

Midnight Kiss



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MIDNIGHT KISS

Charla stood on the corner surrounded by far too many people. She must have been crazy to let Thea talk her into going into Boston for First Night. Dressed in the silver metallic miniskirt, black nylons, and black boots Thea had insisted she wear, along with a too-thin black sweater under the only dressy winter coat she owned, she was freezing.

And there were too many people.

“This is fun!” Beside her, Thea grinned and spread her arms. “Look around! Everyone’s having a great time. No one’s drunk or stupid like at that party we went to last year.”

“Yeah.” Charla was pretty sure the couple to her left were drunk, judging from the way they held each other up. Or else they just liked being draped over each other.

“It’s almost midnight.” Thea held up her smartphone so Charla could see the display. “Twenty minutes to find someone to kiss.”

“I am not kissing a random stranger,” Charla muttered. “I don’t care if it’s New Year’s Eve. I don’t want to kiss anyone.”

“You can kiss me.” Thea laughed. “Yeah, yeah, you aren’t into ladies. More’s the pity. You wouldn’t be having so much trouble finding the right one if you were open to possibilities.”

“I am open to possibilities. Male ones.” Charla rolled her eyes. Thea was cheerfully bisexual and had been trying to talk Charla into “jumping the fence,” as she put it, for years. It was all friendly teasing, but tonight it rubbed Charla the wrong way.

She was straight, her boyfriend of three years had dumped her just before Christmas, and the last thing she wanted to do was kiss someone. Anyone. Even if it was tradition.

“I should have stayed home.” She leaned against a trash can and sighed. She wasn’t having a good time. It was her own damn fault, of course. She could have faked smiles and enjoyment until it felt real. She could have decided Ian could go fuck himself because she deserved better anyway.

But he’d dumped her two days before Christmas Eve, and she’d spent the following week back in Maine with her parents and siblings and other assorted family members. They hadn’t given her time to wallow and mourn the relationship she’d hoped would lead to the happy marriage and family she’d always daydreamed about. She’d returned to Boston only the day before, and now, back in the city where she and Ian had talked about settling permanently, she couldn’t help feeling like shit.

If she’d stayed home, it wouldn’t have mattered, but she was harshing Thea’s good time too. Thea had dragged her out to have fun. She hadn’t wanted Charla to be stuck home alone on a night that was supposed to be about celebrating. But Charla would have been better off at home. At least she wouldn’t have felt guilty about wrecking Thea’s night.

She stuffed her hands in her coat pockets and hunched her shoulders, hoping for something resembling warmth. The night was colder than she’d expected, another reason she wished she’d stayed inside with a cup of hot cocoa.

“Come on.” Thea tugged Charla’s sleeve. “There’s more room over here, and we’ll be out of the wind.”

Charla didn’t even look in the direction Thea indicated, just allowed her friend to pull her along. Even in a good mood, Charla had found it was usually best to just go with the flow when Thea was involved. With the effort it took to keep herself from thinking about Ian, she didn’t have the energy left to resist Thea.

They stopped beside the Boston Public Library on the other side of Copley Square. Definitely out of the wind, since the huge building blocked it quite well. A passing police officer studied them for a moment before moving on. Security was all over the place that night, as it had been at every public event in the city since the Marathon. Charla understood the need, but being constantly scrutinized was getting on her nerves.

Just like almost everything that night.

Thea sat on the stone bench along the library wall. Surprised there were any spots open, Charla sat beside her. “Why are we here?”

“You mean by the library or in this universe?” Thea chuckled. “Lighten up, kid.”

“Yeah. That’s easy.” Charla leaned forward, elbows on her thighs. “I’m sorry. You should have just let me stay in my cave.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Thea patted her on the shoulder. “You needed to get out. I know you’re still upset about Ian. He’s an asshole and he doesn’t deserve you, but you guys were together a long time. Of course it hurts. If you’re still like this next week, I’ll worry, but I get it.”

“Thanks.” Charla forced a smile.

“You know what they say.” Thea grinned. “The one you kiss at midnight on New Year’s Eve will be with you forever.”

“I don’t think anyone says that.” Charla shook her head. Thea was trying to cheer her up, but the grey cloud around her wasn’t going anywhere.

“I say it.” Thea nodded toward a man who’d stopped a few feet away. “See? He’s cute.”

“You kiss him, then.” There was no way in hell she was going to walk up to a total stranger and ask to kiss him. Not on New Year’s Eve, not ever. She didn’t even bother looking at the guy.

No one would be with her forever anyway, no matter what Thea’s silly superstition said.

“I have my someone,” Thea said. “For now, anyway.”

“Then why aren’t you home kissing her?” That was one thing Thea hadn’t explained. Why she’d badgered Charla out of the house instead of coming to First Night with her girlfriend Marnie.

“She pulled an extra shift at the hospital,” Thea said. “Workaholic, that one. But it is what it is. Hey, he’s coming over!”

Charla took a second to realize Thea meant the man she’d pointed out. She turned just as the man stopped in front of her, a cute but confused smile on his face. He wore a long wool coat, unbuttoned despite the cold air, over a grey sweater and blue jeans. He was tall; Charla didn’t

bother trying to judge his height. In each of his black-gloved hands, he held a foam coffee cup.

“Can I help you?” Charla sat up straighter. She wasn’t about to let herself be attracted to Random Dude, but that didn’t mean she wanted him to see her all slumped and grumpy.

He smiled and held out one of the cups. “You can help me drink the coffee.”

“Um, yeah, because I’m likely to take a drink from a stranger.” Charla tilted her head and studied the guy. His blond hair was messed by the wind, and his blue eyes were partly hidden by thick lashes and heavy eyebrows.

He was good-looking. And something about him clicked with her. She didn’t believe in insta-love or whatever people called it, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t be intrigued by someone she’d just met.

Though she hadn’t actually met him yet.

He shuffled his feet and glanced at Thea. “Sorry. Yeah, it would be pretty stupid to accept a drink.”

“Yeah, and we are not stupid,” Thea said. “Why’d you buy two coffees?”

“Because I was with someone.” He shrugged. “Blind date. Apparently she decided she’d been better off not seeing me.”

“That stinks.” Charla moved over a little, leaving a gap between her and Thea. She wouldn’t drink the guy’s coffee, but the way he mentioned his date struck a chord with her. At least she wasn’t the only one feeling crappy on New Year’s Eve. “Join us if you want. Just don’t expect us to take the coffee.”

“Thanks.” His face brightened and he squeezed between them. “I’m Wes, by the way. Wes Hyland.”

“Anything like James Bond?” Thea said.

Wes’s face reddened. “No, unfortunately. If I were a secret agent, I probably wouldn’t have lost my date. I’m just a boring IT geek.”

“I’m Charla Johnson.” Charla held out her hand, and Wes set down one of the coffees on the ground in front of him to shake it. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Wes set the other coffee beside the first. “So are you from around here?”

“Charlestown,” Charla said without thinking. Giving a total stranger her location was probably stupid as hell. Then again, she’d only mentioned the town.

And her first and last name. If Wes was a psycho-killer, it wouldn’t take him much effort to find her.

“Chelsea,” Thea said. “And I’m Thea. You’re not a lunatic, are you?”

Wes chuckled nervously. “No. Not a lunatic. You don’t have to worry about me tracking you down. Like I said, I’m just an IT geek.”

“Ten minutes!” someone in the crowd shouted.

“Ten minutes until midnight,” Wes said. “Great. Guess I’ll kiss my coffee cup.” He looked at Charla and rolled his eyes. “Sorry. I might be a little bitter about my date bailing on

me.”

“I get it.” Charla smiled. *Those eyes.* Insta-love wasn’t a thing, but crushing on someone at first sight definitely happened. “My boyfriend dumped me last week, so that’s why I’m here with Thea and not with someone I plan to kiss.”

“You know what they say,” Wes said. “The one you kiss at midnight on New Year’s Eve will be with you forever.”

“I really don’t think anyone says that,” Charla muttered.

“And you wouldn’t want the coffee cup with you forever anyway, would you?” Thea said.

“No. No I wouldn’t.” Wes leaned back against the wall behind them.

For a few minutes, Charla watched the crowd thicken as more people joined the throng waiting for the countdown. She was acutely aware of the warmth of Wes’s body right beside hers. It was nice to sit with a guy who wasn’t criticizing her or complaining. Someone who didn’t know her and just felt like sitting beside her.

Until Ian had dumped her, she hadn’t even realized how much of an ass he’d turned into. And even though she hated the end of the relationship, it was a relief. Thea was right. Ian didn’t deserve her. She deserved a nice guy. Maybe someday, someone like Wes.

Someday after she was over the whole thing. No rebound guy for her. She thought things through too much for that. Which was another thing Ian had complained about.

And she seriously needed to stop thinking about Ian before she drove herself nuts.

“Are you okay?” Wes leaned a little bit closer to her, and she smelled the coffee on his breath.

For just a second, having him that close flustered her so much she couldn’t answer.

“Um, yeah.” She took a deep breath. “Yeah. Unhappy memories.”

“I hope tonight gives you a happier one,” he said.

She smiled. “I think it will.”

“Oh, get a room,” Thea said.

“Maybe in a few months,” Wes said without looking away from Charla.

Charla snorted.

“Ten!” The number resonated through the crowd.

“Nine!” Wes and Thea joined in.

“Eight!” Charla stood, and Wes stood beside her. Thea stayed in her seat.

They counted down the rest of the way, and with each number Charla’s heart beat faster. She was standing beside a cute guy. A guy she didn’t know, who she would probably never see again. And it was New Year’s Eve.

As the crowd shouted, “Happy New Year!” Charla decided what the hell.

Before she could turn toward Wes, his arms were around her. Their lips met, and the cheers of the crowd faded into a rushing in Charla's ears. Her heart soared, and her entire body tingled as the kiss went on. For the first time in weeks, she was happy.

She had no clue what the hell was going on, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was the kiss.

The one you kiss at midnight...

Wes broke the kiss and stared into her eyes. "Wow."

"Yeah." Charla gave him a faltering smile. "Um..."

"Sorry if I was out of line." He let go of her. "I just... It felt right."

"Yes, it did." Her smile grew more certain. "The one you kiss at midnight, huh?"

"That's what they say." He grinned and pulled a phone out of his pocket. "I know you just broke up, and you probably aren't even close to looking for someone else to spend time with, but I would love to take you out for coffee sometime. Somewhere where you can see that I didn't put anything in it."

Charla laughed and took out her own phone. "I'd like that. Give me your number and I'll text you mine."

Wes's smile broadened and he recited a number. Charla sent the text and burst out laughing again at the chimpanzee noise Wes's phone made. He looked at the screen and pressed something. "Saving your number. And I'll give you a prettier text tone. Bells, maybe."

"Okay." Charla put her phone back into her pocket and hesitated. What the heck did one say to a random guy one had just kissed?

"Time to go." Thea hooked her arm around Charla's, saving her as usual. Though for a change, Charla didn't want to be saved. "Wes, it was nice meeting you. Might see you again sometime if you're nice to my girl here."

"I wouldn't dream of being anything else." Wes put away his phone. "And it is time to go. But you know what they say, Charla. We'll see if it holds true. Talk to you soon."

Before Charla could respond, he walked away.

"He forgot his coffees," Thea said. "That was a hell of a kiss."

"Yeah." Charla touched a gloved finger to her lips. "It was. With you forever?"

"That's what they say." Thea patted her arm. "Forever's a long time. Time enough to keep him from being a rebound."

"Yeah."

"So stop staring after him like you want him to come back, and let's get home." She wrapped her arms around herself. "I'm freezing. Why'd you make me come out here?"

"It was your idea!" Grinning, Charla took off at a run toward the subway station several yards away. Behind her, Thea's heels clacked against the sidewalk as she followed.

Getting home took longer than Charla would have liked. Public transit was insanely crowded, and even with extra trains and busses running, it wasn't easy to get back to her

apartment in Charlestown. She walked through the door and flipped on the lamp just as her phone chimed.

She pulled it out of her pocket, heart beating fast again, and couldn't help smiling when she recognized Wes's number on the message.

We kissed at midnight. I don't know about forever, but I'll take one day at a time with you until you tell me to stop.

It sounded like Wes wanted more than Charla could give, and yet she didn't have the sense that was what he'd meant. She sat on the couch without taking off her coat and typed a reply.

Right now I'm not in the market for more than friends.

His reply came within moment. *Friends are always a good way to start. One day and then the next. And I hope tomorrow can be day one. Coffee at two? You name the place.*

She couldn't let him think it was a date. Hell, she couldn't let *herself* think so. But he wasn't asking for much. Just coffee. Friends went out for coffee together. She and Thea did so all the time.

And she wanted to see him again. Forever was far more than she could handle, and after Ian's bullshit the last thing she wanted was another relationship. But one day at a time was easy. They could start with coffee and see where things went. One day at a time for as long as they chose, whether only as friends or eventually as more.

That sounded good.

Two at Dunkin. She typed the address of the donut shop up the street from her apartment and hoped he wouldn't think it was too far, since he hadn't told her where he lived. After a brief hesitation, she added, *Looking forward to finding out more about you.*

Likewise, he replied almost immediately. *I could keep typing at you forever, but we should get some sleep, huh?*

As if his words had power over her, Charla's eyelids started to droop. She'd had to work that morning and had awakened at the ungodly hour of five a.m. Of course she was tired.

Sleeping would give her time to make sure she wasn't just seeing sparklies from meeting someone new. To make sure she really did want to meet him for coffee. And to accept that she hadn't dreamed the electrical jolt of a kiss in Copley Square.

"The one you kiss at midnight," she said softly. It was a ridiculous superstition that she would have suspected Thea of making up if Wes hadn't voiced it as well.

Ridiculous or not, she couldn't deny that she liked the idea of Wes being with her. At least for a little while. At least as her friend.

Yeah, she typed. *Sleep is good. See you tomorrow. Let me know if plans change.*

They won't, he replied. *Not if I can help it. Pleasant dreams.*

You too.

She set down the phone and leaned back, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She knew exactly what she would dream about that night.

A kiss that might lead to something amazing when she was ready. And that would lead to a friendship for now.

Something better than she'd had in a long time.