of people. Always looking at the positive slant on things. Always optimistic. He'd never understood her. Mostly, he'd kept a wide berth. Until that party.

Sure, he and her brother had been teammates, but they hadn't been super tight. Even then, he'd understood the rules of the team. No one messed with anyone's family. Too bad you broke that rule.

And now like a moron, he'd invited her to stay with him. As in, within feet of him. The scent of her apple-and-ginger shampoo

would drive him nuts. Not that he had been trying to pay attention to what she smelled like. Whenever she was standing right next to him, it was impossible not to notice.

She was exactly like he remembered, different streaks in her hair maybe, but her skin was the same brushed cinnamon and her dark eyes still all knowing.

She'd looked at him with such focus that he was convinced she could see every thought. But the thing that still got him were her lips. They were full and soft. And he wondered if she still used strawberry lip gloss.

What? No. He was not going there again. The last thing he needed was that kind of distraction. Hell, she'd probably forgotten all about that night anyway. But the masochistic part of him hoped she hadn't.

He opened the door for her and she whispered a "Thank you." The bellboy went in next and Cole directed him to the loft bedroom just up the stairs. After he'd tipped the young man and Jamie set her laptop case on the counter, he shrugged, ready to show her where things were. But she spoke first.

"Th-thank you for this. I wasn't entirely sure what I was going to do. Probably camp out in the lodge or something. You saved my behind."

"Like I said, I have the room. And it's no problem. We messed up the reservation so it was my responsibility to fix it. Besides, you're a friend, of sorts."

Her eyes went wide and his skin pricked with heat. Was she

going to call him on what happened with them all those years ago?

But she didn't. Instead, she said, "I—uh notice you haven't decorated yet. You want some help putting all the stuff up?"

Her smile was overly bright and it was apparent that, unlike him, she was looking forward to Christmas. "Uh, well, I just got in myself. Besides, I'm not really a holiday person."

"What?" Her mouth hung open.

A chuckle burst forth before he could stop it. She just looked so gobsmacked. "Sorry. You act like I just personally killed Santa. Not really my thing."

"No tree, no lights, no gingerbread houses? No mistletoe or eggnog?"

"Sorry. No."

"I just—" She shook her head. "Okay, fine. You just show me where all the stuff is and I'll get it all set up for you. It's the least I can do. Bring in a little Christmas cheer."

Silent alarm bells clanged in his head. Oh no. Not going to happen. "No, it's really not necessary. I'm really here to work anyway so—"

She waved a hand at him dismissively. "So am I, but working doesn't mean we can't do Christmas. I love the holidays. Show me where it all is. I'll do the setting up. If you can make sure I'm not sleeping in my car for the holiday, I can do a little decorating. And we need to get you an ugly sweater. Maybe there's one in the gift shop."

Cole stared at her, caught somewhere between laughter and bewilderment. She hadn't changed a bit. She still talked a mile a minute with a determination that was unstoppable. Problem was, he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. Either way though, he knew it would be easier to let her have her way. He could deal. And it wasn't like he needed to wrap presents or anything. "Fine, all the stuff is in the storage closet down the hall, next to the garage. If you want a tree, I can have one brought in."

"A real tree? I brought my tiny miniature one, but that would be even better."

He blinked. "You travel with your own Christmas tree?" He put his hands up. "You know what? Never mind. Okay, I'll call and have it brought in."

She grinned and in that minute, she looked every bit the fun eighteen-year-old she'd been. "Cool, you just let me take care of everything."

He stared after her as she pranced down the hall. This was a mistake. He could feel it in his bones. But there wasn't much he could do to stop the train.

* * *

Jamie rested her hand on the wall of the storage room, the dust particles dancing in the streams of light. Holy hell, she'd just agreed to stay here with Cole. You. Are. An. Idiot.

You were thinking you have work to do and don't have time to run around trying to find a place to sleep. But Cole? This was stupid. How was she supposed to ignore that undercurrent

for a week? Let alone ten days. Was it possible to die from embarrassment? Or longing? That had to be a real thing right?

Focus, Jamison. Get the decorations up and then you can work. And maybe even enjoy a little bit of Christmas. She'd been expecting to be in a basic room. She couldn't believe Cole had a luxury suite and wasn't using it to go all out on the holiday celebration.

The ceiling soared and the color palette was a very contemporary shade of yellow. The furniture was contemporary and light. But there was so much texture. Cotton, flannel throws, a pop of velvet here. And then of course, there was the enormous fireplace serving as the focal point. And the massive iron-and-glass lighting fixture up above made the room dance in light.

And the far wall was made entirely of glass. If she looked hard enough, she'd likely see deer roaming the property.

She'd get some stuff set up, then do some work. Maybe bake some cookies as a reward. The kitchen was all kitted out with granite counters and the nicest appliances she'd ever seen. Not that Cole looked like he planned on taking advantage of them.

Do what you came to do, not to reminisce about Cole. What happened was stupid kid stuff. It belongs in the past.

But as Jamie pushed away from the wall and started to unpack the boxes of lights, her mind automatically took her back to that long-ago night.

Frank O'Connor's parties were sort of legendary. That night, things hadn't gotten into full swing yet because the basketball

team had been at an away game and was delayed. So her brother wasn't there yet. It was mostly a bunch of bored kids sitting around drinking.

Nothing extraordinary until Marcie Gates, Frank's girlfriend, suggested they make things exciting with some spin the bottle. Or at least a version of it.

A lot of interesting things had happened after that. Frank and Marcie got in a huge argument because he'd had too much fun making out with Carrie Moss in the closet and she'd let Fitz Jacobson touch her boobs.

Jamie hadn't even wanted to play really. She'd just been down there holding her first beer, trying to blend in with the cool kids before Matt arrived. If he'd seen her he'd have flipped out and told their parents. And there would have been a ban on all future parties. As big brothers went, he was pretty overprotective.

Usually, she didn't even go to parties unless Matt was there. Not like anyone thought to invite her. Sure, she was Matt's sister, so she was accepted into the cool-kids crew by his insistence, but she wasn't one of them. Not one of the pretty people. But when Marcie had asked her if she was going, she'd said yes and dragged her friend Claire with her. Too bad Claire had ditched her in favor of giggling with one of the hockey players.

Cole had been there. Hell, he was always there in the background. As was the way with banes of existence. If he told her brother that she'd been drinking, she'd be toast. Just her luck, when it was her turn, the spinning bottle had landed on the empty

space that he walked right into. Even now she could feel the heat on her face as he'd studied her.

A moment later, he'd been dragging her into the closet to read her the riot act about being irresponsible, and drinking and how she should know better. It was like dealing with Matt. Of course he'd pointed out that she'd been drinking at a party with no one looking out for her. He'd gone on and on about how things would be perceived by other people. She could still remember struggling against his hold and muttering, "I'm not drinking. I've been muscling through the first sips of this beer to fit in with everyone. I don't know how you guys can drink that stuff."

He really hadn't liked it when she pointed out that by dragging her into the closet, things didn't look good for either of them.

It was clear to everyone on the outside that they weren't making out so Frank insisted they could come out only if they actually made out.

Jamie's skin still burned at the memory. It was like they all knew she was the squeaky-clean good girl. As if she wore it like a brand.

Cole had just rolled his eyes and told her to sit down and be quiet for a few minutes and Frank would eventually let them out.

"Are you serious right now?"

He'd scoffed. "Frank's being a prick, but you're Matt's sister so he won't mess with you too much. Just moan at the door or something."

Jamie frowned. "What?"

“You know, moan, like you’re doing something fun.”

She’d tried, but she sounded more like she was in pain than any of the sexy moans she’d heard in movies.

“Geez, Jamison, it’s like you have no idea how to pretend like you’re having a good time.”

Frank had banged on the door again to remind them of what they were supposed to be doing.

She threw up her hands. “I have no idea how to do it. I’ve never hooked up with anyone before,” she spilled. “So why don’t you try your hand at moaning?”

He blinked. “Bull.”

She shook her head. “No bull. So, I’m sorry I don’t have it right or whatever.” Jamie recalled Cole’s eyes raking over her inducing a wave of heat as if it were yesterday.

Cole had banged his head against the back of the closet and squeezed his eyes shut. “You have to at least have kissed someone right? I heard you were going out with Adam Sinclair or something.”

She ducked her head. “I—uh. I’m not too sure Adam likes girls. At least he doesn’t like me. He didn’t want to kiss me.” She shrugged. “I figured I just didn’t do it for him or something.”

“What?” He’d brought his head up. “You think it’s you? No. It’s not you. It’s him.”

“Yeah, well it feels like it’s me. Heck, no one’s asking for my number or seems particularly interested, so…” Jamie let her voice trail.

Cole had run his hands through his hair. “I get it. You want to be noticed. But people notice you. Right now, I bet there’s some poor guy wishing you’d look at him. I’d rather you talk with him than one of these drunken varsity kids. Sometimes guys can take advantage.” Then he peered at her through thick lashes. “What are you waiting for anyway? A kiss is no big deal.”

She’d ignored his last question. “You’re one of those varsity kids. Are you taking advantage of me?” she asked.

“Unlike you, I haven’t been drinking. And you’re Reed’s little sister. It’s different.”

“Great. Just what I need. Another big brother. I keep going like this and I’ll never get my first kiss.”

Cole groaned. “Just stop. It’ll happen. You know, when you’re at college. Far away from anywhere Matt can kick someone’s ass.”

She’d licked her lips nervously and gathered every ounce of bravery she possessed. “Or maybe you could do it.”

His eyes had locked with hers, but he’d shaken his head. “No can do, Jamison.”

“It’s Jamie. And why not? You obviously know what you’re doing if Rebecca Watts can be believed. And you said it yourself, it’s not like it means anything. I’m not going to be some dopey girl that chases after you. And bonus, not like I’ll be chasing you around begging you to do it again.”

She had been lying through her teeth of course. Because sometimes when she was all alone, she wondered what it would

be like to kiss him. It was silly. He never even noticed her other than as competition. She could count on one hand the number of one-on-one interactions they'd had. But she'd always been hyperaware of him.

"If you do it, I'll stay away from jocks at parties and I'll stop pretending to drink." Beer tasted like piss to her. "I just want to know."

Cole swallowed hard, his brows furrowed. "If I do this, you never tell Matt? And you stop trying to make out with varsity assholes."

"Yeah, okay."

"And promise me. No more even holding a can of beer. And beware of frat boys bearing fruit punch. You understand me? You're way too trusting."

"Deal."

Cole shook his head and patted the carpet next to him. "It'll be easier if you sit. Because you're practically puppet-sized."

She wrinkled her nose. "I am not."

"Uh-huh." When she sat, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she relished his warmth. "You want the guy to treat you like you're special. Be gentle with you. Never coming on too strong, okay?"

She nodded. Taking mental notes. "Got it."

Then Cole had caressed a cheek with his thumb and cupped the back of her neck under her hair and angled her head. Her heart was thundering so loud, she could barely hear him when

he spoke.

“Okay. I’m pretending it’s not you, Jamison.”

Her first kiss had turned molten hot in seconds as he schooled her in how to kiss. How she should expect to be touched. Everything had been so gentle, passionate, and she wanted more.

Blood rushing in her head and heart hammering, she’d decided to take matters into her own hands. She pulled back, and he frowned but let her go easily. “Are you okay?”

At first all she could manage was a nod. But then she blurted. “Yeah, but I want you to really kiss me. I know you’re holding back.”

Cole tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Jamison. You don’t want—”

“Yes, I do. Or some other guy is going to teach me and he won’t have my best interest at heart...” When it looked like he might not kiss her properly, she pushed herself into a crouch and levered herself onto his lap facing him. “Please show me.”

“I—” Then he sighed and kissed her again. The second time around hadn’t been quite so gentle. His lips had been far more urgent, his hand skimming up her tank top to run his thumbs just over her ribs. The tease of his thumb over each ridge sent a shiver through her body.

His hand clamped on her hips and he set the tempo of the kiss and their rocking bodies.

The sensations zipping through her body weren’t just new. Try explosive and mind changing. She knew she couldn’t go back.

Not to boring, bland her. Not when she knew it was possible to feel this way.

The tingles wrapped around her spinal chord tight and forced her muscles to bunch. Forced her body to arch, searching for...something.

Cole kissed her deep. His hand on her hip moving her until their bodies rocked into each other again and again. But then he threw his head back against the wall and tucked her against him.

She'd tried to ask him why he stopped. Or what she'd done wrong. The evidence of his arousal was hard to miss. And the idea that she'd managed to excite him was heady. But when she tried to talk, he hushed her, then held her for what felt like an eternity.

They didn't move until the sounds of the party were in full swing. Then he'd gently lifted her away. His motions stiff and jerky. "You okay?"

She lied as smoothly as she could. "Yeah, I'm fine. You?"

"To tell you the truth, I have no idea."

"I'm sorry. I didn't—"

He'd kissed her forehead then. "You have zero reason to be sorry. None. Let's go."

He'd taken her out of the closet and it seemed like everyone had forgotten the game. She left that room with him feeling anxious and curious. But the longing was most prevalent.

That party had marked the beginning of winter break. And considering her parents had dragged them to Saint Louis that

Christmas, she hadn't seen him again until the following January. And then it was like it never happened. She wasn't sure exactly how these things should go, but he was silent. The weird part was, he ignored everyone. Quit track, didn't run soccer and left all his academic clubs. She'd easily made valedictorian after that. Not exactly how she'd wanted to do it. It was obvious something was wrong. But the one time she'd tried to approach him, he'd looked through her. Like she didn't exist. She hadn't tried again. And now, he was playing savior to her damsel in distress? How the heck was she supposed to survive a day with him, let alone ten days?

Chapter 5

Jamie was a Christmas-decorating expert. A pro short on time, so, she did the basics. Stuck some battery-operated candles in the windows, put up the wreaths. Strung some garlands and pinned a few snowflakes to the ceiling. She pulled out the nativity scene to place under the tree.

It only took her about an hour after the tree had arrived. The whole time Cole had been absent. She hadn't seen a glimpse of him since he'd brought her in. After she was done, she settled in to get some work done. Working, for her, was like going into another zone. She didn't even like people around because it messed with her flow too much. She usually employed noise-canceling headphones and played nature sounds. She changed to music once she got her groove. Today, for sure, called for Christmas music.

After picking her spot on the couch, and setting up the router configuration, she was pretty much up and running. She was so deep into issues to mark for fixing that she didn't notice when Cole had come out from one of the rooms down the other hallway.

It wasn't until his shadow loomed over her that she snapped her head up.

When she jumped he grinned. Tugging the noise cancelers off, she smiled sheepishly. "Sorry about that. When I'm working I go total focus mode."

"Yeah, I caught that. I've been trying to get your attention for five minutes. Of course that was before I realized you'd gone into la-la land or whatever." He glanced around. "I see you were dead serious about decorating. Looks like a Christmas vortex in here."

"Bah humbug, Scrooge." She rolled her eyes. "I can't believe you don't get into Christmas." Shoot, unless he was Jewish. "Damn, I didn't even ask if your family even celebrated Christmas. Maybe you do Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or something and here I am with my nativity scenes."

He coughed a laugh. "No, we did Christmas. It was a pretty big deal in my house, the hot cocoa, ice-skating on Christmas Eve. The whole thing."

She frowned as she looked up at him. "So what happened? Did an elf scare you when you went to sit on Santa's lap one year?"

A shadow crossed over his face and for a moment, he looked so vulnerable and lost. But then it was gone and he cleared his

throat. “Nah, I’m just grown now. I know there’s no such thing as Santa Claus.”

She hadn’t imagined it. There was a shadow of pain behind his eyes, but he didn’t seem interested in talking about it. Of course, to someone like her, that just made her want to ferret it out and fix the bug. The defective code. Right the imperfection. Not your business.

So instead, she just said, “What? I refuse to believe there’s no Santa. I insist on believing in the jolly man with the beard and Rudolph. Except in my mind, Santa looks like a male model, and has a six-pack.”

The hint of a smile was back on his lips. “You want to interview for Mrs. Claus, then?”

She laughed. “I don’t do relationships.” At least not anymore. “Just like you don’t do Christmas.”

“Fair enough.” He inclined his head toward the front door. “I guess with your earphones on, you didn’t hear the front door. I had pizza delivered. I’m at a good stopping point if you are and want to eat.”

She lifted her brows. “Sure. I could eat, but then, I can always eat.”

His brows went up. “You’re so tiny though.”

“I am small but mighty.”

He smirked. “Anyway, if you want some help with some of the lights, we can do that before we eat.”

Jamison couldn’t believe her ears. “Mr. Bah Humbug wants

to help?”

He shrugged. “You’re the size of an elf—you’ll never be able to get them up there. Besides, your sweater might catch fire with all those lights. And you seem super into it, so whatever.”

She glanced down. “This sweater is awesome. You’re just jealous they don’t have one this cool down in the gift shop for you. But you know what, I’ll find one for you, as a thank-you.”

His brow furrowed. “I’m good. You don’t need to thank me any more.”

Jamie glanced at her laptop and hit Save out of habit. The system autosaved her project, but she wasn’t taking any chances. “Oh, but I really, really want to.” Laughing as she stood, she had to crane her neck to look up at him.

Stretching out her muscles, she worked out the kinks as she followed him toward the aroma of pepperoni pizza. Her stomach rumbled.

“Okay, maybe we’ll get food first, then.”

Jamison laughed. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Nope. Given the roar of your belly, I don’t want to see what happens if I don’t feed you.” He pulled down the plates and glasses and grabbed a couple of sodas out of the fridge.

This was weird and at the same time totally normal. Like they did this all the time. Nevermind the pink elephant in the room. Jamison thought she’d be more nervous talking to him, but he was so much mellower than she remembered. There was still an intensity to him and her skin still prickled with heat every time

she felt his gaze on her, but this she could do. Act like a normal person and not a hormonal teenager.

Normal... Right. Besides, she had a hell of a lot of work to do. She'd run into a glitch in the maze. She was missing something, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. It was technically fine, but she didn't do fine. Fine was not in her vocabulary. It needed to be outstanding. She needed a miracle so she had to be better than fine.

"You're frowning. Why?"

Cole's voice had a way of melting through her inner dialogue with herself. "Shoot, sorry, when I'm working, I tend to get all in my head and forget I'm meant to be talking to real people. Bad habit. So why don't you tell me all about Cole Nichols. And not the boring sanitized school, work, location stuff. Real stuff. Like where are all the bodies buried."

He laughed. "What makes you think I'd tell you that? For all you know you'll be joining them."

"I'm pretty sure I could take you. I'm small but mighty." She took another delicate bite.

Cole's eyes narrowed and sharpened on her lips. When he spoke, his voice was harsher, deeper. "You're the size of a Smurf." He looked like he wanted to say something else but snapped his mouth shut. His gaze locked with hers. The intensity of it nearly scorching her skin.

She should look away from him...except she couldn't. If she wasn't careful, she'd soon be doing that uncomfortable staring

thing and he would know she was crazy. "I'll take that to mean I'm sprightly! And sprightly wins over dark and broody any day."

"I am not dark and broody." He scoffed.

"I know your shtick. You act all bah humbugy, but you're a good guy. After all, you let a relative, Christmas-loving, stranger stay with you when you were clearly not in the Christmas mood. Someone like that wouldn't have bodies buried out back."

Cole just shrugged. "You're supposed to help elves. It's like a Christmas rule or something."

"Don't think I don't recognize deflection when I see it."

It was a good thing Cole Nichols didn't walk around with a grin all the time; women everywhere would be left quivering in his wake. The flash of teeth and the crinkling of his eyes at the corners and she was about to melt in a pool of warm gooeyness. "I have to remember you're sharper than most."

"Come on, no little details about what you've been up to all this time?"

He shook his head. "Not much to say if I can't talk about work or where I live or where I went to school."

Jamie stared at him. "Oh come on, no adventures, hiking the Andes, BASE jumping off the Eiffel Tower, no supermodel girlfriend in Antibes or Saint-Tropez? You're ruining my image of the mysterious Cole Nichols."

His laugh was quick. "I'm not mysterious. I'm an open book."

Jamie raised a brow. "Okay, so what's your deal—girlfriend, married? Why are you spending the holiday alone?" Why did you

ask that? Why? A muzzle would be a good idea.

The teasing glint went out of his eyes in an instant. His one-word answer said it all. “Nope.” And the subject change was so quick it gave her whiplash. “You ready to put up those lights now? Or do you want the last piece?”

She glanced down at the pizza. Between the two of them they’d managed to eat seven of eight slices. Three of them she’d eaten herself. “Yeah, the lights seem like a good idea.”

Lights. Yes, more decorating. Then she’d get back to work. Deal with the task in front of her. Do what she came to do. Not drool over Cole. Because, well, she really should have learned her lesson by now.

For the next ten minutes, they worked in relative companionship. He even smiled once or twice. He might not like Christmas but he was letting her enjoy hers, which was pretty decent of him.

She turned to ask him for the next set of lights, but her foot slipped on the stool.

In a flash, Cole wrapped both arms around her, bringing his body flush against hers, and Jamison lost everything she’d perhaps ever had in her brain. Gone. Poof.

Jamie sucked in a deep breath. Cole stood statue-like as his hands flexed across her back. Tension wrapped around them, then crackled and Jamison didn’t know when she’d so acutely felt every feminine instinct.

He quickly held her away an inch, but if she dared breathe

again, her nipples were going to rub against his chest. She could feel his hands moving behind her as they stood, gazes locked, bodies not otherwise moving. Holy hell. Cole Nichols was just about the sexiest man she'd ever seen in her life. Easy does it. Remember last time you went down this path?

Sure, he had an angled, sculpted jaw and cheekbones that made supermodels jealous and his dark lashes framed clear dark eyes. And of course there was the hair. It just looked soft to the touch. And there was no forgetting his body. She wondered if his abs still had abs. More than once when she'd been a teenager, she'd lost time just by trying to count them. She always got a little distracted around four and had to start recounting.

But for her, the pinnacle of sexiness lay in Cole's lips. His lips endlessly fascinated her. Back then. Not now. Because now she was an adult who knew better. They were full and curved in a hint of a mysterious, devilish smile. It was that smile that had her drooling all over him years ago. It was those lips that made her want to misbehave.

And right now they were inches from hers. If she tipped up her face and stood on tiptoe and climbed up his body, she could press her lips to his. But Cole Nichols was not on the menu. You're here to work.

So distracted by his lips, she forgot about keeping her boobs to herself; she released the breath she'd been holding. When her breasts brushed against his chest she clamped her jaw tight to stop herself from moaning. But one escaped anyway.

Cole's eyes had fluttered shut but other than that, he was doing an excellent statue impression.

When he opened them again, she saw annoyance, confusion and something else. It looked like hunger. But that couldn't be right. She cleared her throat, and then stepped down off the stool, out of his arms. "I guess I'm done with these lights." She nervously licked her lips.

His voice was rough when he spoke. "You okay?"

She nodded slowly. "Yeah. Good. Great even." Cue awkward silence.

"Sorry about the tree. A few branches broke when it fell."

"No big deal, I can get the fake one out of the closet."

"I can cut one from the property if you want. It's one of the services we offer guests."

"God, no, you don't have to do all that. I just wanted to get into the spirit since I'm working and all. I don't need you to cut me down a tree."

He shoved his hands in his back pockets. "You never said why you were all alone for the holiday."

There was no way she was getting into that right now. "Long story. Family is in France and I am hoping for a Christmas miracle."

"Now who's being mysterious?"

* * *

What the hell was wrong with him? Cutting down a tree? It had been years since he'd done this. His hands hurt. And his back

was killing him. Hell, had it been this hard when he was a kid? Probably because his father had done the lion's share of the work and he'd made snow angels.

But it was all worth it when he used the sled to drag the tree into the house. Jamie squealed and clapped. "Oh my God, it's perfect." If only it was this easy to make all women happy.

He'd never seen anyone so delighted over a damn tree. He was supposed to be working. A drink in his hand, basketball on in the background, laptop in his lap. That was the plan. Getting a Christmas tree wasn't part of the equation.

But look how happy it made her.

The scent of cinnamon wafted in the air. "What's that smell?"

She glanced toward the kitchen. "Oh, well, you took a little longer than I thought, so I started on a batch of my mom's cinnamon cookies."

"I really am rooming with a Christmas elf."

"You bet." She grinned at him, all white teeth and dimples.

She hummed Christmas songs as she pulled out a tray of cookies. And despite himself, Cole was starting to remember when Christmas had been fun. "So given your unholy love of the holiday, how did you end up all alone on Christmas? And don't give me any bull about working."

She rolled her eyes even as she laughed. "It is not an unholy love." She tossed a piece of popcorn at him, which he dodged. "Fine. Bad breakup. That unsettled me a little. Then I've been so consumed with work that I haven't really come up for air, so no

time to plan something major. The family was headed for a big trip, but I just couldn't do that and stay focused."

He knew the feeling. "As of Thanksgiving I was single, so not really in the people kind of mood."

She frowned. "I'm sorry. What happened? Hotter supermodel came along?"

Despite himself, his lips twitched. "No. That was the month before," he teased. "She broke up with me."

"Oh damn. I'm sorry." She winced. "Sometimes my mouth runs away from me."

"No, you're good. I probably should have seen it coming. She showed more day-to-day interest in my stock portfolio than I did." She was easy to talk to. Too easy.

"Ah, so she had her sights set on a billionaire."

He laughed. "Yeah, I guess."

"Well, her loss. I think millionaires have a lot to offer. If only women would give them a chance."

He laughed and he threw a piece of popcorn at her. "You're funny."

"I mean, I'm just saying, when did millionaires go out of style?"

"Right?" he laughed. "I mean, I should be able to have at least two supermodel girlfriends."

He didn't manage to dodge the popcorn she threw at him. One kernel hit him right on the nose. "You are gonna get it."

She squared her shoulders, and then put down the sewing

needle she'd been using to thread the popcorn. "I'm not afraid of you, Nichols. I wasn't when you drenched me at Matt's pool party when I was eighteen. I'm not now."

He frowned. Oh hell, he hadn't thought of that day in years. Who was he kidding? His subconscious pulled it out from time to time. Her brother had thrown an eighteenth birthday party. The whole team had gone. He'd started to come out of the haze of despair that had become his constant companion by then. He still didn't know how he'd had any friends at that point. That second party had been the only time Cole had spoken to her after that kiss that had changed everything.

She had refused to get in the water. Because he hadn't known how to talk to her or apologize, he'd looped one arm around her waist and carried her in. In the water, he'd wanted to talk, to explain. To hold her.

But she'd been angrier than a half-drenched kitten.

"You sure about that, Jamison? I seem to recall you didn't like me carrying you in. You probably don't want all that popcorn in your hair."

She narrowed her dark eyes. "Who says I'm the one going to end up with popcorn in my hair?"

He smirked. He liked that about her. Even when she was outmatched, she didn't give—

Another piece of popcorn hit him on the nose and she was off, running around the island.

She was going to pay. He caught her easily enough and she

laughed and squirmed while tossing pieces at him.

He grabbed a handful and pulled back her sweater, dropping them inside.

“Oh no, Cole, really?” She squealed as she laughed.

He grinned. “You asked for it.” Three hours with her and he was playing. When was the last time he’d played?

She might have protested, but she was still reaching for the pieces that had fallen on the floor and then she tossed them as she ran.

Again she didn’t get far; he picked her up easily with one arm. She squirmed and he said, “Easy does it. Truce? I don’t want you to hurt yourself.” He put her back down.

Her chin jutted up. “Me? I’m not—”

It hadn’t been his intention to kiss her. But she was wrapped in his arms with her eyes dancing and, well, damn it. It seemed like a good idea at the time. And she tasted like freaking heaven. Sweet, with just a hint of spice. And just one brush of his lips did him in.

Synapses in his brain fired the danger alert code. But the nerve endings in his body fired the “keep doing this” code. He kept the kiss light. Just a tiny taste. Just a little something for Christmas to make him still believe in wishes. Even though he knew better.

But then everything changed. Instead of pulling back with a shocked or concerned expression, she mewled, and then looped her arms around his neck. She was pressing her body into his and she was kissing him back.

Cole slid a hand down her back and pressed her against his body. Yes. Hell yes.

Even if this was a dream, it was one he could get behind. He'd sleep half the damn day if it meant more kisses like this.

Her tongue danced with his, tangling and twisting. Forcing his to chase hers. In a flash, he picked her up again and she wound her legs around his hips.

He couldn't breathe; the desire contracted his lungs and airflow. With much effort, his brain made a few feeble attempts to come back online.

Jamie worked her fingers over his scalp and he groaned in ecstasy. It might not have been smart, but he didn't care. He needed to stop thinking and right now she was the panacea he needed.

She tasted familiar yet illicit at the same time. In a matter of seconds they were seventeen again in Frank's house, playing seven minutes in heaven.

The second she'd touched her lips to his, he felt like someone had poured gasoline on him and lit a match. And none of that feeling had gone away. In fact, it was worse. Much, much worse.

A flood of endorphins rushed through his blood as he remembered everything about that night seven years ago in startling clarity. From the taste of her lip balm, to the feel of her soft skin. And somehow it was more potent now, more visceral. He couldn't get enough and he wondered if it might be possible to explode from a kiss.

Cole slid his hands under her sweater and around her back, relishing her velvety skin. She felt like satin under his fingertips. Her soft sigh like a balm to his soul.

Bringing his hands back to her torso, he skimmed her ribs. Tracing each with his thumbs. When his thumbs rubbed the soft undersides of her breasts, Jamie gasped and arched into the caress.

She threw her head back, breaking their kiss, and he smiled to himself as he watched her. She wanted more. She was wound just as tightly as he was. Just like him, she remembered.

He needed more. Needed to touch her, hold her.

With a frustrated growl, he snatched up the hem of her sweater. "Let's toss this, shall we?"

She nodded absently and reached for him. He was more than happy to oblige, surpassing all thought that told him this was a bad idea.

He dragged that hideous sweater over her head and tossed it aside. "There, that's better."

She blinked into focus and grinned. "Yeah, it got really hot in here. Wonder why."

She was so damn cute. "What do you say we get rid of this too. Make you more comfortable?" He tugged on her Cyberpunked T-shirt. Wait, what the hell? He frowned and focused on three lines of code with colorful, punk rock, rainbow font. Cyberpunked. "Where did you get this T-shirt?"

She looked down. "Oh, I had them screened and printed for

all the employees. You know as a team-bonding thing. What, you want one?"

Cole's gut fisted. Oh hell. He gently lifted her away from him. Jamison Reed was J.L. Reed. The one woman he couldn't make comply. "You want to explain why the hell you won't sell to me?"

She frowned, then blinked.

It took her a second to process. But he could tell when it finally dawned on her what he was asking. She stumbled back as if she was on fire. "You're Teched?"

Cole crossed his arms. "Yeah. Want to answer my question?"

This was the man trying to take everything from her. She knew the vultures were circling and his company was the biggest, baddest bird among them. They didn't think Cyberpunked could withstand the tide. Well, she'd just have to prove him wrong.

She glared up at him, then drew herself up to full height. "The only way you're coming near me, or my company, is over my dead body."

He glowered at her. "That can be arranged." He'd spent the past half day with her. How was he just finding this out?

"I'd like to see you try."

Chapter 6

It wasn't exactly like Jamie was avoiding Cole. It only looked like avoidance. So what if she'd locked herself into the guest room and worked all day? That was what she had planned for this little staycation anyway.

It had absolutely nothing to do with the gyrating make-out

session yesterday. Nothing. Okay, maybe a little something. But she didn't have a clue what to say. Or do. After that little mutual revelation, she hadn't even said a word, just walked upstairs and locked herself in, only surfacing for breakfast and to reset the router. And breakfast had been a hurried standing-up affair while she shoved a muffin into her mouth and hoped he didn't see her hiding in the kitchen.

She didn't need to explore the grounds. Or enjoy the fireplace. Or the Christmas tree she'd decorated. She was perfectly fine in her room working.

She wasn't hiding at all. Pants on fire.

She wasn't at all concerned that she was living with the enemy. Rooming with the one man who wanted to rip apart her life. No, wait, considering Brandon, make that the second man. Jamie kept trying to tell herself it made no difference now that she knew who was behind Teched. The same rules applied. Work her butt off, get the game done and live to fight another day.

Her phone rang and she rummaged through her laptop bag to dig it out. She answered with a grin when she saw who was calling. "Hey, Mia. How is the newlywed? Shouldn't you be holed up in some fabulous location with your very sexy husband?"

Mia Donovan had grown up in Hope, just one town over from where Jamison and Cole had grown up. She and Mia had often competed in the debate tournament together. She was one of the few friends Jamie had kept from high school.

Her friend laughed. "Oh, don't you worry, Ryan and I are

getting plenty of alone time. It's been a little hectic trying to start the production of my new show as he drags me halfway around the world on my honeymoon for three months." Her friend was the producer of a weekly docuseries for the TVN network.

"Oh, the woes of a woman in love," laughed Jamie.

"I know you said you were going to be in town, and Ryan surprised me with a trip home to New York for the holiday. I'd love to see you if you're around."

A chance to see Mia, and get the hell away from Cole, she was so down for that. "I would love to see you. Do you mind meeting me halfway in say, Reynolds? They have that pub on the edge of town. It's a bit hipsterized but might still be fun."

A night out was just what she needed. She'd been working all day and was making good progress. A few hours to give her brain a rest weren't going to kill the time line.

"You're on. Seven thirty?"

"Sounds perfect." She hung up the phone with Mia and finished the component she was testing. Tonight would be good. When she got out of the house and away, she would be able to find her calm, rational center.

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