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A Kringle  
in the System  
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*Holiday eBook Freebie*

A Kringle in the System  
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Emery sidled to the bar, hopping up to land on a stool. She pulled the red and green striped hat off her head and threw it down in front of her. The jingle bell on the end made a disgruntled sound before dying.

The bartender approached, nodding his head in her direction. He placed a paper napkin with the bar's logo down in front of her.

"Vodka martini. Two olives. No ice."

No, she'd had enough of ice. And snow.

And especially the freakin' North Pole.

She rested her chin on her hand and stared at her reflection in the glass behind the large display of various libations.

"Loser," she mouthed.

It was bad enough to get fired on Christmas Eve, but when one was let go from Santa's personal staff, it was humiliating in every sense of the word. How'd one plug that kind of hole on a resume?

The bright glow of lights shining on tinsel only attributed to her foul mood. Holiday music filled the bar from hidden speakers. Dean Martin assured some woman that it was indeed cold outside—and apparently cold in the world of giving gifts to all the children of the world.

Fired!

It was almost too impossible to believe.

Emery rubbed her thigh, feeling the rustle of the pink slip crinkle in her pocket. She pulled out the paper and reread the chilling words.

*Due to overstaffing and economic cutbacks in a declining market, we regret to inform you that your services are no longer needed.*

She wadded it up into a tight ball then threw it to the garbage can sitting next to the bar sink. It bounced off the rim then rolled under the liquor shelves.

Oh, jeez. Emery rolled her eyes at her inept attempt to make a basket.

A television played a senseless stream of pictures. The sound had been turned off, useless in the din of people out celebrating the holiday. A closed caption marquee scrolled the words to the program across the bottom of the screen.

The station broke for commercial, capturing Emery's attention immediately. An ad for the ParaMatch.com touted the accuracy and discretion of their services. They specialized in hard to match clients. Emery knew what that meant even if the people around her didn't.

She hid the points of her ears with the fall of her long hair. The last thing she needed was someone calling attention to the fact she was a genuine Christmas elf. An unemployed one, but one nonetheless. She took a candy cane shaped pen out of her bag and wrote down the phone number. The website most likely only had the questionnaire and not the information she was looking for.

"It's a cruel day when Emery Elfsbane needs the service of a matchmaker to find her a date," came the deep masculine voice in her ear.

With her head bowed down to see what she wrote in the dim light, she hadn't noticed Zachariah Kringle enter the bar, much less park his finely toned ass on the next barstool. But then he had a talent for moving like a silent night through the world.

Emery raised a brow and glared at him. "I don't need assistance in finding a date. I am, however, in want of a job, thanks to your dear uncle."

Zachariah frowned. "What?"

It took all her patience not to yell at him. As if he didn't know what happened. She closed her eyes and counted to ten.

"Em, come on. What happened?"

She felt his knuckle graze her cheek. Her eyes popped open. There was something about him. The man was hot enough to melt the entire Arctic zone. He was also the Pole's biggest player.

Worse for her since she'd had a major crush on him for years.

Annoyance surged up to her mouth, loosening her tongue. "I got canned, all right?"

"Canned?"

"Like a tin of peppermints."

A frown formed between his dark brows. "Well, I should say I saw it coming, but I didn't think they'd really do it."

Forget annoyance, she'd just gone to seriously peeved. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He slid his ice blue gaze along her flank then moseyed around the curve of her breast. "That you're way too sexy to be one of Santa's helpers."

Emery sputtered. It took her a full ten seconds to regain her power of speech. "Have you lost your mind? I've worked for the Jolly Fat Man since I was a child, not once in all that time has anyone ever admonished me for my job performance. Now, I'm an adult, I'm suddenly too sexy for Santa's workshop. Give me a break."

Zachariah raised his hands in defense. "I'm only stating the obvious."

Emery crossed her arms over her red suit. "Well, the North Pole needs to learn a few things about equal opportunity and sexual harassment."

The notion made Zachariah throw back his head and let out a whopping "Ho Ho Ho." The entire Kringle clan laughed like that—it was supremely embarrassing. Bar patrons turned their heads and held glasses aloft, returning the gesture in a cheerful salute.

If Emery could have slid off the barstool and into oblivion she would have. No such luck. Where was the ghost of Christmas Yet-To-Come when you needed him? Something—anything to suck her into the black void of tomorrow-year and out of this time and place.

"You're a Neanderthal." She belted back the last of her martini and hopped off the barstool. If she had to spend a miserable Christmas wondering how she was going to keep herself in designer tights, she had better come up with a plan to support herself.

She grabbed the cocktail napkin with ParaMatch.com's phone number and started through the crush of patrons to the door.

"Wait. Emery, come back."

*Do not turn around. If you do, you're a chump.*

He grabbed her arm, pulling her back to him. "Please. Let's go somewhere and talk."

"What's there to talk about? I've been told two different stories. My pink slip stated economic reasons and now you're telling me I'm too hot to push toys to tots. Looks to me like I either need to hire a lawyer or contact a union rep." She pulled her arm from his grasp and started back on the quest to find the door.

In such a crowd, it was hard to know if she was even headed the right way. She was at least two heads shorter than most people. As a matter of fact, she came to about mid-chest on an average-sized man. Christmas elves, unlike their ethereal counterparts, were notorious for their petite statures. Emery was no exception on that count.

"Please, Emery." He followed her out onto the sidewalk.

Shoppers rushed up and down the street, hurrying to purchase last minute gifts for loved ones. Melancholy wrapped its cold arms around her. There were no loved ones stressing to shop for her. No spiked egg nog or regifted fruitcake. Nothing.

The pink slip had taken that all away from her.

Including her apartment on the exclusive Polar Bear Drive.

Zachariah stood in front of her, holding her arms in his large warm hands. "Come home with me. Spend what's left of the holiday with someone who cares about you."

It sounded like a line. "Isn't that putting it on a little thick?"

"No one should be alone at Christmas. It's against the rules."

"So is firing someone." She tried to shake his hands off, but it was no use. "Getting kicked to the curb with a severance package doesn't make for a holly jolly holiday season."

"No, it doesn't. But we can change that." He ran his hand up under her hair to massage her neck. "What do you say?"

It certainly presented a better alternative than spending the evening alone. Still, there was that question of his playboy ways. Emery might be a good-time elf, but she wasn't a loose one. But oh holy night did his touch spread both comfort and joy throughout her body.

Dare she trust him?

Her heart thumped in a painful beat. It had been a very bad day. Was it too much to want for a little kindness? Especially given the time of year.

She gazed up into his Arctic eyes and pressed his hand to her skin. "Let's go then, Kringle."

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Zachariah had a hard time believing he had Emery all to himself on Christmas Eve. It was more than a wish come true. He'd waited so long for her to notice him with something more than indifference.

He poured them both a glass of hot dark cocoa and added a splash of Irish crème. Emery sat on the sofa facing the roaring fire. Colorful lights and garland reflected the fire's glow on her golden hair and creamy skin.

Gorgeous didn't even begin to describe her. And for all her bravado, she was a tenderhearted soul.

He knew all about her trips to children's cancer wards and nursing homes where many of the worlds' elderly were left to pine away in loneliness. Those were the things he loved about her—the things she told no one about. The fact that a generous heart was wrapped up in a smoking hot package made her all the more alluring.

He shook his head at the unfairness of it all. If anyone deserved to work for Santa it was Emery Elfsbane. She was the personification of goodwill to all.

Damn Uncle Kris for being so short-sighted in his campaigns. Not to mention rigid.

Zachariah carried the cocoa to Emery. Handing her a steaming cup, he took a place beside her.

"Thank you." She blew across the top then took a cautious sip. "Mmm. That's good."

"I call it my Cup of Cheer."

She smacked full lips together. "It tastes more like a Cup of Comfort."

"That, too." He couldn't help the smile that came readily to his face, or the fact his fingers got tangled in the ends of her hair. "I'm sorry about you losing your job. I tried really hard to get him to reconsider."

A frown pulled her brows together. "Exactly how did the conversation evolve? You might as well spill all the beans."

He let out a long breath. "My uncle has a very specific idea about what one of his elves should look like. They're cute, innocent and cherubic. You, Emery, would make Jack Frost hot. It's not the image Santa wants. It comes down to you being let go to maintain a certain image."

She ran a hand over her red outfit that hugged some pretty impressive curves. Consternation filled her face. "I didn't do anything wrong. I'm just being myself."

And therein lay the problem. Emery moved with a sensuality she wasn't even aware of.

"I don't think he meant it personally. That's why he told you it was economic reasons. He didn't want to hurt your feelings."

Emery slammed her drink on the glass-topped coffee table, making Zachariah wince at the sound. "Well, it *is* personal. I was fired for my looks. It's a form of discrimination and I won't stand for it."

"And what will you do? You only have my word for it, and I can't let you go around trying to sue my uncle and cause discord in the family. He'll fire me next for telling you." Not that he'd be out much. Sure he loved working for family, but he'd grown tired of designing toys. He wanted to branch out and do something else. He loved working with codes and dreamed of designing something more impressive than model trains. No, he wanted to write software programs. However, his uncle wouldn't hear of Zachariah taking another position within the organization. Zachariah's toys were just too popular with the kids.

Control freak.

If Zachariah wanted out, he'd have to leave the company completely.

"I can't let it stand the way it is. Who is going to hire an elf who got fired by Santa? He's materially damaged my career choices." Emery shot to her feet to pace before the fire. White fur trim on the hem of her short skirt danced across her thighs as she moved. It was a tantalizing sight that made Zachariah give a deep internal sigh.

"I don't see how. Your experience should be all your prospective employers look at."

"But it won't be." She flung a hand out. "It's the only job experience on my résumé."

Zachariah rubbed his chin. "Wait until after the holidays and I'll talk to him for you."

Her eyes brightened. "You will?"

At that moment he'd battle a rampaging abominable snowman if he thought she'd look at him like that for the rest of their lives.

He swallowed. "Sure. Why not?"

"In the meantime, I need to come up with a backup plan." She pulled a crumpled up napkin from her pocket. "I wonder if it's too late to call ParaMatch."

Zachariah's heart stopped. He knew his eyes bugged out, but he couldn't help it. The elf of his dreams was thinking about matchmaking when they were supposed to be enjoying an incredibly romantic setup. He must be losing his charm.

"Why?" he managed to get out between constricted vocal cords.

"Lucilla Wainwright owns that agency and has wicked huge contacts in the paranormal business world. She's bound to know someone hiring a slightly undertrained Christmas elf."

His heart shuddered into a normal beat. "Oh. I guess she would."

"I appreciate you saying you'll speak to him, but I really have to see what else is out there. Santa's a stubborn old guy. He's more likely not to budge if you put pressure on him. I need to be prepared." She pointed at phone sitting on the bar. "Mind if I make a call?"

"Be my guest." He rose and gave her some privacy.

So far, things weren't going his way. He thought when he found her in the bar, he'd be able to convince her to come back to the Pole with him, they'd smooth things over with his uncle and then, maybe if she was feeling grateful enough, they'd hook up.

Thing was, he wasn't so sure he wanted only a hook up with her. Somehow just having her close made him fantasize about setting up a house, making vows, having babies.

He opened the freezer and stuck his head inside to cool down.

The stress at work had made him snap.

That's what it was. If he made a commitment to Emery, there'd be no more fooling around with the bevy of lovely ladies he crossed paths with on a daily basis. Once he made the vows, they were bonds. Forever.

Kringles did not *fool around* on their spouses.

Zachariah backed slowly out of the Frigidaire.

Realization burned like a holiday candle in his chest. He didn't want anyone but Emery. There was something special about her. He'd never been able to put his finger on just what

pulled him in, but now he understood. It wasn't one thing—but everything. He wanted the entire package.

And he knew exactly how to get Santa to come around to his way of thinking.

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Emery hung up the phone after leaving a message on Lucilla Wainwright's voice mail. As a member of one of the most notorious witching families, Emery would have thought Lucilla's family celebrated Solstice. But apparently they took the entire season off through New Year's to ski.

Emery would be better served if she spent the time writing out her non-existent résumé. Surely the experience she gained working for the largest toyshop and distribution center on the planet—save Wal-Mart—put her in pretty good stead. But she'd never worked for anyone but Santa. What if the rules outside the contained world of the North Pole were different? It would be the worst case of culture shock ever.

But she could handle it. She was a big elf.

Besides, she really didn't have a choice.

There was still the possibility that Zachariah's talk with Santa would see her reinstated in some capacity, but did she want to beg to work at a place that no longer wanted her? Sure, the hours were good, the pay awesome and the benefits unparalleled. All right, so it was the best gig on the planet. But there were other places to work.

Maybe she could design video games. There was always room for one more elf-based RPG.

Zachariah came out of the kitchen carrying a couple of bowls of snacks. "If you want something more substantial, we'll have to order out. I was too busy with the last minute Christmas push to get to the market."

"Snacks are fine. I don't have much of an appetite as it is." She moved to the sofa and sat down. Yummy golden popcorn and chocolate covered peanuts made her stomach rumble. So, much for trying to convince him she wasn't hungry. Better eat when it was offered. Who knew when or where her next meal would come.

Emery grabbed a handful of popcorn and put it into her mouth one piece at a time. After a few moments in silence, she glanced up to find Zachariah staring at her mouth. Self-consciously, she wiped the back of her hand over her lips. "What?"

"You have absolutely no idea how beautiful you are, do you?"

She was about to put another piece of popcorn into her mouth, but was glad she didn't. She'd have choked for sure. Receiving the Heimlich was not on her holiday wish list.

He must have taken her dubious expression as a challenge. "It's true."

He leaned forward, brushing the hair from her brow. "You've got eyes the exact shade of holly leaves, and lips as red and velvety as poinsettias."

Emery laughed. "That's the biggest pile of reindeer shit since Prancer mistook Ex-Lax for candy."

Without warning, Zachariah took her mouth in the hottest kiss since lips had been invented. Emery tried to push him away, but only managed to get her hands tangled in his sweater.

His tongue made a passionate sweep against hers. Even Santa's sleigh couldn't fly as high as Zachariah took her with that one kiss. And it seemed to go on forever. Not that she minded so much. It sure beat the red hat off the alternative.

At length, he pulled away, kissing each corner of her mouth. His eyes had grown a vivid blue, like the heart of a flame. "You even taste good."

Bemused, Emery couldn't think of one thing to say. *Thanks* seemed inadequate. *Of course* was too arrogant.

She thumped his chest a few times. "Right back at you."  
 His crooked smile set her heart to beating hard against her chest.  
 "You know I want more." He ran his thumb across her bottom lip.  
 Emery moved away, putting more space between them. "As your reputation dictates."  
 Shock came and went across his face. He shook his head. "No. That's not what I mean.  
 Well, it is, but it isn't."

She crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for what was sure to be a very lame explanation.

"I want everything."

"Spoken like a true Kringle."

Zachariah took her hand. "In a manner of speaking. You know we Kringles mate for life."

"Is this what you tell all the exes the night before?" She put her finger up to stall the comment she saw burning in his eyes. "What about the morning after, when you throw them away like used wrapping paper?"

He let out a long groan. "I knew I'd end up regretting my lifestyle one of these days."

"It's not your lifestyle that's the problem. It's my belief in you." She poked his chest a few times. "You don't exactly have a sterling track record. And I'm having too bad of a day to end it by becoming another notch on your candy cane."

He shot up from the sofa. "I had no idea you had such a low opinion of me."

"I don't."

"It sure sounds like it." He turned his back and walked away, head hung between his shoulders. "What am I going to have to do to convince you I want to spend not just this Christmas but all the rest of them with you?"

It appeared they weren't having the same conversation.

Emery swallowed. "What?"

Zachariah turned back around. Hope flared in his eyes. "I want all my Christmases to be with you."

"Are you serious?"

His hands came up in entreaty. "Yes. What do you think this is all about? That I just happened to stumble across you in a bar? I love you, Emery."

"You love me?"

His expression softened. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"I'm just wondering why it's taken you so long to break your silence." And why she hadn't fallen over from heart failure?

He gave a brief shrug of his wide shoulders. "I have now, isn't that all that matters?"

"We'll see, Zachariah. We'll see."

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Zachariah had jumped through more hoops than a trained tiger, braved a bevy of bereaved babes and hounded the head honcho all in the quest to prove to Emery that his heart was true. So far he'd not made much progress.

That was all about to change.

"Santa will see you now." The receptionist turned her hand like a game show beauty, indicating the big man's office.

Nerves shot through his system, upsetting his stomach and making his head pound. No matter the outcome, he really needed to get rid of the stress working for his family created.

His uncle sat behind a large desk piled with papers—lists that had already been compiled for the next year. The man wasted no time on the Naughty and Nice aspect of the job. It's what he lived for.



"Zachariah, come, have a spot of cocoa and tell me where you were all Christmas Eve." Santa looked over top of his little gold half-glasses. A disapproving frown marred his merry brow.

Zachariah went to the cocoa machine and hit a few buttons to customize the flavor to his liking. "I was at home."

"Home? Instead of Command Central. I don't recall giving you the night off."

"You didn't. But I had the time coming and needed a break." Cocoa foamed over the top of the mug, running into the drain. "I followed Emery."

Santa put the list down and let out a heavy sigh. "She was heartbroken?"

"Angry is more the word. I'm still trying to talk her down from suing you for wrongful dismissal." Zachariah blew across the hot liquid then took a cautious sip. He kept a watchful eye on his uncle for reaction.

The jolly old elf did not disappoint.

Santa sputtered. "Why in the Jack Frost did you tell her the truth?"

"Because I think the truth sucked."

Quiet followed Zachariah's pronouncement. He sat down on the red velvet sofa and let the silence stretch out. No sense in rushing the explosion that was sure to come.

He watched in fascination as his Uncle Kris' face began to turn red as Rudolph's famous nose. The snow-white beard bristled with the movement of his mouth as it flapped uselessly.

Finally, he stood, gut landing on the desk in front of him, glaring across the office at Zachariah. "I have run this organization since well before you were born. I require no input from you on how to conduct business or what is or isn't good for the company. If you have a problem with the way I do things, you can join Emery Elfsbane in the unemployment line."

Zachariah smiled over his mug as he took another sip of cocoa. "Music to my ears." Music, hell, it ranked right up there with the *Hallelujah Chorus*. "I sure hope you've paid into unemployment, because I intend to collect while I decide what I want to do with the rest of my life."

Santa did that sputtering thing again. He really was becoming quite proficient at it.

"*Elves don't draw unemployment!*" he bellowed.

Jingle bells shook. Ornaments shuddered on evergreen branches. Fireplace stockings trembled.

Zachariah never realized just how much fun Santa baiting could be. "They do if they've been fired."

"Have you gone mad?" Santa reclaimed his seat in a tired heft of his bulk. "No Kringle has ever left the family company."

Zachariah set his mug on the cocoa table. "Then isn't it about time? This place stopped being fun to work at decades ago. Now, it's filled with the same rules, regulation and double-talk you can find at any other company."

Santa looked shocked at the charge, but said nothing.

Zachariah continued, "Face it, you fired Emery because she didn't fit your image. Pure and simple. You didn't even consider giving her a job somewhere else in the organization. You just let her go, after years of faithful service. And like Ebenezer Scrooge you let her go on Christmas Eve. That's shameful. An embarrassment. Wait until Aunt Holly hears about that one."

Santa had the presence of mind to wince at the notion his wife would find out about Emery's firing. "It isn't just Emery's looks that got her fired. I can never find the girl when I need her. She's always off somewhere out of reach."

"Do you know where she is?" Zachariah rested his arms on his knees. "She spends her time with dying children and the elderly. Reading them stories, or holding their hands so they won't be alone or afraid."

Santa leaned back, putting his head in his hand. "She told you this?"

Zachariah shook his head. "She has no idea I know. I've followed her into the city. I thought she was meeting a man. She was, but he was ninety if he was day and she spent the afternoon with him just letting him tell her stories of his youth. When she left, that man had a twinkle in his eyes to rival any young buck. She'd put it there just by listening."

Santa's eyes were troubled as he stood and made his way to the window. Snow came down in a steady fall, gathering on the window panes. "I've been a fool."

Zachariah wanted to agree, but decided to hold his tongue. He'd said enough for now. It was time for Santa to have his say.

"I became what I like least—a corporation. People complain about the commercialization of Christmas, and yet I fell into the same trap. I, the very symbol of what the holiday season is about, the selfless giving to others for the sake of bringing joy, allowed myself to be influenced by a society run amok by greed."

"You aren't that bad, Uncle. You've just gotten a little away from the message is all. Tone down the corporate image and bring back the homey feeling this workshop is famous for and things will work out."

Santa turned, gazing at Zachariah with a smile. "Will you stay on if I agree to put things back the way they were?"

"I'd be honored if you'd let me help, but on one condition."

"What's that?"

"Hire someone else to design the toys. I'd rather work in IT."

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Emery folded the want ads and placed them on the table. None of the employment options looked promising. Lucilla Wainwright had yet to call her back and Emery's bank account wasn't going to hold out forever.

As it was, she'd overstayed her welcome at Zachariah's. He might have mentioned wanting a future with her, but she was almost positive he didn't mean for it to start right away. No, better to put some space between them while they navigated the thin ice of a new relationship. Though she was pretty damn sure she might be in danger of falling in love with him right back.

The kitchen door opened and Zachariah entered the kitchen brushing snow from his jacket. "It's really coming down out there now. Put on your coat and come outside with me. It's beautiful."

Emery rose. He'd been to see his uncle and it killed her that he wanted to walk in a winter wonderland and not tell her the outcome of the meeting. Maybe he thought to take her out into the fresh new snowfall and break the news to her gently. Despite claims to the contrary, he'd not been able to sway his uncle to take her back onboard.

Did she really want to work where she wasn't wanted?

It was all she'd known.

She'd been born within the walls of the North Pole compound. Schooled with the other employees' children. Everything she knew and loved was there. Bravado was fine in the heat of the firing moment, but at length it was rather cold and lonely.

Bundled in her warmest wear, she stepped out into the yard to find Zachariah had hitched horses to a sleigh.

Alright, maybe she didn't feel quite so lonely.

Zachariah helped her as she climbed up into the sleigh. He spread a thick blanket over her legs then took a seat beside her. He picked up the reins, clicking to the horses to go.

She had to admit it was beautiful with the snow coming down.

"There's a thermos of cocoa on the floor if you want a cup."

"In a minute." She put her hand through his arm and snuggled closer. "This is very romantic."

He turned that sideways smile to her. "I know."

"Are you trying to soften me up for bad news?"

If anything his smile got larger. "What makes you think that?"

"Because I'm dying of suspense and you haven't mentioned a word about what happened at the meeting with your uncle. Cut an elf some slack here."

"Hold your sugar cookies," he laughed.

He pulled them through the woods and to a place where the river hadn't as yet frozen over. He pulled on the reigns, stopping the horses in the most picturesque setting Emery had ever seen. Her breath caught as a deer picked its way through the snow on the other side of the river. If he'd ordered the scene it wouldn't have been anymore perfect.

Zachariah turned to her, brushing snowflakes from her cheeks and lashes. "I suppose I should put you out of your misery now."

"Please."

He leaned over, placing a slow kiss on her mouth. "Uncle Kris is very sorry about what happened. He wants you to come back and work in Research and Development."

Emery sat there stunned. It was her dream job come true.

"How did you manage that?"

"I reminded him of the core of what we're all about and how we've strayed over the years. I also told him about a certain elf I know who has the most beautiful and generous heart I've ever known." He caressed her cheek with his thumb. "Marry me, Emery."

She swallowed hard. "Are you sure? You don't know me that well."

"I know all I need to." He pulled her hair back from her ear, leaning forward to place his mouth there. "You brought the magic back to the holiday. Say yes."

What she could have possibly done that was so special she had no idea. She'd always lived true to her nature, bringing cheer and joy to those around her. That wasn't magic, it was goodwill to all.

Zachariah trailed kisses down her neck then met her lips once again. "Marry me. It's all I've ever wanted for Christmas."

Emery smiled up into his beloved face. "Well, we can't have you walking away with a lump of coal in your stocking now can we?"

She slid her arms around his neck, pulling him close. The horses nodded their heads, sending the bells around their necks to jingling.

"That's not coal you're feeling, babe."

Emery laughed, giving her answer in a kiss that burned brighter than any Yule log.

## Author Biography

MK Mancos was raised on a steady diet of mystical beliefs and paranormal experiences. This early exposure to things that would have landed directly in the X-Files, gave her a driving need to write stories of paranormal romances and fantasy worlds. She lives in rural New Jersey in a house she claims is haunted, but her husband has yet to believe.

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