

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

SHELBY REED

*Holiday
Inn*

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Holiday Inn

ISBN # 1-4199-0477-9

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Edited by Briana St. James.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication: December 2005

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HOLIDAY INN

Shelby Reed

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Prologue

Jesse Proffitt stretched out on his son's bed, Daniel's threadbare stuffed whale clutched to his chest, and stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars glued to the ceiling.

They'd buried Daniel this morning, under a light drizzle that had commenced three days earlier when a drunk driver struck and killed him on the street in front of their house. A hit-and-run. Daniel was chasing a neighbor's dog. The dog made it to the other curb.

Daniel didn't.

Jesse tried to swallow, found his throat too thickened with unshed weeping. Outside, the rain intensified and drove itself against the earth, like his roiling grief. Even nature seemed to know that a six-year-old so full of life and spirit wasn't supposed to die like this.

He was Jesse's greatest joy. His life. His world. Jesse couldn't think past the pain. It filled his ears, his nose, his eyes, his mouth, choking him. It bubbled and seared like molten lava in the center of his chest, eating his insides, his soul, everything except his heart, which had gone brittle and shattered into a thousand, free-floating shards.

And still the world was spinning in its callous, insolent way, when it should have gone still in reverence. Still Toni Braxton sang from the small stereo in the kitchen, begging someone to un-break her heart. She had a deep, rich, soulful voice that Jesse would recognize anywhere. Funny that amid all the pain, he could muse over Toni Braxton and her lush vocals. He wondered if she'd ever lost someone she loved to the black void of death.

Silence would have been more appropriate now that all the mourners had gone home, but Sheila couldn't stand the quiet. She never had liked stillness, so Jesse and Daniel had given her that damned mini-stereo last month for Mother's Day, and it

never went silent. She was moving around the kitchen to its constant yammer even now, on the day she'd watched their son's coffin lowered into the ground.

The refrigerator door opened and closed. She was putting away the casseroles brought by well-meaning neighbors. She hadn't eaten a bite of anything since Jesse called her from a bystander's cell phone three days ago.

Sheila, come home...Daniel's gone. He's gone from us, he died in my arms...our boy is dead, and I couldn't even tell him goodbye.

Not that her inability to feed herself had much to do with grief, necessarily. She'd been too thin when Jesse married her a decade ago, and he'd long since grown sick of admonishing her to eat. It was a *thing* with her. Emaciation meant power. It also meant a bony, unyielding body curled away from him every night in bed. But the slow dissolution of their marriage hadn't really bothered him so much over the past few years, because Sheila had given Jesse a terrific son, the best friend a man could want, and Jesse could stand anything.

Anything but this.

On the kitchen radio, Toni Braxton sang about un-crying her tears.

He hadn't, yet. Hadn't cried. Couldn't. He'd stood at the foot of his boy's grave and held Sheila up, and her ninety-nine pounds felt like a thousand, crushing him. She'd wailed and Jesse had been her wailing wall.

Now he lay on top of their son's quilted cartoon bedspread and closed his burning eyes, breathing in the fast-fading scent of Daniel, the echo of his laughter, his husky voice shouting for Jesse to come kiss him before he could go to sleep. And Sheila moved like an automaton around the kitchen, straightening, cleaning, anything to avoid the bleak reality that remained, which included her husband.

The phone rang down the hall and Jesse's body gave a startled jerk. Soon the sympathy calls would quit coming, and people would move on with their lives, while Daniel Proffitt's parents sank in the quicksand of loss. No one could save them, not even themselves.

Sheila's voice, tear-choked, murmured over Toni Braxton. Inaudible words. A pause, followed by the click of her black high heels on the wooden floor, leaving the kitchen. Coming nearer.

"Jesse? Where are you?"

He didn't answer. She didn't need an answer. Her narrow shadow fed the falling darkness in the hall, and then she appeared, her face a ghostly white mask in dusk's gloom.

"Jess?"

"Yeah?"

"That was the sheriff's office." Her words quavered as Jesse sat up to look at her. "They arrested him."

"Who?" he responded automatically, even though he already knew. Even though Jesse's blackened mind had already decimated the man a thousand times in the last three days.

"The driver who killed Daniel."

He sat up to look at her, then said flatly, "All right."

When he looked up, the doorway was empty.

Chapter One

"So where are you, Anna?" Maggie Shea spoke around a mouthful of something crunchy, unashamed to munch in her older sister's ear over an already-scratchy cell phone connection. "Made it down through Rocky Mount yet?"

Anna glanced in her rearview mirror and maneuvered her Toyota sedan into the passing lane. "Not even close. Traffic's crawling. Drivers are road-raging. There's a reason why I hate traveling over the holidays, you know."

"But this is my first Christmas in my first house... Mom and Dad are going to be here any minute, and I can't handle them alone. You know how important it is that you be here." Maggie's voice rose in a plaintive fashion that sent Anna scurrying away from the argument.

"I know how important it is to you," she affirmed quickly, "which is why I'm taking my life in my hands and inching two states through this godforsaken parking lot they call I-95. I wouldn't miss your party for the world."

"Or Christmas with your best sister."

"Or Christmas with my *only* sister."

"At least you have good weather," Maggie pointed out. "No snow, and you were so worried."

"So the weatherman says." Anna eyed the early afternoon sky through the windshield. One small cloud drifted close to the horizon in a sea of blue. "I just have a funny feeling about this."

"You do?" Alarm sapped the humor from Maggie's voice. "Is it a run-of-the-mill anxiety feeling, which would mean nothing, or a pit-of-the-stomach bad feeling, which would mean psychic intuition?"

"Strictly run-of-the-mill," Anna reassured, giving herself a mental kick. Maggie was so superstitious. "So I'll see you in about three hours."

"Call me every half-hour so I know you're safe."

"You're a pain in the ass."

Maggie chuckled and hung up without saying goodbye—she'd always believed uttering those magic words would bring bad luck. Such idiosyncrasies had long ago ceased to unnerve Anna. Her younger sister's quirks made her lovable, if a little impossible. Her whole family was that way. Maybe that craziness was what had driven Anna to become a genealogist. She craved explanations for why the leaves of her family tree were so...colorful.

The party didn't start until dinnertime, and two hours into the drive, weariness strung tight bands across the back of her neck. She needed something to fortify her, pep her up, give her a jolt of temporary social enthusiasm, since all she really wanted to do was turn around and go back to Alexandria, Virginia, where her empty apartment and too-small artificial Christmas tree sat waiting.

Coffee would have to do, and a break from the stress of creeping along I-95 with all the other fools too entangled with their families to say, *No, thanks, I just want to stay home this year.*

It took another mile before a harried driver took mercy upon her and let her into the right lane, and with a sigh of relief, Anna swung off the next exit ramp and into a crowded gas station.

No parking spaces remained, so she pulled into an illegal spot on the grass, beside a dusty maroon Harley, and climbed out.

Despite the vibrant glow of the sun, the cold snatched the breath from her lungs. Icicles hung like crystalline fingers from the eaves of the convenience store, and customers pumping gas into their vehicles huddled against the wind's assault. The frigid currents shoved Anna along, whipping at the thin silk wrap she wore over her

velvet minidress and loosening the pins that held her brown hair in its carefully crafted chignon.

Damn, but it was chilly. Whoever had the guts to ride the motorcycle she'd parked beside had a hide of steel.

Stepping into the warmth of the convenience store, she glanced around for the coffee machine and spotted it in the back. A tall man in full leathers and boots stood at the counter beside it, his dark head bowed as he doctored a cup of steaming coffee.

The motorcyclist, no doubt. Everyone else in the store was either elderly or weighted down with kids and junk food, moms and dads dressed in goofy Christmas sweaters and college football jackets.

Anna couldn't have explained why she hesitated in the entryway instead of heading straight for the coffee. The cheery store was crowded, Christmas music trilling under the steady hum of voices. There was nothing particularly scary about the man at the coffee bar, other than the fact that he was the proverbial biker—bearded, broad-shouldered and powerfully built. He probably wouldn't bite her if she walked up beside him and reached for the coffeepot.

When the glass doors behind her swung open and a blast of cold air stabbed through her clothing, she jolted from her rumination and forced herself to walk. The biker didn't look at her when she stopped at the counter beside him, but he did move aside to make room for her. Painfully aware of his dark presence, she poured herself a cup of coffee, and glanced around for the sugar.

He was blocking it.

She cleared her throat. "Excuse me. May I...?"

He backed up a step and met her gaze.

Wild blue yonder. It was all she could think. His eyes were the iridescent color of the Caribbean Sea, made all the more electric by his dark beard and mustache, and the stern features they half hid.

An unexpected surge of sexual awareness washed through her as she reached in front of him and grabbed a couple of sugar packets. The scent of piney winter and worn leather emanated from him, and she quickly stepped aside again, surprised at her reaction. She liked clean-cut, polished, cerebral men who were familiar and utterly unthreatening. Grizzled bikers weren't her type. Unpredictability held no appeal for her, and this stranger's somber, fiercely blue eyes radiated it.

Maybe the lack of sex—a year's worth since her last breakup—had addled her brain. Or maybe it was just the idea of spending yet another Christmas as a single girl.

Somehow her relationships always met a tragic end just short of the holidays. It was a running joke in her family. Even Anna never bought her boyfriends Christmas presents anymore, because inevitably they would hit the high road by December 25th. And this year was the worst, because this year, for the first time, she really felt alone in the world.

So she gave her steaming coffee a slow stir and let herself indulge in the wayward pleasure of standing beside a man she didn't know. A mere five inches separated them; they stood too close, really, but he didn't seem to notice, and just the sheer thrill of breaching his personal force field pumped her pulse into a high, erratic dance.

A quick sideways glance told her his profile was more handsome than she'd thought, even with all that facial hair. She'd never kissed a guy with a mustache or beard. It might be prickly on her lips, too distracting. More likely it would be silky soft, delightful. It would glide a shivery path across the sensitive column of her throat along with his lips as he kissed his way down her naked body. Maybe when those lips found the curve of her breast...and then closed hot and hungry over her nipple, drawing on it, tonguing it, and that beard and mustache tantalized every inch of her aroused flesh...she would never want to go back to a clean-shaven lover. And *oh*, to feel the brush and tickle of that bearded chin on the tender flesh of her thighs, between her legs, and then the probe of a soft, wet tongue sliding down her cleft, savoring her, while his strong hands cradled her ass and lifted her like a loving cup...*oh my God*.

Pre-orgasmic shivers fluttered through her muscles, and she felt herself go wet beneath the velvet dress. How insane to get so excited simply by standing next to a complete stranger. Maybe she was having some kind of holiday mental breakdown.

Face burning, she stirred her cooling coffee one last time, then glanced around for a top.

The biker was, of course, standing directly in front of the stacked lids, and she wasn't about to reach past him again. Shouldering her purse, she started to turn away when he said, "Need a cap on that?"

His voice was low, quiet.

"Oh." She swung back and looked everywhere but at his face. "A medium one, please."

He retrieved the plastic top and handed it to her.

"Thanks." Delight quivered in her stomach as she stared at the front of his leather jacket, and out of sheer nervousness, she continued, "I can just see myself sloshing coffee all over this velvet dress."

"Going somewhere special?"

She glanced up at his gaze and away again, seared. Yep, those eyes were still blue. "A Christmas party."

"Have fun," he said without smiling.

"You too."

Jesus. He didn't look like he was headed anywhere fun. There was a starkness to his features that belied holiday cheer of any kind.

"Merry Christmas," she added uselessly as he walked past her. He might not even celebrate Christmas. It didn't matter. He was a stranger, a passerby in her day, no one she'd ever see again, although she would remember those gorgeous baby blues for a while. A woman didn't forget eyes like that. And if she ever had the guts to replay the intense sexual fantasy she'd conjured about that beard...it would definitely have to be

somewhere private. Like in her lonely apartment, with her lonely vibrator, which probably needed dusting off by now, for all the action it saw. The morose thought stole the vague excitement lingering inside her.

She sipped her hard-won coffee without tasting it and watched through the store window as the biker climbed on the Harley parked beside her white sedan, slipped on his full-face helmet and rolled out of the parking lot. It was a sexy sight, a man straddling his motorcycle, sheer roaring power between his strong thighs, his face a mystery beneath the black-shielded fiberglass mask.

Only when the rumble of his motorcycle faded did Anna recognize the hollow sensation in her chest.

She felt as though she'd been left behind.

* * * * *

It took her a while to notice the dense clump of clouds that had dulled the glaring afternoon sun. She set her coffee cup in its holder and directed her sedan onto the interstate, where traffic had miraculously resumed moving at a pre-holidays pace. Spirits lightened by this heavenly phenomenon, she dialed Maggie for her thirty-minute check-in, dutifully reported her location and after hanging up, adjusted the radio to a festive slew of Christmas tunes.

That was when the first snowflake hit her windshield.

Glancing up in horror, she studied the fast-growing cloudbank and groaned as flakes drifted across the hood of her Toyota. How could this be happening when the weatherman had proclaimed Christmas weekend to be blue-skied and crystalline all the way down the Eastern seaboard? How, in this day and age of radar, computers and high-tech gadgetry, was it possible *to miss the gigantic storm* now brewing over North Carolina?

Within minutes the highway surface was wet and dusted with fine talc, and the heavens had turned to steel. Anna slowed her car to a crawl, noting with increasing

anxiety that the traffic around her had thinned dramatically. People were actually pulling over on the shoulder of the road, hazards flashing their sense of alarm, unwilling to forge through what was fast-becoming the impossible.

A whiteout.

"No freakin' way," she muttered, and picked up the cell phone to dial Maggie.

An automated voice on the other end announced there was no available signal.

Ahead, red lights flashed as the pickup driver in front of her unexpectedly hit his brakes. Instead of slowing, the truck skated sideways and made a helpless, graceful slide into the grassy median.

Anna clutched the steering wheel with both hands, hunched forward to see the road, her heart hammering. The highway ahead was almost deserted. It seemed she'd moved into a foreign, cold, frightening land, where the only sign of humanity was the gentle tinkle of Christmas music beneath the roar of her heater.

Soon her entire world shrank to the two feet barely discernible in front of the car. No exits appeared. Nothing but hard-whipped snow, which clumped in the windshield wipers as fast as they could clear the glass. If this kept up, the blades would freeze and she wouldn't be able to see anything.

Anna swallowed the lump in her throat and tried again to call her sister, but it was no use. The storm must have knocked out a tower. Either that, or she truly had entered *The Twilight Zone*. Praying she wasn't overshooting the highway altogether, she eased into the right lane and took her foot off the accelerator in preparation to pull over.

Suddenly a pale red dot appeared through the miasma ahead, a ghostly neon orb that swayed and then shot hard into her path. She gasped and hit her brakes, slid a little and finally maneuvered the Toyota to a stop. In the dim glow of her headlights, a black-garbed figure lay in a tangled heap on the abandoned powder-coated highway, his motorcycle's rear tire still spinning.

Anna threw her transmission into park and leaped out into the storm. She couldn't tell if the rider was a man or woman; the black-shielded helmet hid his face. "Are you okay?" she called, slip-sliding with little aplomb to his side.

For a second the motorcyclist didn't move, and then he slowly pulled his legs free of the bike and sat up in the snow.

A man.

Hunkering down beside him, Anna brushed the white powder off his back and helped him pull off his gloves. "Oh God, did I mow you down?"

"No," his low voice was muffled. "I cut across your lane. I didn't see you." He unfastened his helmet and pulled it off, leaving his dark hair ruffled, but suddenly all Anna could see was a familiar pair of piercing blue eyes.

"Funny meeting you here," he drawled with no humor whatsoever.

She scrambled back, slid, and hit the snow on her bottom. "You're the guy...the...coffee..."

"Right." He raked a hand through his hair, straightened his spine, winced a little as he rubbed the thigh on which he'd landed. "We must be the last two fools left on the interstate."

"I was looking for an exit," she said foggily, her heart pounding.

"Me too. There aren't any."

"I noticed." Drawing a deep gulp of frozen air, she let her worried appraisal move down his long legs. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He got painfully to his feet, his breath puffing out in rapid clouds beneath the whirling snow, and offered her his hand. "Are you?"

"Oh. Yes." She grasped his fingers and allowed him help her up, then quickly withdrew from his warm touch and backed up against the hood of her car.

The snow seeped into her velvet pumps as she watched him set his motorcycle upright. He was incredibly strong to handle the machine with such ease. Young, too, more than she'd thought the first time she saw him. And those amazing eyes...

The shiver that quaked her frame didn't have everything to do with the frigid air snaking beneath her thigh-length skirt.

He didn't appear to harbor the same romantic notions. After giving the motorcycle a once-over, he swiped his helmet from the ground and flashed her a solemn glance. "You should get back into your car where it's warm."

"I'll wait to make sure you get safely on the road."

With a shrug that said *suit yourself*, he pulled on his helmet, flipped down the face shield and straddled the bike. "Take care," his voice came muffled at last.

"You too." She picked her way around to the Toyota's driver's side, shaking hard from the cold and excitement. Any second and the roar of his bike would fill the air, he'd ride off and she'd never know why their paths had crossed.

Hell, who needed a reason? She sounded like Maggie, searching for keys to the universe. Maybe the insanity was genetic after all.

Inside the car, Anna pulled on her seat belt and cranked her heater, all the while taking guilty pleasure in the sight of the biker's strong form straddling the motorcycle as he tried to start it.

And tried. And tried.

Her pulse jumped in her veins, a wayward thrill tickling her nerves. Frustration wrote itself in every lean line of his body as he attempted again and again to start the Harley, and failed.

His bike was dead. She couldn't leave him stranded out here in the middle of a blizzard.

She couldn't take him into her car, a dark, unpredictable stranger.

The motorcycle fired finally...and sputtered out. His head dropped forward in abject frustration. And all the while, Anna's heart performed impressive acrobatics, because it had already made the decision for her.

He dismounted, kicked down the stand and stood with his hands on his hips, studying the Harley. After a minute, he gave its exhaust pipe a scolding nudge with the toe of his boot, then gathered his backpack and trudged over to her car door.

Butterflies swooped and soared in her stomach as she lowered the window expectantly.

"I hate to ask you to do this," he said, leaning low to meet her eyes through the full-face helmet, "but —"

"Of course."

"Just to the nearest exit."

"No problem."

And hitting the unlock button, she invited him in, a dark, bearded stranger with the bluest eyes she'd ever seen.

Chapter Two

Anna drove at a snail's pace through the storm, her fingers clenched and sweaty on the steering wheel, every muscle in her body tight with awareness of her silent passenger.

When she stole a glance at him, he was staring out the window, one elbow resting on his helmet, his forefinger stroking his mustache. He seemed to be somewhere else, and not one bit interested in making her acquaintance, which should have been a relief.

It wasn't. The scent of leather, male exertion and melted snow filled the car's interior, stole her common sense, plucked at a female place deep inside her that made her want to lean across the console and bury her nose in his short, tousled hair. He was all male, impenetrable, a rock. Under those smooth-fitting black leathers no doubt dwelled all kinds of lean, hard delight. But beyond the physical allure, he radiated a strange melancholy and a raw sensuality that was as frightening as it was appealing.

He wasn't her type. She was nuts to want him, yet she did. So much that she could barely sit still beside him. Her mind played tricks on her, flashing images before her eyes that were carnal, outlandish and wholly reckless considering her focus needed to be on the icy road.

Lost in the sheets of some generic fantasy bed, she would let him toy with her, tease her with slow, circling thrusts, let him rub against her until she shuddered and came, and came again. Then, when enough was enough, she would clutch his damp back, roll him over with wild strength granted by lust and sit astride him, her hair loose and tangled as it thrashed her breasts in time to her movements.

"Faster," he'd order, his hips pushing hard beneath her so that she rose high, impaled on his steely cock. Instead of obliging him, Anna would pin his broad wrists to the mattress and slow the enticing rotation of her pelvis. He could only touch her when she allowed, even though every

grinding slide of her sex against his hard shaft threatened to dissolve her power and render her mindless and vulnerable.

But it was her fantasy, and she was a siren, capable of wringing helpless cries from even this dark, dangerous man. After an agonizing forever, after perspiration dampened their bodies and his legs slid against the mattress in restless agony, after his harsh exhalations had turned to low groans and his hands twisted in the sheets...she would reach behind her, let her fingers find the sensitive sac beneath his cock and fondle him, and the tender flesh would tighten like magic beneath her skilled caress, a harbinger of the impending explosion.

"Fuck me," he'd growl, his dark head thrashing on the pillow. "Fuck me hard, Anna – do it now!"

And with her own orgasm simmering like hot oil in her belly, she would free him, ride him fierce and fast, revel in the hard slap of flesh meeting flesh, the rising commingled scent of their desire, the rising song of their ecstasy, until every muscle in his strong, sweat-slicked body tightened and bunched, and he churned out pulsing jets of fire within her. While he was still quaking, still calling her name, she would soar to the sky, crest and fall into a hundred tiny deaths of sanity. The aftershocks of her orgasm would milk him until he sank into the mattress and she fluttered like a fragile leaf atop his strong body. Then he'd stroke her damp hair with all the tender gratitude of a sated lover, kiss her temple, and say –

"How about now?"

She visibly jerked and embarrassment scalded her cheeks. "I'm sorry?"

"There's an exit coming right up." He turned his head to study her.

Anna swallowed and stared at the road. "I didn't see the sign."

"There were two of them," he offered, and when her gaze darted back to him, he was regarding her with grave intensity. God only knew how much of her thoughts were written on her burning face.

"Well, thank God." She maneuvered the car carefully onto the exit ramp and crept to a stop sign half buried beneath ice and snow. "Do you have any idea where we are?"

"Nope. There's a gas station." He gestured to a faded blue and red billboard, but when they rolled by the station, its windows were boarded up and tall brown weeds poked through the abandoned snow-coated lot.

Anna's unease tightened into trepidation. Where *was* everyone? They couldn't be the only two people out in this freak storm. Where had the rest of the world gone?

In the distance, a row of golden lights sparkled through the blowing collage of white. "A motel!"

"That'll do," he said.

Minutes later the Toyota pulled in front of "Holiday Inn," only this motel didn't belong to any giant hospitality corporation. It was a one-floor motor lodge, circa 1960, with a green and red retro façade and snow-frosted gables. Anna was comforted to see the variety of vehicles parked in front of the rooms. She and the biker weren't the last surviving life forms in the universe, after all.

A rotund, bearded man dressed in Christmas red—complete with plaid suspenders—waddled down the walkway with towels under his arm, and gave them a cheery wave as he passed.

"Merry Christmas! Come in out of the storm!" he called, before disappearing inside a room.

Anna smiled and turned to her passenger. "Maybe you can call someone to pick you up here, or...or...?"

"Yes." He didn't say who that someone would be...a wife? Girlfriend? Before Anna could cross the line into nosiness and ask, he reached across the console and touched her elbow. Just a brush of fingertips, but she felt it down to her marrow. "Thank you for the ride."

"You're welcome," she replied breathlessly as he climbed out into the waning storm. It seemed so abrupt, their parting. So sudden, like something had been left unresolved.

Oh, well. That was it. The adventure was over, the stranger gone, her foray into reckless behavior ended. A snowplow rolled by the motel on the two-lane highway, headed for the interstate. She could get back on the road now, and spend the next one hundred miles mooning over what could have been with that sexy, forbidden stranger if she'd had even *one ounce* of raw courage...

Her sister had won the guts lottery in the family, however. And Maggie was going to love this story of the one-night stand that never was.

Anna made it to the interstate ramp and braked to dial her sister's number. Still no signal. If the storm continued to abate, she would only be a little late for the party. The Toyota revved a high squeal when she accelerated.

"Oh, no, you don't," she muttered, shifting gears. In reply, the car jerked and sputtered, made an ungodly sound she could never describe to any mechanic...and shut off.

"No, no, no! Shit, shit, *shit!*"

No amount of coaxing could get the engine to turn over. Tears lodged in her throat, she hit the hazard button, climbed out and stood in the middle of the deserted ramp beside her lifeless sedan. What the hell was she going to do now? Not a soul was in sight, not even the snowplow, which was just as well, since her dead Toyota was sitting smack in the center of the road.

It was a long, cold walk back to Holiday Inn, and by the time she reached the office, her feet were screaming in their soaked velvet pumps and her nose was so cold, she wasn't sure it hadn't fallen off her face. Every muscle was rigid from shivering, and when she stepped into the golden warmth of the tiny, wood-paneled lobby, she got as far as the nearest plaid sofa before collapsing.

"It's a nasty one out there, eh?" The jovial voice from behind the counter startled her into an upright position. She hadn't seen the clerk when she walked in, but suddenly there he was behind his wood-paneled station, white beard, bald shining head, dressed in a red-and-white-striped shirt and those crazy plaid suspenders.

Santa Claus, Anna thought dazedly as she got to her feet. How *apropos*.

"What brings you out in such a storm, my dear?" he asked, much too merrily for her current mood.

"My car has stalled on the interstate ramp," she told him in a carefully restrained voice. "Do you know of any nearby service stations that could help me?"

He rubbed his whiskered chin. "Not this late on Christmas Eve."

She closed her eyes, drew a deep breath for strength. "How about a room, then?"

"'Fraid we're all full up for the night. Lots of travelers thrown by this freak storm." He nodded at the large picture window. "It's coming down again, harder than before."

He didn't have to be so cheerful about it. Anna wasn't one for weeping, but the urge to do so, and do it loudly, surged in her chest and suffocated her response, which would have been, *You've got to be shitting me*.

"We're 'bout to close up here, go home to our families," the happy little man continued, as though they were sharing a congenial fireside chat. "How about you? Are your loved ones close by?"

She shook her head, self-pity choking her ability to speak.

"That's too bad. I'd like to let you stay here in the lobby, but I'm off the clock now, and I've got orders to lock up for the night. Cash register and all, you know. You can use the phone here to call the highway patrol though. Maybe they can help."

Hell of a Santa Claus he'd turned out to be. Resisting the urge to tell him exactly what she was thinking, she dialed the number on the old-fashioned rotary phone with stiff fingers, and when the highway patrol dispatcher told her it might be morning before a patrol car could reach her, "*...what with the storm slowin' things down and lots of accidents ever' where...*" Anna knew there'd be no Santa this year.

"Thank you," she called to the little man, who had disappeared into a back room. *Not that he deserved it.*

He poked his bald head around the doorway, his blue eyes twinkling. "May your Christmas be filled with magic, dear."

"Same to you," she gritted, tears stinging her eyes. Frankly it was the thought of hiking the half-mile back to her car that grieved her, even more than spending a frigid, blustery night — Christmas Eve! — in a car with no heat.

In thirty years, she'd never felt more alone.

Chapter Three

Jesse ran warm water in the sink and let it pour over his fingers, soaking in its comforting heat, letting his weary mind drift, if only for a moment, away from reality. He hadn't felt anything but sadness in so long, and the acid of grief had eaten holes in his brain, through which his thoughts seeped, disjointed and agonized.

But there had been a single breath of clarity, of normalcy, today of all days. The pretty brunette in her tin-box Toyota, all wrapped up in silk and velvet like the sweetest Christmas gift. The tenderness about her, the endearing clumsiness, the kindness in her big brown eyes, the sexy way her swan neck flowed into her graceful shoulders. The curve of her breasts beneath that wacky, useless shawl she wore, as the relentless wind whipped her chestnut curls free from her fancy hairdo.

He'd wanted her. The realization struck him now, brought a rueful smile to his lips as he stared down at the steaming water trickling over his fingers. *I guess you're not as dead as you thought you were.* In another lifetime, he might have had the balls to ask for a parting kiss from such a beautiful woman. A brief taste of her full, sensitive mouth would have lifted him up and out of the bleak movie his life had become. And it wouldn't have been so out of place to ask for a kiss. For a while, they'd shared an adventure. Two strangers whose paths had intersected not once, but twice—and while Jesse didn't believe much in fate, the scenario certainly offered some interesting possibilities to his writer's imagination.

But he hadn't asked to kiss her. Hadn't even thought of it until now. One more missed opportunity, and normally he didn't care. Tonight, though, it mattered. He regretted the way they'd passed through each other's lives. Even now he could picture her moving among the guests at her party tonight, sipping champagne, smooching

cheeks, shaking her sweet backside beneath that short velvet dress to some sultry beat on the dance floor.

That tugged his mouth up into a smile, but when he caught his reflection in the mirror, the pleasure faded from his bearded features. He hardly recognized himself anymore. How had he come to this? People lost children every day and moved on. Why couldn't he? Why had he lost everything when he lost Daniel? His entire life—his writing career, his marriage, his home, his identity—slipping away like the water gliding through his fingers.

He'd let it all go without a fight, except for Daniel's ghost. It was killing him, day by day, pulling him out of this world and into another where nothingness reigned. He was drowning, letting himself drift farther and farther from recovery. He had become a ghost himself.

The water in the sink abruptly went cold and he straightened, shutting off the spigot. A coffeemaker sat on the counter to his left, but he didn't want coffee. He needed something stiffer. Whiskey. A tiny flask was tucked inside his backpack for occasions such as this, when the nights got too long and his isolation too profound. He'd never been much of a drinker, but at this moment it promised a welcome escape.

He loosened the flask's lid, then hesitated. The bitter medicine might go down easier with a little cola, and maybe he'd sleep for a while, his only break from the pain that drove him. He'd passed a soda machine near the motel office, although there was no guarantee it would work. Everything about the tiny motor lodge seemed lost in time. Just like he was.

Retrieving a handful of coins from his jacket, he opened the door and stepped out into the covered walkway, just in time to see a slender, familiar figure limping away from the motel and into the wind-whipped parking lot.

"What the hell...?" Hunching against the blowing snow, he jogged after her. "Hey!"
Christ, he hadn't even asked her name. "Miss!"

The heavy precipitation swallowed his call. Only when she paused to adjust her thin, soaked shawl did his voice reach her, and her head shot around, her fawn eyes wide and liquid with tears, wet strands of chestnut hair frosted with ice.

She was shivering. Crying. An unnamed sensation fisted around his heart as he reached her. Without thinking, he folded her into his arms to protect her from the swirling storm, and she didn't resist.

He meant to ask her what she was doing — was she *crazy*? — but she melted into him just right, as though she belonged in his arms, and only when the wetness of her garments soaked through his shirt did he pull back to meet her brimming eyes. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

"Hugging a stranger?" She laughed, but it sounded choked. "After I dropped you off, I thought I could get back on the highway. The storm was letting up. I mean, it appeared to be. I'm not crazy enough to get back on the road in a blizzard. But — you saw that the storm had let up, right?"

"Sure," Jesse said, his embrace absorbing the hard shudders of her body. She might be a little nuts, but she smelled like a rose in winter, soft and rich.

"I barely made it to the on-ramp and my car died," she was saying. "No warning. There's nothing wrong with that car, I'm telling you. I take such good care of the cheap piece of junk! And it flat-out died!"

"The nerve of it," he murmured, knowing she wasn't listening as she clung to him, her words coming in warm exhalations against the bare skin where his collar fell open.

"And then the snow just poured on my head like someone had dumped a bucket of ice on me, and — and I walked back here, but there are n-no vacancies."

"I took the last room." He cursed under his breath and tightened his embrace, his chin finding the top of her head. It felt too damn good to hold this woman, standing like a crazy man with her out in the storm.

She was sobbing now, her shoulders heaving, whether from the cold or the tears he didn't know. "It's not your fault. Ugh, look at me. Normally I don't do this. It's just that...it's C-Christmas —"

"Come on." He started to lead her toward his room, but she stiffened and withdrew from his guiding arm.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking you somewhere warm."

"Your room?"

"The office looks locked up and closed," he said. "Do you have a better place in mind?"

She bit her lip. "I don't know you."

"No, you don't," he replied, shivering himself now. "But I'm not about to hang out here and freeze to death just to let you get better acquainted. You want to come in or not?"

She lifted her chin and studied his eyes, her teeth chattering. "Fine. I'll accept your offer as a return favor for helping you on the highway. Only until the snow lets up and I can call a tow truck. And no funny stuff."

"Speak for yourself," he pointed out, poker-faced.

Her head tilted in consideration. "Well, true. I could be a serial killer for all you know."

"Maybe you'll have mercy on me and take a break from all that violence. After all, it's Christmas Eve." And when at last a smile twitched on her delectable mouth, he led the way into his room and shut the door behind them.

* * * * *

Despite her bravado, unease swirled around Anna as unrelenting as the blizzard's wind. Here she stood inside a stranger's room, staring at him, and he at her, his bright

blue eyes giving nothing away. And outside the world had disappeared in a miasma of white fury.

If this man wanted to hurt her, he could easily have his way. He was, as she'd earlier suspected, strong-limbed and lean. He'd shucked off his leather jacket. His plaid flannel shirt stretched taut across his broad back as he finally moved, leaned to pick up the ruined shawl that had slipped from her shoulders and hung it in the tiny closet to dry.

"I was going to make myself a drink," he said, his voice quiet in the room's hush. "Would you like one? I can grab you a soda from the machine."

"That would be great." Still quaking from the cold, she eased down onto a worn wingback chair and squeezed her chilled hands between her nylon-covered knees to warm them.

He disappeared outside again, and she sat in utter stillness, shell-shocked by the unbelievable reality of this day. She no longer felt like crying. This was all too interesting to give into despair just yet.

After a moment she retrieved the phone from her wet purse and dialed Maggie's number. This time the call went through, and for a moment hope swelled in her heart. But there was no answer; not even the machine picked up. She dialed again, to no avail.

The entire day was beginning to feel like one fat cosmic joke.

The biker reentered the room, two soda cans hugged against his chest. Snow dusted his dark hair, and he shook it off like a big dog and shut the door with his foot.

"It's bad out there," he said, and leaned behind Anna's chair to crank the heating unit, close enough for her to study the smooth seat of his leather pants.

He had a nice ass, she managed to note through her misery. Muscular, but not the bulky bubble-butt of a weightlifter. His physique was obviously compliments of Mother Nature. So was the easy way he moved, with enough liquid ease to indicate innate sensuality—half the reason for Anna's discomfort. She might not trust him, but she trusted herself even less. Desperation did funny things to a woman's code of ethics.

Right now she could hardly remember what her mother had taught her about strangers and motel rooms with only one bed.

Outside, the wind wailed a mournful elegy, but warmth had begun to return to Anna's limbs, and since the biker had retreated to the bed and seemed to be keeping his distance, she relaxed a little.

"Before you even think it, I don't plan on getting wasted." He retrieved a small flask of whiskey from his knapsack and splashed a finger into a glass on the bedside table. "I just want to warm up, and I'd suggest you do the same."

"Plain soda, please," she said stiffly. "I'd like to keep my wits about me."

If he was insulted by her obvious doubt of him, he didn't show it. After he'd handed her a glass of cola, he finished making his drink. Then he sat down on the edge of the queen-sized bed with the glass cradled in his big hands and wordlessly met her gaze.

Anna swallowed a mouthful of cola and glanced away. His eyes were so clear, so piercing, like the azure marbles she'd collected as a kid. She wanted a longer look at them, but they stung her. "What's your name?" she asked finally.

"Jesse." His lashes lowered as he studied her mouth. "You?"

"Anna."

He lifted his glass in her direction. "To being stranded in the middle of nowhere on Christmas, Anna."

"Cheers," she echoed, and took a long gulp. Silence blanketed the space between them, and underneath, an unnamed tension roiled and flowed. After a beat, she said, "You know, Jesse, I think I will have a little whiskey with my soda."

He obliged her, then returned to his post on the edge of the bed, and they finished their drinks without speaking. Outside, the storm raged, and soon the lateness of the afternoon swallowed what remained of the frail, frozen daylight. Jesse reached over and turned on a bedside lamp, filling the room with a soft golden glow.

Thawed at last by the whiskey, Anna kicked off her ruined pumps, curled her feet beneath her and sank deeper into the chair's winged embrace. Despite the strangeness of the situation, it was damned good to be off the highway. Weariness weighted her eyelids, and she forced them open again, not quite secure enough to sleep in this man's presence.

Without a word, he rose and withdrew a blanket from the closet, tossed it to her. Keeping his distance, even though less than an hour ago he'd wrapped her in his arms and she'd come more than willingly.

"Thank you," she murmured, and the words held a deeper import.

He gave a short nod. "I'm going to sleep for a while."

She tensed again, her gaze following him as he pulled back the covers and threw one pillow to the foot of the bed. He didn't offer to give her the bed and he didn't offer to share it. He pulled off his boots, tugged his shirt free from the waistband of his pants and stretched out on the mattress.

"Wake me if you need anything," he said, and just like that, he fell asleep, leaving her in peace, wholly surprised, and inexplicably disappointed.

* * * * *

While he slept, Anna crept into the bathroom, locked the door and ran herself a hot shower. She hung her soaked clothing up to dry and stepped beneath the steaming spray, where she lingered until the water went tepid. When she was done, she wrapped herself in a towel and sat on the toilet lid, unsure of what to do next. It wasn't appropriate—or smart—to flounce around the room in nothing but a towel while her clothing dried, even if the biker wasn't awake to witness it. On the other hand, she couldn't sit in the tiny, steam-filled cubicle all night. Gritting her teeth, she pulled back on her clothing, which no longer was drenched, but merely damp and icy to her tender skin. It was hell, but at least she was clean and somewhat thawed.

Shivering, she eased the bathroom door open and tiptoed into the room. The biker had changed positions on the bed; he lay on his side away from her, silent, the steady rise and fall of his back indicating he truly was asleep.

He looked cold.

Moving stealthily, Anna drew the side of the bedspread over his huddled form, then backed away to watch him, half frightened, a quarter miserable, and the rest...well, titillated. Knowing that nothing would happen between them gave her love-hungry mind free rein to entertain a million erotic scenarios. *Two strangers, both solitary, stranded in a storm, sharing a motel room with one bed out of sheer desperation. And sheer desperation would ultimately drive them together.*

Sounded like a movie...a juicy one.

She groped for the chair behind her, curled up on it, and covered herself with the blanket he'd offered her earlier. After a while her thoughts slid into a sleepy collage of fragmented fantasies, and finally, dreams.

* * * * *

Anna didn't realize she'd dozed off until the sound of water rushing through creaking pipes roused her back to life.

The bed was empty, the covers rumpled. From the bathroom came the sound of a shower running, the thud of soap hitting the tub floor. After a minute the water shut off, followed by the clack of shower curtain rings sliding on a metal rod.

He was in the shower. Naked. With one thin wall between them.

Afloat in that languid place between sleep and wakefulness, she let her eyelids slide closed again while a naughty picture of his body slid through her mind. *Jesse*. The name suited him. Tough yet tender. He'd welcomed her into his room. He'd put his arms around her in the parking lot, protected her from the storm.

Such a man would be an incredible lover. Anna couldn't say how she knew this. But she'd felt it, a galvanized shiver of awareness, while she stood in the sheltering

circle of his arms with the snow blowing all around them. Awareness of his strength, and of the vague vulnerability that contradicted it. She'd been wrong to think him an impervious rock. Now that she knew his features, she read the unnamed history in the lines around his crystalline eyes — laughter. And the shadows beneath those eyes — grief. He'd been happy once. What had stolen that from him and brought him to this solitary place on Christmas Eve?

Unexpected desire surged low in her belly, burning her everywhere, pulsing heat between her thighs, making her painfully aware yet again of how long it had been since she'd known the touch, taste, scent of a man.

This one, with his paradox of darkness and light, mesmerized her. And being just a little afraid of him seemed to feed that fascination. She wanted to unlock his armor, see what dwelled beneath.

What if, for once, she took the road less traveled and followed the whisper of recklessness in her mind, the one that echoed the hot fantasies she'd entertained since first seeing him in the convenience store? What would he do if she threw all caution to the wind and met him at the bathroom door?

Merry Christmas, she'd say. May I unwrap you?

Before the scenario could play to fruition in her overheated mind, the door squeaked open and steam billowed out of the bathroom, followed by the delicious scent of soap and shampoo. Jesse appeared, his lean hips enfolded in a towel, his naked back turned to her as he retrieved the knapsack he'd placed by the sink.

She sat as still as a deer and watched the liquid play of sinew under his golden skin, her throat dry, her pulse pounding. Rivulets of water trickled over the ridges and dips of his musculature, rushing to meet at the low dip of his back.

When he lifted his head, she froze.

The clean-shaven, sharply chiseled face reflected in the mirror belonged to someone new. But those eyes...deep, bright, exquisitely blue...they were the same. Filled with buried sadness, but under that, something more. Man's awareness of Woman. He knew

she appraised him, measured him, contemplated the possibilities, and she didn't deny it by looking away.

They stared at each other in the mirror for much too long before Anna finally found her voice. "You shaved off your beard and mustache."

His mouth quirked and he rubbed a hand across his chin. "It's been a while. I feel kind of naked."

"You look different."

"You don't like the change?"

Her cheeks warmed as she tucked away the memory of her earlier fantasy. "Believe me, a part of me definitely liked the beard. But you're quite handsome this way. I like your face."

"Thank you," he said, his eyes finding hers again. Searching for his own answers.

Holy cow, she wanted him. And what, truly, did she have to lose, alone on Christmas night for the thirtieth time in her singular life?

One...two...three...jump. "So what are you thinking, Jesse, when you look at me like that?"

"Wondering what you're thinking when you're looking at *me* like that," he volleyed.

She had to smile, even though her heart threatened to hammer its way through her rib cage. "That's funny."

"Maybe a little."

Try, try again. "Well? Do you like what you see when you look at me?"

"Yes," he said, without preamble. Not that she gave him any choice.

Her brows lowered. "You're nice to say that, but I kind of put you on the spot just now."

"Maybe a little," he repeated.

Anna bit her lip. "Well. I like *you*, Jesse."

His strong throat moved when he swallowed. "That's good, seeing as how we're stuck here together."

An arid comment, but not a rejection.

She eased forward on the chair, her heart pounding. "I want to know you." The truth quavered just a little. Playtime was over.

He let the shaving lotion slide back into his knapsack, the muscles of his back flexing as he straightened. "Why?"

"I don't know. I'm drawn to you. Not just physically." When he didn't respond right away, she snapped out of her pleasurable haze and closed her eyes, humiliation chilling away the desire that had turned her insides to warm, sweet liquid. "Jeez...what am I doing?"

"I'm not sure." He braced his hands on the counter, all clean and sexy, watching her in the mirror with those blue, blue eyes. "Keep talking and maybe we'll figure it out together."

Not a rejection at all.

Just like that, the fire returned, rushed through her, simmering low in her belly. She licked her lips and straightened on the chair, the blanket sliding from her lap into the floor. "I felt like this when I first saw you at the gas station, you know."

"Like how?" he prompted, his voice gone husky.

"Like...all squirrely and...and hot." Her fingers dug into her thighs through the short velvet dress, braced for his rebuff, prepared for something far more frightening—his reciprocation. "You scare me to death. I haven't been with a man in a year, and even before that, I've only had a couple of boyfriends. I'm a long-termer when it comes to relationships. This isn't like me. I don't pick up strangers. You're a stranger."

"That's right." He turned at last to face her, but instead of approaching, he leaned his backside against the counter and let his sultry gaze slide down to her feet and back. "You want to change that?"

She tried to clear her throat, but all that came out was a squeak. Her body was aching and inflamed as though he'd touched her inside and out with his strong hands, yet all he'd done was make a few noncommittal comments, look at her with those watchful bedroom eyes, standing there unabashed in all his half-naked beauty...

Anything could happen next.

"Anna," he straightened away from the counter, the word playing on his lips as though he'd sampled it and liked what he tasted. "That's your name?"

"That's right," she said hoarsely.

"Anna," he said. "Come here."

Chapter Four

When she didn't move right away, Jesse held out his hand, his heart lunging in his chest. Jesus, she looked vulnerable. She was small, so fragile in the face of an incredibly gutsy move.

Her proposition had sideswiped him. He couldn't have guessed she wanted him...didn't know why she did, when he had so little left to offer. Maybe it had something to do with being so lonely it hurt. He knew the feeling and he didn't want to hurt her. He didn't want to be hurt. Maybe if he touched her, cradled those soft, yielding curves against him and got the craving out of the way, he could end anything else that would expose him for the brittle shell he'd become.

Or maybe he was dreaming this entire scenario.

His hand started to drop, but then she rose from the chair and crossed the six feet between them to take it. Her cool fingers laced through his, and she pressed against him, her free arm encircling his naked waist. Instantly his cock surged from half-mast to full hardness, too responsive to the slightest stimulation after so long. If she noticed, she didn't say anything. She could have been coy, suggestive, doused the heat between them with some crass comment that would shine a spotlight on what this truly was—a meaningless one-night stand.

Instead, she rubbed her nose against his bare chest like a languid cat, her lips finding the hollow at the base of his throat.

"Christ," he whispered, his head listing as she placed small, tentative kisses along the side of his neck. The scent of soap and fresh shampoo filled his senses. She'd showered, left off the stockings. Her shapely legs were golden and bare.

Between them his erection pushed against the towel, against her belly, answering any questions left unvoiced and demanding much more.

Still he spoke, one last grasp at sanity. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because all we have in this world right now is each other." She pulled back to look at him, her lashes heavy, her lips parted in invitation. "Because tonight I think you're as lost as I am. And because I think you're beautiful. You're so beautiful, Jesse."

He wrapped a hand in the tousled damp mane that tumbled to her shoulders. "And so you want me to fuck you." A test.

Anna didn't flinch. "I want you to touch me. To make love with me."

"I don't know what that is anymore," he whispered, and rested his jaw against her temple where her pulse thudded a staccato rhythm. *She really is scared.* He was, too. His own heartbeat echoed hers, pounding in his throat, his chest, his engorged cock.

"It doesn't matter." Her words quavered as she caught his wrists and brought his hands up to cup her breasts. "Don't you have a wife? A girlfriend?"

"There's no one. Not in a year." He stared down at his fingers curving around the soft mounds of her breasts. Even through the velvet bodice of her dress and some stiff undergarment beneath it, her nipples poked his palms, tight little knots of arousal. He wanted to grasp the neckline and pull, tear it away from her slim body, suck and bite and lick every inch of her. She was petite; he could handle her, twist and turn and move her where he wanted her, how he wanted her, which was in every possible way. Now. *Right now.*

When Anna's gentle fingers cupped the back of his neck, the ferocity in him stilled.

Make love to me, she'd said. By God, he would remember how. She would show him.

Grasping her waist, Jesse turned her and lifted her onto the counter by the sink, putting them at eye level. She had big liquid eyes, a tender mouth that invited a sliding tongue. Pacing himself, he ducked his head, caught her lips gently, feathered his mouth across hers, once, twice, nudging his way inside with soft, non-threatening kisses, a softer probe with the tip of his tongue. Licking, flicking, meeting her tongue and darting away again, he savored the faint whiskey taste of her until her fingers dug into his back and her breathing fractured into small explosions.

It was all the encouragement he needed. His fingers slid beneath her dress and up one bare thigh to the incredible heat and dampness of her sex, where he paused, and stroked, and teased until her pelvis lifted from the counter in search of a firmer touch. Her panties were in the way, but he played her through them, driving them both higher with each stroke of his thumb, to a place where they couldn't turn back.

Groaning her frustration, Anna sought to kiss his mouth again, but Jesse was intent. He dragged her hips closer to the edge of the counter, pinning her hands to the Formica surface, and dropped to his knees before her.

"No..." It was half-plea, half-protest, when he grasped her legs to edge them apart and his intention became clear.

"No?" He looked up at her flushed face, at the way her hair tumbled, sleep-sexy, around her cheeks. "No, you don't want me to strip you naked and eat you until you come?"

"I don't know. I haven't...I don't..." Her eyelids fluttered open, her hand slipping from his grasp and finding its way into his hair. God, he liked the way she touched him. He wanted to feel those gentle fingers tangled and tugging for dear life while she screamed her pleasure beneath his mouth. He wanted to drive his tongue deep into her wetness and swallow her whole.

"Spread your legs for me, Anna," he whispered, and when she did, just a little, he caught the sole of her foot against his bare chest to hold her there, open to him, vulnerable.

The sultry, aroused scent of her perfume and raw desire filled his senses as he nuzzled his way up the inside of her thigh, nipping, licking through the thin barrier of her panties. The soft material was silken with her body's need as though she'd been aroused for some time.

"God, you're so wet."

Instantly her legs pressed closed. "I know, I know. Just looking at you in the convenience store made me that way." She squeezed her eyes closed at her own

confession, two spots of crimson appearing high on her cheeks, but Jesse smiled and pressed a kiss of reverence against her knee.

“Anna, don’t do that. You know how long I’ve been hard? Maybe since you stepped foot into my motel room. Why do you think I got in the shower while you were asleep?”

“I don’t know...”

He studied her fluttering lashes. “To jack off like some kind of desperate fool.”

Her eyelids flew open and she stared down into his face, a shudder moving through her. “Did you?”

“In the end, no.” He nuzzled her other knee. “Maybe some part of me was hoping you’d let me do this instead.”

“Good,” came the husky response, and she shifted her knees apart as though he’d uttered *Open Sesame*.

“Lean back against the mirror and lift up a little.” When she obliged, he drew the bikinis down to her ankles. They dangled, uselessly frilly and forgotten, from one bare foot, while he stroked the outside of her naked hips beneath the dress. Then shifting to his haunches, he pushed the hem of her dress up her shapely thighs, up, up, exposing every creamy inch of her skin, and when her neatly shaven mound came into view, he closed his eyes and gripped the counter’s edge on either side of her to squelch the rush of desire that threatened to undo him.

It would be so easy to stand up, grasp her hips and pull her forward to meet his relentless thrust. To push inside her, deep, deeper, then back again, dragging through all that silky wetness, back and forth in measured lunges, setting fire to her senses, and to his own. But her request—her challenge—so brave, so shaky, echoed in his overheated mind. *Make love to me*.

And so, parting her slick folds with his thumbs, he leaned forward and with the tip of his tongue found the swollen bead of her clitoris.

“Oh!” Her entire body jerked, and his own muscles clenched in response, perspiration dampening his limbs.

He wanted to come, right then and there.

He shifted, regrouped, breathed in the clean, sexy scent of her skin and, beneath that, the perfume of her desire. Pacing himself. Reveling, for the first time in a million forevers, in beauty and pleasure. And when he was ready, he leaned forward again and let his tongue explore her, made lazy circles around and around the tiny nub at the top of her sex until she was trembling. While his fingers held her open to him, his tongue glided lower, through the moisture that slicked her flesh, savoring her salty-sweet flavor as he recalled from some sleeping part of him what made a woman sing, what made her sigh, what made her scream with pleasure.

Maybe Jesse didn’t know Anna, but he’d guessed just right.

When he spread her wider with his fingertips and unexpectedly plunged his tongue into her core, she uttered a choked cry and her hands clutched his shoulders, his neck, his hair, blindly seeking to anchor herself under his tender assault. “Oh God, Oh God, Oh God!” Thrashing shudders lifted her pelvis and rocked her against his mouth as she climaxed under his tongue.

Still Jesse lapped and licked her, probing, stroking, until she collapsed against the mirror and her fingers loosened their death grip on his hair. Then he grasped the edge of the counter and rose on legs that quaked.

When her lashes lifted and her somnolent brown gaze locked with his, she didn’t speak. No words were necessary. He helped her off the counter and drew her toward the bed a few feet away, where she sat on the edge, considering him, his naked torso, the blatant tent his erection made beneath the snug towel as he stood in front of her.

The orgasm he’d given her had apparently stripped away her inhibitions and now she sat before him, tousled, lush, vibrating with sensuous intent. This night could go so very wrong.

Or so very right.

Lost, he squeezed his eyes closed and gave himself over to her. *Make love to me, too, Anna. Make me forget everything but pleasure.*

And she did. Jesse vaguely registered the rush of cool air on his skin as she unknotted his towel and drew it away from his body, the murmur of approval she uttered as she took in the sight of his need, then her hands were clutching his naked ass and her hot, sweet mouth engulfed his cock, sucking it deep into scalding wetness.

Trembling, he let his hands find her hair and buried them in silky thick luxury. He wanted to rub those satin strands over his erection, rub and rub until he came in hard, pulsing shudders. He wanted to thrust deep into her mouth, again, again, feel the compression of her throat around him as she swallowed everything he had to give. His agony. His need. His pleasure.

There was so much he wanted, and so little time. Forcing his eyes open, he stared down at her and watched the smooth ride of his shaft pushing between her lips, then its reappearance, red-hot, impossibly harder and wet from the insistent stroke of her tongue. Despite her innate innocence, she was damned good at this. Her hands gripped his hips and guided him between her lips again, her thumbs caressing the sensitive spots inside his hipbones. Sucking him in as deep as he would go. Pulling back and playing the head of his penis with her firm, dancing tongue before taking him again in strong, hungry pulls.

"I'm going to come," he panted.

She drew back and met his eyes. "Not yet." The world tilted as she unexpectedly pulled him down with her, and he caught himself before he crushed her beneath him on the mattress. And then her thighs were riding his hips and he was moving against her, driving his hard penis against her slippery chasm, and there was so much wetness...from her, from him, the scent of heat and want an earthy ambrosia between them.

Jesse was frantic. Before he could stop himself, before he could think, he shoved her dress around her waist, grasped his shaft with the other and found her quivering, wet entrance with the driving tip of his cock.

"Come inside me," she breathed against his ear, giving him the permission he needed.

He thrust firm and deep within her, to the hilt. No protection in any form, not even on his heart.

"Ah..." An indecipherable sound tore from the center of his chest. A sound of agony. A sound of joy.

He was raw. "Oh God."

"It's okay, Jess, it's fine..." Breathing mindless encouragement, Anna pulled her knees up high to cradle his hips and took him even deeper, her hair spilled wildly beneath her, her fingers grasping at his back, his ribs, his undulating backside, then at last the crumpled bedspread, taking it with her as his fierce rhythmic thrusts drove and drove and drove her up the mattress.

"Christ, you feel...so...good." He moved spasmodically, like a machine beyond his own control. This was more than fucking. The way she scalded him, enclosed him, down to the very heart of him...he'd never felt sensation so intense.

Release built to unbearable heights in Jesse's cock, filled it to bursting, and he tried to slow, to delay the explosion, but she was whispering hot words against his ear — "*Oh yes, oh please yes* —" thrusting back almost faster than he could plunge inside her, and then she climaxed again, her cries lost beneath the roar in his ears, and it was too late. He heard himself from a distance, groaning desperate words from a primal, universal language, months of pain and emptiness jetting inside her as he came with an intensity that detonated stars before his eyes.

It went on and on, spasms of ecstasy clenching and draining, painful and incredible and cleansing. When the stars faded, his head sagged against her shoulder, and for a

moment he allowed himself to be held in warmth and what felt strangely—impossibly—like love.

“Jesse,” she whispered against his cheek, and scattered light, soothing kisses over his damp shoulder. “Jess.”

For an instant he lolled in the loveliness of Anna, her peace, her tenderness. Trying to remember what was wrong in his life that had brought him, ironically, to this place of joy. Because he’d forgotten. For just a second, he’d forgotten.

And then he remembered. The grief returned with a vengeance, threatening what little dignity he’d brought to this naked place. Easing off her, he rolled to his back and flung an arm over his eyes, struggling to breathe, to force the emotions back into the bottomless well he’d long feared would one day be unlocked.

He hadn’t dreamed a stranger might hold the key.

He didn’t know her. Hadn’t wanted to. Hadn’t meant for this day to become so lost and misguided, and God, where was his path to self-destruction leading him this time? The knot in his throat had nothing to do with the anger and pain that had sustained him up until now. This woman had exposed his scars with one look. *Jesus*. One touch. A little sympathy from a stranger, and he wanted to weep like some kind of idiot kid.

Quiet, Anna shifted onto her side to face him. He sensed the touch of her luminous gaze on every part of him, as though she could read the darkness etched on his heart. Her brown eyes were too probing, too aware. It was the first thing he’d noticed about her, standing beside him at the gas station coffee counter. Her velvety brown eyes, her silken soul.

“Jesse?”

When she reached out and moved his arm away from his face, he grasped her wrist to push her back...and failed as he registered the soft resilience of her skin, the warm, musky fragrance of a woman’s desire that rose from beneath the crumpled dress. His fingers gentled to caress her, to measure the fine breadth of her wrist as he brought it to his lips and kissed the tender flesh where her pulse hammered erratically.

"You're so damned beautiful," he murmured, and that was all, because his gratitude choked anything more. She said nothing, just laid her head on her crooked elbow, watching him revel in her.

He'd wanted to touch her like this since he'd first seen her. To know the surface of her body, and beyond that, her heart. To learn the lush resilience of her mouth, the flicker of her tongue, the heat of her kiss, breathing life back into him.

A fleeting fantasy...yet here they were. The impossible could still happen after all.

Jesse Proffitt could still feel something besides pain.

* * * * *

"Can I ask you a question?" Anna finally spoke, her voice hushed, as though the room were a sacred place. Maybe it was, she thought. They'd christened it thus.

"What is it?" He rolled to his side to meet her, and they lay nose-to-nose, elbows bent beneath their heads.

"Why aren't you married?"

It was none of her business, but she wanted something more of him to take with her when they parted. Something more than the incredible pleasure he'd given her, that they'd given each other.

He swallowed and reached out to move a wayward strand of hair from her cheek. "I used to be married. We were together eleven years. We divorced last year."

"Oh." Her gaze slid away as she assimilated the information and tried to conjure a scenario. What kind of woman had he loved enough to marry? Was she funny? Bright? Beautiful? Did she know how to touch him just right? Could he make her go all wet and weak with one look from those incredible blue eyes of his? And a really masochistic part of Anna wondered, how many times had this woman taken him inside her body and heard those magic words of desire and need whispered against her hair?

You feel so good...you're so damned beautiful...

"Did you leave her?" she asked, and winced at the sound of her own driving inquisitiveness.

"Well..." He rolled to his back and exhaled, one hand absently rubbing his stomach as he thought about his answer. "I guess that depends on which one of us you ask. On paper, she left me. She had justifiable reasons. I guess I drove her away. I don't know." He sighed again, his profile limned by the frail glow from the lamp. "We were happy for a while, at first. She was a real estate agent. I was a writer. We had money, a nice house. And then we had a child. A son."

Anna hesitated, sensing the shift of currents in the night. Languid arousal had slid into something dark and raw. "Where is your son now?"

"He died eighteen months ago." It was a flat statement, an offering of emotionless facts, and yet the grief behind it stole the breath from her lungs.

It explained so much, all of a sudden. This was a key to who Jesse was. And she couldn't help herself when she asked softly, "What happened to him?"

For a long time Jesse didn't answer, and Anna's cheeks warmed with each excruciating second that passed in silence. She'd crossed the invisible barrier he wore around himself like armor. Her prying had shattered all the delicious, languid intimacy between them.

Then his husky words rent the quiet. "He was hit by a drunk driver on the street in front of our house."

Anna swallowed, trying to read his features in the shadows. It was impossible. But his words bled an anguish she couldn't begin to measure.

"He was six years old."

"Oh, Jesse..." she scooted closer to him, her palm finding his cheek in the shadows. "I have no right to pry like this, but...if you want to tell me, I'll listen."

"I don't know. I haven't...I don't know."

"It's okay," she quickly accepted his shaken reply, moved by it into acquiescence and shame. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

The sheets rustled as he shifted to look at her. "Shouldn't you? Look at us, Anna. Two complete strangers. Yet I feel like I've been closer to you tonight than maybe anyone, ever. If there's anyone who I want to spill my poison with, it's you."

"Then talk to me." She cupped his face in one hand, the other tracing the somber line of his mouth. He had beautiful, sculpted lips for a man. He had a truth to tell, *poison*, as he'd called it, so potent that he carried it with him like his own secret potion. She could see the toxic anguish in his eyes, which flashed like polished stone in the gloom.

His words burst out, choked and laughing at the same time. "I thought that losing a child happened to other people. He was there every day, a part of my life, a part of me, more than my own breath. Can you imagine losing an arm or leg? How about both arms? Both legs? You can't even compare that agony to what it felt like losing Daniel."

Anna swallowed the useless words of consolation welling on her lips. Something told her that her silence was far more valuable now as he purged his truth.

"It was spring, beautiful, warm. He asked me if he could play in the yard with the other kids. Did you finish your homework, I said. Like that's even important for a kid who's just turned six." Jesse was weeping now, a flood of anguish that she met and embraced with silent strength. "He hadn't finished his homework, he needed help on the math, but I needed to write—I had an opinion column in a local paper, and if you asked me now what my oh-so-fucking-important opinion was that day, I couldn't tell you." Wiping his eyes, he uttered a short, self-effacing laugh. "I had a long way to fall to be humbled, and trust me, I'm there now. But that day—I wanted peace and quiet. I told him to go outside. And when he got there, his buddies from next door were out playing football, except their damn dog kept stealing the ball. They told me later Daniel was the only one to give chase when the dog darted out into the road. And—" He

stopped, too choked, and for a moment there was only silence, while his torn breathing shattered the night, and Anna's cheeks grew wet with tears of sympathy.

"And see, there was this homeless guy, an alcoholic, who had holed up temporarily with his brother a couple of streets over. He had a few drunk driving citations under his belt, but his lawyer brother kept digging him out, and digging him out. Doing him a favor, he thought. That's what brothers do for each other. While Daniel was playing with his friends, this guy got drunk, borrowed his brother's new sports car and took it for an afternoon joyride. Down the street. Down the next street. Then down our street, going fifty miles an hour. And he didn't even remember hitting my son, later when they caught him. He was so drunk, he didn't remember killing a child. My child."

"I'm so sorry," Anna whispered, leaning to kiss the corner of his mouth. "So, so sorry."

"Daniel was only six." Jesse's hand covering Anna's to hold it against his hot, tear-streaked face. "Six years old when he died, and I died with him. Every time I say the words aloud, I die again."

She stroked his cheek, blind in the dark, blind to who he was, only that he was Jesse, a stranger full of secrets, and perhaps he'd shared with her the biggest one.

She could share with him, too. Her sympathy. Her touch. Herself. "Jesse," she whispered, and lifting her head, she found his trembling mouth with her kiss.

* * * * *

So much time had passed since he'd known pleasure of any kind, much less this potent, sweet arousal flaring between them again. He tried to feel guilty for letting it dilute his grief, but desire rushed through him anew, tensing every muscle as he slid his hand up her arm and roughly pushed the dress off her shoulder. *So smooth, her skin. Like satin.*

Hot with shame, with too many tears, he started to apologize for his outburst, but she leaned closer to capture his mouth more fully, swallowing his agony, one hand

stroking his hair, the other gliding over his chest to caress his stomach, to trace around his navel, then down his flank, and when he thought he'd go crazy for want of her, to firmly grasp his aching erection.

The electric contact of her fingers on his cock nearly sent him through the roof.
"Anna..."

"Make love to me again," she whispered, and grasping his hands, guided them to her small, firm breasts through the lacy brassiere she still wore.

He couldn't think, couldn't rationalize, *couldn't stop*. Her dress was caught around her waist, the zipper buried beneath the drooping bodice. His shaking fingers didn't work well enough to find it, so he sat up, grasped the back of the bodice and pulled.

Anna didn't flinch at the telltale ripping sound. Scrambling to her knees beside him, she reached behind her, freed herself from the strapless bra and drew the unsalvageable dress up and over her head. The dress rustled to a forlorn heap on the floor.

Flushed, ruffled, and goddess-beautiful to his aching eyes, she met his gaze squarely and said, "Again. Please. Now."

"Ride me," he ordered, half mindless as he braced his back against the cold headboard and led her to sit astride him.

She found his shaft with a confident hand, rubbed herself against the engorged head, teasing, beckoning, and then slowly sank down on him in measured increments until they both gasped with the ecstasy of it. For a moment neither moved, then Jesse's attention shifted from her rapt features to her naked breasts, and he cupped them for the first time, gently, in reverence, filling his palms with their weight, thumbing the small nipples into turgid points.

How could he have taken her the first time without touching every part of her first? Without poring over her, learning each curve, each point of delight? She was perfect, the most desirable woman he'd ever known, and for tonight, no one and nothing else existed but them in this tiny, enchanted room.

Everything slowed then, as the anguish seeped away like swirling blood washed down a drain. He leaned forward and caught her nipple between his lips, flicked it with his tongue. Tugged a little until she shivered and arched her back. He scissored his teeth gently across it and felt the heavy, quickened drum of her pulse in response, the tiny contractions of her silken muscles around his shaft with each tug, as though an invisible string stretched between her nipple and her womb.

Anna watched him in the spellbound silence, her long brown hair fallen around them, the only sound between them the harsh seesaw of their breathing. When he lifted his head in silent request for her kiss, she feathered her lips across his open, panting mouth. Then she rose and fell once, twice, riding his cock with a measured deliberateness that dumped every sane, human thought from his mind and sent orgasm rushing up his shaft like fire.

"Please," he gritted. "Not yet."

"Yes," she whispered fiercely. "Now." And she cradled his head against her breasts, a strangely protective gesture that granted Jesse permission to take his pleasure without inhibition.

Biting back the wild sounds rising in his chest, he gripped her hips, pushed high and hard and exploded, every shudder of his body in rhythmic correlation to the pulsing jets he shot inside her.

And while he was still shuddering, he grasped her waist and ground her against the rigid root of his cock, all his attention focused on her pleased face, the way she clutched his shoulders and rode him frantically in return.

There was nothing more beautiful to Jesse than the sight of her like this. *Anna*. He would remember her forever.

She cried his name when she came, her head thrown back, graceful throat flexing with the attempt to swallow the feral sounds of ecstasy. She bathed him in her essence and her peace, and drew the darkness from him.

In the aftermath, they slid down and apart and finally beneath the sheets, only to flow back together again, limbs entangled as they shared a pillow.

When Jesse could talk, he said, “Anna, Anna, Anna.” A surrendering sigh. A lover’s accolade.

She smiled and rubbed her lips against his still pounding heart.

“I ruined your dress,” he said after another minute of floating in the healing quiet.

“Damn you,” she murmured aridly.

He lifted his head to meet her sleepy cocoa eyes, noting the way she held him, with arms and legs surrounding him but not clinging, as though to say, *You can run if you need to.*

What he wanted – needed – was to stay.

“You can wear my flannel shirt and a pair of jeans I brought with me,” he went on, fingering a silky strand of her hair where it lay against the pillow.

“I’ll be the hit of the party, if I ever make it there.” Anna stretched and smiled at him, languid and blissfully mindless of her rumpled state. He liked that about her, that lack of self-consciousness. She was innately sensuous, too. An incredible lover, and no doubt she’d show him, slower and easier, if he could get past wanting to fuck her into tomorrow. If he could stop himself from spurting the minute she touched him.

He’d just have to practice with her until he got it right.

Chapter Five

In the soft blue morning light that pierced the gap in the curtains, they dressed without speaking. After showering together to bathe away the night's desire and merely eliciting more, both were too drowsy for anything beyond long glances and tender smiles. Jesse chuckled at the sight of Anna's lithe hips swimming in his jeans. She had rolled the cuffs several times and didn't seem one bit awkward in the oversized flannel shirt he'd given her. The now-shabby velvet pumps were an interesting touch, too. Star-struck, he watched her wiggle into them with a helpless smile.

When they were packed, he dragged his knapsack and helmet off the table and stopped her before she could open the door.

"Merry Christmas, baby," he whispered, nuzzling her tousled hair.

"Merry Christmas." Her arms crept around his waist, and they stood there for a moment, each wondering if the night's storm—inside their hearts and outside in the world—had passed.

Anna turned her head to look at him as she opened the door, wondering what to say to ease the sudden unease, but Jesse was staring past her, squinting into the morning sun.

She whipped around.

The world was green and clear, the birds chirping beneath a cornflower sky.

Not a sign of white powder to be found.

Stepping out into the parking lot, she made a slow circle, her incredulous eyes taking in the utterly impossible.

Where was all the snow?

Jesse followed her, his steps slow as he looked around. "I can't believe what I'm seeing."

"There was a storm, though," Anna began, her voice trembling. "You saw it too – the drifts, the ice – there's no way it could have melted this quickly..."

"There was a storm," he echoed, and they lapsed into silence, staring at each other in disbelief.

Then Jesse shouldered his backpack and tucked his helmet beneath his arm. "Let's check out of the motel," he told her. "We'll ask the clerk what he saw last night."

Inside the tiny lobby, everything was the same as Anna had remembered it, except the jolly bearded guy in the suspenders was gone, replaced by a chunky teenager with ear piercings *ad nauseum* and a gleaming set of braces on her smiling, gum-snapping teeth.

"Merry Christmas," she said cheerfully. "Did y'all enjoy your stay?"

Jesse cast Anna a meaningful glance. "Absolutely."

"It was wonderful," she added, and for a second she forgot the missing snow, the broken-down Toyota, the wrecked motorcycle, the magnificent strangeness of it all. Only Jesse was there, Jesse with his blue eyes and gentle, skillful hands. A man full of shadow and light, and a fathomless grief he held close to his soul. Maybe they'd part ways forever today, but no matter what she failed to learn about him in their few remaining moments, he was no longer a stranger to her heart.

"...And we're just curious," he was telling the clerk, his lean cheeks flushing. "Did it snow around here last night?"

The teenager laughed. "Heck, no. It's been in the seventies all week. It's enough to kill the Christmas spirit, know what I mean?"

Anna stilled. Beneath the counter, Jesse's hand closed around hers and gently squeezed.

"Well, that's funny." She recovered, keeping her voice steady when what she really wanted was to reach across the counter and shake the girl. "The old guy who checked us in last night said something about snow."

The girl leaned her elbow by the register. "What old guy? You mean here? We don't have any men working here. Martha was on duty last night."

A huff of disbelief burst from Anna's chest. "Look, we're not idiots. There *was* an old guy here behind the counter. He was bald, had a white beard and he was dressed funny, with stripes and suspenders, kind of elfish—"

"I reckon it was Santa Claus," the girl said with a laughing snort. "Serious now, only Martha was here, unless she's seein' some guy, and she'd tell me because she pretty much hates men in general, 'specially the ones 'round here, so I sure don't think that's it."

"That's it!" Anna snapped her fingers, her eyes widening.

"How do you know?" the clerk frowned at her. "Martha's a friend of my mama's, and I can tell you if she was datin' some old guy, I would surely hear about—"

"No. I mean, what you said before—about the man who was here. He did look—and act—exactly like—" Anna glanced at Jesse in a mixture of abject embarrassment and wonder. "I-I think it was...Santa. And this place really must be..." her breath left her chest on a strangled note. "*The Holiday Inn.*"

"Lady, you're turned around," the girl waved her hand, as though the conversation was perfectly viable. "This here's the Magnolia Motel. The Holiday Inn's down two exits and beyond the overpass. It's the big conference center. You can't miss it."

"But the sign out there says—"

"Magnolia Motel." Jesse's low voice broke through Anna's fog of agitation as he gazed out the window. "The sign's right there."

She stared in the direction where he pointed and shook her head. "What the hell happened here last night?"

"Maybe a little too much celebrating, If you ask me," the girl muttered.

"A visit from St. Nick," Anna whispered, meeting Jesse's eyes. "The best gift ever. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I would definitely agree." He let the curtain fall and moved toward her, both of them forgetting the invasive presence of the gawking teenaged desk clerk. When he bent his head to kiss Anna, he quietly laid the room key on the desk and slid it toward the girl.

Swiping it off the countertop, she backed away from the two crazy people in her lobby. "All righty, then. Thanks for staying at the Magnolia Motel. Y'all have a nice day." And she fled into the office.

* * * * *

Neither Jesse nor Anna said a word when they found the Toyota parked in an inconspicuous spot outside the motel lobby, and a few feet beyond it, Jesse's motorcycle, unscathed.

They stood between the two vehicles for a while, bewildered, maybe a little scared.

Jesse was the first to laugh. He laughed and laughed, and after a moment an answering smile crept across Anna's face. There was no explanation for the last twenty-four hours, beyond two lost souls finding each other through an impossible storm. Finding comfort. Finding love's sweet potential. What more could one want for Christmas?

"Anna, what's your last name?" He caught her hand and pulled her, grinning helplessly, against him.

"Shea," she said.

"I'm Jesse Proffitt."

"Nice to meet you," she said, her smile widening.

"Anna Shea, do you believe in magic?"

"After last night, do you even need to ask?" She stood on tiptoe and slid her arms around his neck. "Don't you?"

"I didn't for so long." His humor faded as he gazed down into her face. "Until you showed up in a magic storm, and brought me to this magic place, and touched me with your magic hands. You made me believe in magic and so much more. Thank you." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. Then, "I have another question for you."

"What is it?" she asked, tears and laughter shining in her eyes.

"Tell me, Anna Shea...what are you doing New Year's Eve?"

Epilogue

From his perch on a kitchen chair, eight-year-old Justin Proffitt watched his mom prepare dinner, his dark brows drawn down in troubled thought. After a moment he was ready with his yearly arsenal of questions.

"Okay, so how did you meet Dad again?"

She smiled as she withdrew a bag of vegetables from the refrigerator. "Santa Claus introduced us."

Justin wasn't so sure anymore that Santa really existed. Especially because he'd recently seen his dad wrestling a large box down to the basement that looked like the racecar track he'd requested in his yearly letter to the North Pole.

"Mom, that whole thing sounds made up."

"It's true. We got lost in a snowstorm on the highway. Dad was riding a motorcycle and I was driving a car. When he slid on the ice and fell off his bike, I pulled over to help him. And soon we found out that there never was a snowstorm."

"So Santa made the snow so you guys would meet."

"Right."

He scowled, but before he could pin her down for more details, his father came downstairs from his office and stopped to kiss Justin on the head.

"How are you, kiddo? Enjoying your first day of winter break?"

"It's okay, I guess." Which meant, *I'm bored*. They hadn't seen each other all morning. Justin wasn't supposed to interrupt him while he was writing, and today had been especially difficult. Justin had awakened to a world blanketed in fluffy whiteness, which meant sledding, snowball fights, and snowman build-offs with the neighborhood

kids, and no team could build as fat and tall a snowman as Justin and his dad. But today Jesse had a “deadline”, which meant little to Justin except the nothing-to-dos.

The two younger boys who lived across the street laughed and made fun of the crappy snowman he’d tried to build alone. Since he wasn’t allowed to leave the yard, he couldn’t go across the street and punch them out the way they deserved. So he’d come in, defeated, and pulled out his art supplies to color at the kitchen table.

“Dad,” he turned to watch him as Jesse set a hand on his wife’s pregnant belly and leaned around her to steal a carrot from the pile of vegetables she was chopping. “Are you guys Santa Claus?”

Jesse turned to regard him with a faint smile. “Haven’t we had this discussion? Like fifty times since October?”

“I guess.” Justin sighed. “It’s just that most of my friends’ parents don’t believe in him. You guys are the only ones who still act like he’s real. And you don’t just believe in him. You have this whole story about how he helped you meet each other.” He looked down. “It’s kind of embarrassing, so don’t tell anyone else, okay? Nobody has to know.”

“The only person we’ve told that story to is you,” Jesse said, crossing the kitchen to sit at the table beside him. “You’re the only one whose opinion matters to us. And if you don’t believe in Santa Claus anymore, that’s your business. But the story stays the same. We know how we met. Santa set us up.”

Justin stared hard at him, waiting for him to crack a smile, but his dad just gazed back without blinking.

His mom set down the chopping knife and crossed to the refrigerator again. “We’ve never lied to you about anything else, have we?”

He thought for a moment, then shrugged. “I guess not.” Which was good, because really he wanted to believe in Santa, even though his friends had stopped. They sure would be sorry one day if it turned out his parents were right.

"Hey, Dad." Justin poked at Jesse's hand with an unused paintbrush. "Can me and you go out in the snow for a while?"

"You and I."

"That's what I said."

"I thought you'd never ask."

"But what about your deadline?"

Jesse looked skyward and scratched his chin. "Deadline? What deadline? Last one out has to wash the dishes after dinner." Before Justin could react, his dad bolted from the chair. Justin raced after him, swerved in front of him and tried to block the entrance to the foyer, but Jesse lifted and threw him, shouting with laughter, over his shoulder like a sack of flour. "Anna, get out the lotion—Justy's going to have dishpan hands tonight!"

Father and son made a noisy exit down the stairs, leaving Anna smiling to herself in the kitchen. She turned and with a heart full of joy, watched her boys through the window over the sink.

Her beautiful, happy boys.

Once Jesse believed he would never know the love of a child again, the sound of his own boy's laughter, the way a father felt when his son walked tall in his wake. Now he had it all in spades, because he was as much Justin's world as Justin was his. And the best part was that Jesse hadn't been afraid to love again when his second son was placed in his arms, or to remember—and cherish—the sweet, lost boy of his shattered past.

How far Jesse and Anna had come together. She'd never thought she wanted children until she met him. He made her believe anything was not only possible, but well deserved. He was her rock, upon which she'd built a life of happiness. And she was his. A risky prospect, placing one's heart in the hands of such an infallible creature as another human being. Such was love—sometimes frightening, sometimes perilous, and always, *always* magnificent.

She absently caressed her hard, rounded belly as she studied her family through the window. Only three more weeks, and then there would be four.

‘Yes, Katie Proffitt,’ she assured her unborn little girl, the first of many times to come. “There really is a Santa Claus. Let me tell you how I know...”

About the Author

Writing romance comes naturally to Shelby Reed and has flavored most of her work since she first fell in love with Jane Austen's stories years ago. She strives to write about real women with contemporary issues, who manage to find love despite the trials and tribulations of today's single female. When not churning out fiction, Shelby utilizes her B.A. in Art as a portraitist, works part-time as an editor, and considers herself a full-time author since she recently quit her day job to throw herself headlong into writing. She lives in the flavorful deep south with her husband, two rambunctious dogs, and a house full of manuscripts and artwork in various stages of completion.

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