



THE CHRISTMAS ANGEL

By

Elizabeth Batten-Carew

© copyright December 2005, Elizabeth Batten-Carew
Cover art by Jenny Dixon, © copyright December 2005
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Prologue

“Angelique. I want to help you.”

The words startled Angelique.

She stared into the darkness, trying to breach the fog surrounding her memories. Her body felt cold and stiff. With alarm, she realized she couldn't move her arms or legs.

Green branches spread out below her. Panic welled up inside her as she began to remember things. Tremors started inside her.

She glanced at the large picture window, the blinds drawn wide, the lit tree reflected in the glass. There, on top, sat a blond glittering angel dressed in white. An angel who could neither move, nor smile. No one knew the pain that angel felt. The suffering she'd endured over two centuries.

Tears prickled Angelique's eyes. Tears she could not shed. Because that angel was her.

“Who are you?” Angelique asked the voice.

A wispy, shapeless form floated toward her.

“I am an angel.”

Angel? The thought sent shudders through Angelique. It was one thing to know--by personal experience--that the supernatural existed. It was quite another to come face to face with it.

“Do you remember Bertrand?” a voice asked her.

Memories lurched through her mind like stones in a landslide, one over another, violent in their momentum.

Long ago, she had been in love with a man named Bertrand. She remembered the loving look in his eye and the gentle touch of his hand on hers when he had proposed to her. She had accepted joyously and melted into his arms.

When Bertrand had slipped the ring on Angelique's finger, panic had gripped her. A strong sense of foreboding filled her, and she felt cold, as if the life were being sucked out of her. Instinctively, she'd known that it would steal her happiness and destroy her life. Before it reached her knuckle, she had jerked away, shaking her head.

“I was with you then,” the angel said. “I warned you.”

The wispy shape moved closer, then hovered in front of her.

“You see, the Berringer men are cursed. An engagement ring carries the curse from generation to generation. Every time a Berringer male finds the woman he was meant to love and slips the ring on her finger, his love flickers out and dies. Like a candle snuffed out by the wind. I did not want that sad existence for you, Angelique. Unfortunately, I didn’t know the horrible fate that would be thrust upon you when you refused the ring.”

Angelique remembered all too clearly what happened after she rejected the ring. She had been slammed in the gut by a powerful force, crushing the air from her lungs. She had felt herself shrink. Her whole body had turned rigid until she could not move at all. She could not draw in a breath. Panic had overwhelmed her as she’d tried to breath, knowing if she didn’t she would suffocate.

But she didn’t suffocate. Mercilessly, the despicable magic of the ring had stolen her life without letting her die. She had been transformed into a tree-top angel, cursed to sit atop a Christmas tree every Christmas season, with a lifeless body, but all the emotions and consciousness of a real person.

“As soon as you became a tree-top angel, the ring erased you from Bertrand’s memory, thus protecting him from the rejection of love. You became a family heirloom, passed through the generations.”

Angelique glanced around the masculine apartment laid out below her, filled with the sparkle of Christmas. The style was eclectic, accommodating contemporary pieces alongside antiques she recognized from generations of Berringer homes. Many she hadn’t seen since the divorce of George Berringer and his wife, Elise. They’d had two boys. Peter, a toddler at the time, had gone with his mother. So had Angelique.

After his mother’s death two years ago, Peter had made plans to move to Australia. She recognized the grandfather clock in the corner and a few other items from Peter’s small country cottage. He must have passed her on to his brother in Canada.

Nick. That was the other boy’s name. He’d be a man now, but she remembered the wide-eyed, curious boy who used to read books by the fire and would laugh and play games with his younger brother, Peter. He’d had such patience with his younger sibling. His adoration for his brother had been very clear. Angelique had been saddened to see them parted.

“Why are you helping me now?” Angelique asked.

“Because not the time is right,” the angel answered vaguely.

Hope swelled in Angelique’s heart.

“Will you break this dreadful curse and turn me back to human form?”

“It’s not quite that simple.”

Angelique sighed. Of course not.

“The curse can’t simply be broken, but it can be shifted. I will return you to human form--temporarily--to accomplish this.”

Elation glittered through her. The thought of being human once again pulsed through her! The angel’s words, however, troubled her.

“Shifted? You mean, another person would take my place as an angel?”

“If the eldest Berringer male takes your place,” the angel explained, “the ring, and its magic, will go with him, never to harm another soul. There are only two Berringers left, but if the ring--and its curse--are gone, the family will heal and grow again. Isn’t one man’s fate worth the future of an entire family?”

A queasy feeling stirred in her belly at the thought of condemning anyone to the fate she’d suffered so long, but the angel’s logic was persuasive. For centuries, she’d seen the pain in the eyes of the Berringer men and their wives. If she could stop that pain, she had to do it.

“What must I do?”

“When you refused the ring two hundred years ago, the curse entrapped you. To reverse the curse now, you must accept the ring from Nicholas Berringer.”

“Why would Nicholas Berringer offer me the ring? He doesn’t even know me.”

“You must make him fall in love with you. When he proposes and slips the ring on your finger, he will turn into a Christmas angel. You have until midnight on Christmas day.”

“Two days! How will I make him fall in love with me in only two days?”

Silence hung between them like a thick layer of fog.

“Remember, Angelique. If you fail, you will return to your current form and this generation of the Berringer family will be the last.”

Angelique’s brain seemed to flood with fog and the last words she heard the angel say were, “Brace yourself. It’ll take some time to adapt to being human again.”

Extreme disorientation gripped her and her mind blanked.

Chapter 1

A loud clatter jolted Nicholas Berringer from a sound sleep. He sat up and shoved his fingers through his hair, pushing it back off his face, waiting for any other sound to give him a clue as to what had awakened him. A clunk, definitely from the next room, sent Nick scrambling to his feet. He rushed to the bedroom door and cautiously pushed it open. He fully expected to come face-to-face with an armed burglar.

To his total surprise, he stood gazing at an angel.

He blinked, then shook his head.

The beautiful woman standing in the middle of his living room wore a white gown that glittered in the moonlight, with soft waves of pale blond hair floating to her hips, and wings of downy white feathers that looked so real he could almost swear they were a part of her.

“Who are you?” His voice came out in a whispered tone, full of awe.

What was wrong with him? Bowled over by some woman dressed in an angel costume who had broken into his home!

He drew up his shoulders and demanded, “What are you doing here?”

Her large, luminescent eyes blinked a couple of times.

“I ... do not know,” she said in a lilting French accent.

Her words, like a half-forgotten melody from his childhood, washed over him in gentle waves. That voice stirred something deep inside him.

Damn. He had to shake himself out of it! She might look like an angel, but Nicholas didn’t believe in angels. In fact, he didn’t believe in much of anything, especially when it came to women.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Do you always walk into other people’s apartments in the middle of the night?”

Her fingertips grazed the velvet, paisley cushion on the arm of his burgundy leather sofa as she glanced around in bewilderment, then her fingers clutched the back of the couch as if needing the support to keep standing.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

He stepped forward to stand beside the loveseat across from her. As he passed his brother’s gleaming mahogany grandfather clock, he noticed

the time. Two in the morning!

Her eyes widened and she stepped backward and bumped into the tree, which started to topple sideways. Nicholas leaped forward and grabbed it just before it knocked over the stained glass lamp on the occasional table. He set the tree back in place.

She seemed a little inept to be a thief.

Maybe she'd been drinking? She may have gone to a Christmas party--some costume affair from the look of her outfit--and overdone it.

He retrieved two glittering glass ball ornaments, which had rolled across the taupe carpet and bumped against the raised hearth of the fireplace, then re-hung them on the tree branches.

Maybe she'd gotten confused and mistaken his door for hers. But how had she unlocked it?

He surveyed her face--heart shaped, with a pert little nose and full, inviting lips--and the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. Wide and bewildered.

"Do you live in the building?"

"No, I do not think so."

She stepped forward and stumbled on the hem of her skirt. He reached out and caught her elbow so she wouldn't fall and she leaned against him for support. The warm softness of her body against his sent his hormones into an uproar. His blood shot straight to his groin and his cock started to swell.

He eased her to her feet and released her immediately, concentrating on reigning in the tumultuous effect she had on him.

Her lips turned up in a delicate smile.

"Merci."

Despite the powerful sexual effect she had on him, she seemed quite fragile. An intense feeling of protectiveness he'd never known he possessed surged through him. Her effect on him certainly was unusual.

He guided her to the sofa. "Why don't you sit down and I'll get you a drink?"

She lowered herself onto the couch and he fetched a glass of orange juice from the kitchen. Brandy might have been better, but he didn't know what, if anything, she'd been drinking already.

He handed her the glass, then sat down on the chair beside her. They sat quietly for a few moments while she sipped her juice.

"You live here alone?" she asked.

"Yes, that's right."

She rested her hand on his arm. Warmth seeped into him at her gentle touch.

“I think being alone is not something you like.” She glanced at him with luminous, blue eyes and their gazes locked.

He wanted to protest, wanted to deny her words to himself, but he couldn’t. It was true. He wanted a woman in his life. A partner who would give his life meaning, give him a reason for coming home at night, but his fear of being hurt overrode that need.

She stood up and stepped toward his tall, mahogany bookshelf and ran her fingers along the diverse volumes lining the shelf.

“You have interesting books here.” Her finger came to rest on one of Stephen Hawking’s. “You want to understand the universe. Solve the problem of life, I think.”

She smiled at him and his heart stopped at the beauty of her face. She could be a real angel, sent here to lift him from his lonely life—to help him find meaning in it all.

“You should trust yourself, you know.” She tapped her head with a long, slender finger. “The answers are inside you. Just listen to your inner voice.”

He felt unnerved. She seemed to see into his soul. She seemed to understand him on a level no one ever had before.

For a moment, he indulged himself in whimsy. What if she was an angel here to grant a Christmas wish? What would he wish for? Peace in the hearts of men? Joy in life? Love everlasting?

But love wasn’t real. And life was what one made of it. Best to go for peace, and the best way to achieve that would be to deal with her quickly so he could have the place to himself again and get back sleep.

Her hand fluttered to her forehead. “Perhaps I could lie down. My head aches.”

He gazed down at her pale face. Her hands were shaking and she seemed delicate and fragile. That strange protective urge rushed through him again. Damn, he couldn’t turn her over to the police--he didn’t really believe she’d broken in to rob him--and he couldn’t throw her out in the street.

It looked like he had a houseguest. So much for a peaceful night alone. More proof that wishes really don’t come true, especially where women were concerned.

Though as he became increasingly aware of the soft swell of her

breasts under the iridescent white fabric, and the narrowness of her waist, accentuated by a shimmering silver sash, one wish fluttered through his head. A wish she might be willing to grant. A wish his throbbing cock demanded he pursue.

But a wish he wouldn't state to this vulnerable woman.

"Come on, I'll take you to the guest room."

* * * *

Once the door closed behind the man, Angelique sank onto the bed. Her body ached with longing for the handsome man who'd taken her into his home.

She took a couple of deep breathes and the pain in her head eased as the disorientation diminished. Memories of the angel and of the curse swam through her mind.

She stared down at her hands, palms up, then turned them over and wiggled her fingers. She was human again. She stood up and stretched, swinging her arms wide, then walked around the room, luxuriating in the feel of her body. Alive. Blood pulsing through her veins. Muscles stretching and contracting as she moved.

And more, a boiling heat inside her. A longing for the feel of Nicholas Berringer touching her, holding her. The strength of her desire shocked her.

She tugged off her clothes and draped them over the back of a cozy, upholstered chair. The feel of slightly cool air caressing her naked flesh felt wonderful. In the mirror across the room, she saw her naked body reflected back to her, her tightened nipples pointing straight out. She reveled in the strong, erotic feel that pulsed through her body. She slipped under the covers, the smooth, cool sheets silky against her skin, and flicked off the bedside lamp. Moonlight drifted in the window, illuminating the room in a soft glow.

Nicholas Berringer was a very handsome man. Despite his stern tone, he seemed to be attracted to her. She was fairly certain she could seduce him into her bed, but was it possible he would fall in love with her? Could she even bring herself to sleep with him, a virtual stranger?

This was no time for shyness. If she had any chance of making him fall in love with her, starting an intimate relationship would be the best springboard. The thought of his strong, warm hands caressing her body sent thrilling sensations rippling through her body.

Chapter 2

The grandfather clock bonged three times as Nicholas approached the guest room, then hesitated outside the door. After the angel had gone to bed, he'd started to wonder if her headache had been the result of hitting her head in a fall. That could have been the sound that had awakened him. It would explain why she couldn't remember things. He wanted to see if she had a concussion.

He tapped on the door. "May I come in?"

He heard a murmured "yes."

He pushed open the door and stepped into the room, then stopped, mesmerized by the sight of her. Moonlight washed over her white shoulders and the long, blond hair that rippled over the navy duvet shimmered like glistening waves.

His groin tightened.

This had been a mistake. A big mistake. He considered turning around and closing the door behind him.

She blinked and rubbed her eyes. "What is it?"

The hoarseness of sleep in her voice made him acutely aware of the intimacy of the situation. The angel costume hung over the back of the ruby-red armchair in the corner. He didn't see any undergarments with it, yet no straps marred the soft line of her shoulders. She was naked under the covers.

His penis pulsed to life. Breathing became more difficult.

"I was concerned you might have a concussion. I want to check your eyes to see if the pupils are dilated."

In truth, he wanted to check more than her eyes. He wanted to slowly strip away the dark duvet, revealing her full, round breasts. Would her aureoles be large and dark, or small and rosy? Would her nipples be distended, or soft but slowly rising as he watched them harden with need? He would draw the covers below her stomach, then her hips. Would she shift a little under his wandering gaze, becoming as aroused as him? Pulling the duvet lower, he would slowly reveal the fine, blond curls of her pubic hair, then the mound of her womanhood.

He licked his lips.

If he asked her, would she let him share the intimacy of her body?

“Certainement.”

He blinked at her, desire swelling like a tidal wave. He released his pent up breath as he realized she meant he could check her eyes for signs of concussion.

“I am sorry,” she continued. “I do not know your name.”

She pushed herself up a little in the bed. The duvet shifted downward with her movement, exposing a fraction of an inch more skin. He licked his lips and his cock stiffened. He desperately wanted to touch her skin, to feel its velvet warmth.

Good heavens, what was wrong with him? No woman had ever affected him this strongly before.

“Call me Nick.” Thank heavens his words sounded normal, not choked with desire. He drew in a deep breath trying to settle his raging hormones.

“Nick. And I am Angelique. Thank you, Nick, for letting me stay here tonight.”

He loved the melodic way she said his name.

He stepped further into the room, toward the angel on the bed. He flicked on the bedside lamp, then knelt beside her. A few tendrils of hair had drifted over her eyes. Hesitantly, he stroked them behind her ear. At the feel of her silky tresses beneath his fingertips, his throat tightened. His cock lengthened--pushing at the confines of his boxers. Thank heavens he wore a robe. He couldn't believe how much he wanted to drag her into his arms. To tear back the covers and press his body against hers until every part of him touched every part of her.

Except their hearts.

“How are my eyes?” she asked, smiling at him.

He stared deep into the lapis blue depths. “Beautiful.”

She shifted her gaze downward, a faint blush coloring her cheeks.

“You are so kind, Nick, but I mean are the pupils dilated?”

“Oh, right.” He cupped her cheeks and tilted her head back a little. The feel of her soft skin made his penis throb in painful need. “They seem fine.”

Better than fine. As they stared into each other's eyes, he felt incapable of moving, a man chained by desire. He didn't like it, this control she had over him, but he couldn't deny it.

He wanted to kiss her. He needed to kiss her.

Angelique gazed up at this man with fascination. Dark, green eyes set among strong, sharply defined features forming a handsome, masculine face. Wavy, tousled hair she'd love to stroke smooth. When his fingers had trailed across her temples, tingles of awareness had danced along with them, sending tendrils of warmth skittering through her. His hands on her cheeks triggered a gentle flush of heat. The coldness that held her in its grip eased a little for the first time in she didn't know how long.

Maybe she had to seduce him in her journey to breaking the curse, but right now, she sincerely wanted to share intimacy with him. And it seemed little seduction would be necessary.

He leaned toward her and anticipation rippled through her. His lips touched hers with a sweet gentleness that ignited an explosion of feelings within her. Her lips tingled and goose-bumps quivered across her skin. She had been alone for a very long time and she needed the warmth of a human touch. She slid her arms around his neck, wanting to be closer. Wanting the warmth of his body to melt the glacier of loneliness inside her.

His arms encircled her and he drew her closer. His mouth moved on hers and her pulse surged. The incredible sensation of being held by a man felt like heaven. With the tip of her tongue, she outlined his lips, rejoicing in the intimacy. He groaned and dragged her closer. His fingertips brushed lightly against the side of her breast and his tongue thrust between her lips, strong and hard. Her breasts felt heavy and her nipples swelled in arousal. Her vaginal muscles clenched in raw need. She gasped, stiffening in his arms.

Too much. Too fast. The intensity of the feelings that stormed through her threatened to overwhelm her.

Immediately, he loosened his hold and eased away. He stared at her with dark, somber eyes, and a ghost of passion flickered, then disappeared.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that," he murmured.

All she could do was nod, her throat locked tight by desire coiled with confusion. It hadn't been his fault and she should have told him so, but no matter how hard she tried she couldn't find her voice. He rose and left the room leaving her feeling empty and alone.

* * * *

Nicholas closed the door, then stood in the dark hallway, fists clenched.

What the hell had he been thinking?

Of course, that was the problem. He hadn't been thinking. Just reacting.

He had always promised himself no woman would control him in any way.

He had lived with the grief of losing his mother—being abandoned by her—every day of his life, until he'd finally grown up and taken control. He'd pushed aside the pain, vowing he would never allow himself to be hurt like that again.

This woman had been just as caught up in passion as he had, yet she'd left the blame to him, proving that she would watch out for her own needs ahead of his. Just as he expected from a woman.

* * * *

Angelique shivered. The coldness of being alone seemed worse after the warmth of being held. When Nick had held her in his arms, he'd made her feel vibrant and alive, like she hadn't in a very long time.

Her body pulsed with desire. She wanted him.

She wanted him to hold her and stroke her skin, to bring life to every part of her.

She wrapped the sheet around herself and stood up, tugging the sheet free from the bed, then she slipped from the room, intent on finding him.

Chapter 3

Nick heard the doorknob turn. He glanced at the door in time to see it swing open slowly. Framed in the doorway, silhouetted by the hallway light shining behind her, stood Angelique. Wrapped in a sheet.

His breath caught and his cock leaped to life again. Anger stormed through him. *Why the hell had she come here?*

"Nick, are you awake?" She spoke softly. He didn't answer, waiting to see what she would do next.

She stepped further into the room. A stream of moonlight illuminated her, dancing across her creamy-white shoulders. A shapely calf appeared from the dark sheet every time she stepped forward.

Damn, why had she come to tease him like this? He could swoop up and claim her in a devastating kiss, convincing her she needed him as much as he needed her.

But he wouldn't do that. He tried to ignore the increase in his heart rate, the difficulty in drawing an even breath, the race of blood to his lower body resulting in a growing erection.

"Nick." She spoke a little louder this time. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I'd like to apologize."

"For what?"

"For sending you away. For allowing you to believe you had done something wrong."

His stomach clenched and he stomped down the slim hope rising within him.

"You wanted me to stop."

"No. The feelings you triggered in me.... They were very intense. I became overwhelmed. I needed a little more time. When you backed away, I couldn't find my voice."

She took another step forward.

"But I did not want you to stop," she continued.

Her words seared through him.

She dropped the sheet to the ground. Her naked body glistened in the moonlight. His gaze shifted to her breasts, large and round, accentuated by

her tiny waist. Her long, shiny hair flowed over her shoulders, drifting around her breasts, the nipples peering out from the golden waterfall of silk. The aureoles were the size of quarters and the nipples fully erect.

His gaze shifted downward, past the gentle slope of her hips and her flat stomach, to the perfect triangle of fine golden curls.

His cock throbbed with need. With an iron will, he held himself still, lying stiffly on the bed, resisting the urge to leap at her like some horny teenager.

She stepped forward. "I definitely did not want you to stop. Your touch makes me feel alive."

She sat on the bed beside him, her delicate curves inches from him. He fought valiantly to maintain the tight grip of control he held on himself not to grab her and fling her onto his bed, then impale her with his cock.

"I want you to touch me," she murmured, her eyes glittering in the moonlight.

She stroked the hair from his eyes and stared down at him. The delicate touch of her fingertips felt like heaven. Her wide, luminous eyes seemed to plead with him. Not to reject her. Not to hurt her.

She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his, a delicate, whisper of a kiss. He touched her cheek then trailed his hand down her neck, then across her shoulder. The silky feel of her skin sent his senses reeling. He cupped her cheeks and took her lips with his in a long, tantalizing kiss. Her arms slid around him and her soft breath against his cheek quickened.

Oh, God, he wanted her. But could he cope with these intense feelings? As his penis lengthened, he wondered, did he have a choice?

Need overwhelmed common sense and he dragged her against his body, feeling her breasts crush against his chest, only the thin veil of his silk pajamas between them. She reached for the buttons on his top and released the first one. He grabbed the sides and ripped it open, then tossed the garment aside. She smiled and he embraced her again, drawing her delightful breasts against his skin, her nipples hard and taut.

He eased back onto the bed with her lying on top of him. She kissed his collarbone, following the curve to the base of his neck. Her tongue lapped delicately at the hollow in front, then she nibbled up to his ear lobe. She nipped then blew softly in his ear. He stroked his fingers through her silky blond hair, holding himself calm at the riot of sensations she triggered in him. She slid downward again, this time capturing his right nipple in her

mouth.

He moaned as painful pleasure spiked through him.

She tugged and sucked, then swirled her tongue around it. She released it, leaving it cold and hard, while she worked on the other nipple. She smiled at him, her hands running along the planes of his chest, her sweet touch awakening exhilarating sensations throughout his body.

He rolled over, taking her with him. As he gazed down at her, smiling up at him, he longed to taste her breasts, to sample her honey-sweet femininity.

“Angelique, are you sure?”

She stroked his cheek and nodded. Her smile belied a deep, intensity. He could feel it. He could see it in the darkness of her eyes.

“*Absolument*. I am sure.” She nipped his earlobe and whispered in his ear, “I want you.” Her soft breath quivered through him.

He kissed her, sliding his tongue into the warm recesses of her mouth. Her tongue tangled with his and they swirled and churned together. Their mouths parted and he stared at her for a moment, taking in the ethereal beauty of this blonde angel, then he kissed her neck, right at the base, gratified by her soft moan.

“Angelique, you are so beautiful.”

He captured her breasts in his hands, loving the feel of her soft mounds and the taut nipples pushing into his palms. He licked one pink nub, then drew it into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it as she had done to him.

Her raspy breaths delighted him. He dabbed the tip of her nipple with his tongue then drew her in deeper and harder.

“Oh, yes,” she moaned.

Her hand stroked down his belly to his erection, running along the length of it, his pajama bottoms a barrier between her skin and his. She shifted to her knees and grasped the sides of his waistband, then tugged his pants downward. His penis popped free and her eyes glazed a little as she stared at it. The tip of her tongue traced her lips. His breath dragged like silk over sandpaper as he shimmied the rest of the way out of the pants, then kicked them to the floor.

Her fingertips brush against the head of his penis and it twitched as intense pleasure shot through him. She stroked downward, then back to the head, circling around, sending his heart-rate racing.

Angelique had never seen such an enormous erection before. She

loved the feel of his full, rigid penis in her hands, but more, she wanted it inside her. She ached for him. Her vaginal muscles contracted around the emptiness, longing to hold him inside her.

She lifted one leg over his hips and sat on his thighs, the curly, slightly prickly hair of his legs stimulating her damp, hot flesh. His hands cupped her breasts and she undulated into grasp, her nipples swollen and aching in pleasure. She wrapped one hand around his enormous penis and stroked the length of him.

“Nick, I want you inside me.”

She drew his hand to her mouth and drew one finger inside, gently sucking on it. She nibbled the end then released it, all the while stroking his rigid cock.

“Oh, God, I want to be inside you.”

She led his hand down her body, over her belly, to the soft curls below her navel, then guided the damp finger to the dampness between her legs.

He groaned softly at the feel of her need.

“I need you now,” she murmured.

He stroked her cheek and drew her down for a kiss, her soft lips and breathy response to him boiling his blood. He rolled them both sideways, then shifted over her. She placed the bulbous end of his penis in the slick cradle of her womanhood. All he had to do was shift forward to impale her with delight.

“I’m going to make love to you now, Angelique.” He kissed her neck. “Long and slow.”

She readied herself for his first thrust.

“No, do it quickly, Nick.”

She didn’t want him to stop because of her innocence. “I am so ready for you. I want you now.”

He smiled at her. “You certainly are enthusiastic.”

He edged forward, then hesitated. “You feel so tight.”

She drew his face to hers and kissed him, plunging her tongue deep into his mouth.

“Nick, now.”

He thrust, and she suppressed a cry. The pain flashed briefly, then eased as he held still, allowing her to grow accustomed to being stretched. He held his weight above her, his intense gaze locked on hers.

“Angelique, why didn’t you tell me?”

“If I had told you, I don’t think you would have continued.”

He hesitated.

“If I had known, I would have been more gentle.”

“It’s alright. I wanted you inside me.”

“Angelique, I don’t understand this. You hardly know me.”

She stroked his cheek. “But I want you.”

The hard glint in his eyes softened but he remained frozen above her, indecision lining his features.

“Oh, Nick.” She undulated beneath him. “We’ve gone this far. Don’t stop now.” She squeezed him with intimate muscles, then circled her hips. His sagging erection surged to attention within her.

He groaned, then slowly eased forward again, filling her with his hard, rigid cock.

“Yes, Nick.” She wrapped her legs around his thighs, opening wide to him. He filled her deeply, completely.

He pulled back slowly, the ridge of his cock stroking her insides, then he pushed forward again. Slowly. Purposefully. Stroking the walls of her vagina with his wonderful, long cock. She squeezed, then spiraled her hips. Scintillating sensations swirled through her.

“More, Nick.”

An urgency built within her, compelling in its intensity. He pulled back then surged forward again, but he was too controlled. She sensed he held back. She needed more.

“Faster. Harder.”

He thrust--deep and hard.

Sensations burst through her, propelling her toward ecstasy.

“Yes. Oh, God, yes.”

He thrust, and thrust again. An intense point of pleasure deep in the centre of her grew until it encompassed her whole body. Joy expanded around her. Sound became velvet. Touch a melody. Her senses coalesced in a spiral of overlapping colors. Pleasure accelerated to a rapture so complete, it approached heaven.

She clung to him as her consciousness expanded to include the entire universe, then shrank to a single point.

She gasped in one final spasm of bliss, then collapsed back on the bed, clinging to him.

“My God, Nick. That was incredible.”

Never had she felt so complete.

He smiled down at her.

“You are incredible,” he said.

He kissed her, a gentle brush of his lips on hers, then he rolled onto his side and drew her close to his body, his arms wrapped around her.

She snuggled into the comfort of his embrace.

Chapter 4

The soft light of dawn caressed Nicholas to wakefulness. He opened his eyes to see Angelique's face only inches from his own, her lips just a breath away.

Her eyes opened and he smiled.

"Good morning." He leaned forward and brushed her lips with a gentle kiss.

She responded, but he could sense her tentative mood.

His gut clenched. Did she regret what they'd done last night?

He nuzzled her temple. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

She sighed, but held her silence.

He pushed himself up on his elbow and took her hand, then pressed her palm to his lips.

She had given him, a virtual stranger, her virginity. He didn't understand it, except that there was a strange magic between them. A powerful force neither of them seemed able to deny.

"Are you upset about what we did last night? About making love for the first time?"

Her gaze shot to his and she covered his lips with her fingertip.

"Oh, no. Of course not." She kissed him, a feather-light touch of lips on his cheek. "Last night was wonderful."

Angelique stared at his handsome face, the tender look melting her heart.

The face of Nicholas Berringer. The man she must condemn to an eternity of loneliness.

She gritted her teeth and pushed the thought aside, knowing she'd have to harden her heart to such feelings.

He kissed her hand and drew her close to his body. She loved the feel of his hard planes against her skin. She snuggled closer.

The need built within her as her breasts swelled and her aureoles pebbled. In surrendering her virginity to him last night, he had given her the gift of unadulterated ecstasy. Her body remembered and insisted on exploring the possibilities in more depth.

“You’re not regretting last night?” he asked.

“Oh, no. Never.” She wrapped her arms around him and tilted her pelvis tightly to his, feeling his penis swell between them. “In fact, I enjoyed it so much, I’d like to do it again.”

He rolled her onto her back. “If that’s what you’d like. I aim to please.”

He kissed her neck and the resulting tingles danced all the way to her toes, stimulating some interesting places along the way. Her vaginal muscles contracted and she slid her hand down his hard stomach. He kissed down her chest to her nipple and drew it into his mouth. She gasped, then wrapped her fingers around his cock and slid her hand the length of it in one smooth motion. He suckled her other nipple and she arched toward him.

“I can’t believe how much I want you,” she murmured.

He smiled as his hand slid down her belly then stroked the soft curls. She opened her legs wide and arched against his hand. He slid his finger inside her.

“Oh, yes,” she sighed.

He swirled his finger in a circle, then stroked along the wall of her vagina.”

“Yes. Oh, God, yes.”

She fingered the tip of his penis, stroking along the tiny opening, feeling dampness ooze from him. His finger continued to stroke within her, stoking her urgent need. She curled her fingers around his hard cock and pumped.

“Nick, I want you inside me.”

He grinned widely.

“I will be. In a moment.”

His finger found the growing nub of her clitoris hidden in the folds of her skin. The bundle of nerve endings jumped at the delightful stimulation. He flicked and cajoled. She felt waves cascading over her. Swells of ecstatic delight. She clutched his shoulder, digging her fingers into his flesh, and moaned.

Intense pleasure tore through her. The whole world seemed to shimmer, then she shot through the heavens on an erupting fountain of bliss. She burst across the sky, in a blaze brighter and more colorful than any fireworks. Her nerve endings fired with devastating pleasure.

On a long, laborious breath, she recaptured her senses, swirling slowly back to earth. Her clenched body slumped back on the bed. She pushed her

hair off her face and stared wide-eyed at Nick's smiling face.

"Wow."

The deep rumble of his laugh made her smile.

"You definitely know how to keep a woman happy."

"Well, you're easy to keep happy."

She opened her arms to him and he embraced her.

"You don't think that means you get out of your promise, do you?"

"Promise?"

She reached for his erection and stroked it insistently. She wanted that long, hard cock inside her now.

"Oh, yes. That promise."

Nicholas had intended to show her the pleasures of oral sex, but she'd been so responsive to his touch, she had climaxed immediately. A definite turn-on. He was so hard right now he could burst and with her pumping him like that, he would explode any second.

He eased her hand away and pressed the head of his cock against her moist opening.

"Yes, Nick," she murmured in his ear. "Push inside me. I want to feel your rock-hard cock drive deep into me and give me pleasure."

"Angelique, how you talk." He kissed her neck and pushed forward, sliding his swelling cock inside her. "I love it."

She was so uninhibited.

The feel of being sheathed in her velvet opening nearly sent him over the edge, but he restrained the urgent need.

"Oh, Nick, you are so hard and strong inside me. It feels *incroyable*."

He eased back then thrust forward. Her hot, dampness tightened around him as she clenched those intimate muscles of hers.

"Absolutely incredible," he agreed.

He thrust again and she gasped.

"Oh, yes," she cried.

He continued to thrust and she moaned. He pumped into her, as her moans turned into a long, heartfelt cry of pleasure. He drove deeper and harder until finally she screamed in obvious climax, clinging tightly to him. He felt his penis swell impossibly tight, then he groaned as he erupted inside her.

They both slumped to the bed in complete contentment.

He tucked her against his side, his arm draped over her, enjoying the sweet feel of her curves against him as he dozed off.

Chapter 5

Angelique awoke to a knock on the door. She glanced across the bed and realized Nick was not with her.

“Yes?”

“It’s me. Nick.”

“Come in.”

The door opened and Nicholas stepped inside.

“I borrowed some clothes from a friend. I think they’ll fit you.” He placed a stack of garments--neatly folded blue jeans and a fluffy, periwinkle blue sweater--on the end of the bed.

“Thank you.”

Once he left the room, she arose, then stretched, luxuriating in the feel of human limbs.

She spent the next twenty minutes showering, then dressing, all the while fretting over how she would explain to Nicholas Berringer why she’d appeared in his living room in the middle of the night. Or, better yet, how she would avoid explanations as much as possible. So far, she’d done a pretty good job of keeping him distracted.

When she finally entered the living room, the smell of food sent her stomach churning in need. Nicholas stepped into the room with two plates filled with steaming eggs.

“Good morning.” He placed the plates on the dining room table.

She pushed her hair over her ear.

He smiled as he pulled out a chair and gestured for her to sit.

“I hope you like cheese omelets.”

“*Oui*. I mean yes. Thank you.” She plucked the burgundy linen napkin from under her fork and smoothed it across her lap.

It seemed he wasn’t in a rush for an explanation. The tension in her jaw diminished a touch.

He sat down across from her.

With a neat, sure slice, he cut a morsel of omelet and raised it to his mouth.

She took a bite and felt faint from the delectable sensation of warm,

delicious eggs melting in her mouth. She hadn't eaten for almost two hundred years!

"You know, Angelique, last night ... and this morning ... were pretty intense. I don't usually make love with women I've just met."

She put down her fork and took a sip of her coffee.

"Moi aussi. I mean, me either."

"Yes, I realize that. It was your first time." He smiled. "Angelique. Why me? I'm a stranger."

She felt a blush burn across her cheeks. He wasn't a stranger, yet he was. She knew so many things about him, yet she didn't know him. Or at least, she hadn't before last night. Now she knew him intimately.

"This feeling between us ... it is very strong, no?"

"Yes, very strong."

"With you, it is difficult to resist. I didn't want to resist." Even now, she found it hard to resist the urge to slide her hands under the fabric of his shirt and feel the tight planes of his chest. To mesh her lips with his and ignite their smoldering passion again.

"No regrets?"

Her only regret--which drove deep into her heart--was that she'd have to sacrifice him to the curse, but she thrust the thought away before the feelings overwhelmed her.

She shook her head, concentrating on the beautiful passion they'd shared last night.

"Mais non." She rested her hand atop his. "I would do it again." A faint smile tugged at her lips. "In fact, I would love to do it again."

His smile broadened. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it, sending tingles dancing along her spine. "Anytime, sweetheart."

He continued eating and she returned her attention to her own food. She couldn't identify the spices he'd used, but the effect was spectacular. This man certainly could cook.

She took a sip of her coffee and reached for a slice of toast from the basket in the center of the table.

"Angelique, why did you come into my apartment last night? Do you remember?"

"Hmm?" His words dragged her from the spell the food had cast over her. She glanced his way and, at his keen gaze, her stomach tightened.

"Yes, I ... uh ... was looking for you."

"Me?"

“You are Nicholas Berringer? Brother of Peter Berringer?”

His face darkened. “Yes, but I’ve never met my brother Peter.”

She trailed her fingers along the edge of her napkin.

“Actually, you lived with him until he was a year old. And you talked to him last Christmas, before he left for Australia.”

He raised his eyebrows. “True. For the first time in twenty-five years. Why would he give my name to you?”

“Peter and I, we have known each other for a long time. He told me if I ever came to Canada and needed help that I should come to you. Well, last night I found myself in trouble. No money. Nowhere to stay. I believed that a brother of Peter’s would be kind and charitable.”

“If you came here looking for me, then why didn’t you know my name?”

The food she was swallowing stuck in her throat. She grabbed her cup and sipped some coffee before she started choking.

“I ... uh ... I hit my head.”

“Yet you found your way here.”

His direct gaze unnerved her. She stared at the poinsettia centerpiece gracing the table. She couldn’t tell him an angel had changed her to human form leaving her temporarily disoriented, and she didn’t want to lie any more than necessary.

“Well, more like I found myself here.”

He leaned forward and took her hand, his green eyes dark with concern.

“Angelique, exactly what happened to you last night?”

She shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“I do not wish to discuss it.”

His fingers tightened around his coffee mug. “Should I take you to the hospital? Did someone do more than hit you on the head?”

The concern in his avocado eyes shook her. Her attempt at secrecy made it sound all the worse.

“No, no more. A hit on the head, then I had nothing.”

“Would you like me to take you to your hotel?”

“But I have no money for the bill an--”

“I’ll pay the bill.”

She pursed her lips. He was very generous.

“No, I couldn’t accep--”

“You can consider it a loan, if you like.”

She avoided his gaze.

“You are too kind.”

How could she explain that there was no hotel, no luggage, no clothing, no nothing? Better not to explain at all.

What she wanted was to convince him to let her stay here. She had to be near him as much as possible to convince him to propose marriage. Not that she had any idea how to accomplish that in less than two days. Times might have changed, but two days was short in any century.

“I hope you will not think I am very bold but ...” She hesitated.

Chapter 6

His gaze connected with hers. “What is it, Angelique?”

“You see, I have only two days left and it is Christmas. I do not want to impose on your hospitality, but I would much rather stay here than in a hotel room. In a home it will feel much more like Christmas. And you, as Peter’s brother, are the closest thing I have to family.”

He placed his hand over hers, the warmth sinking into her and stilling her frazzled spirit. He smiled.

“Of course. If you’d like to stay here you’re welcome.”

She returned his smile. “Thank you.”

“To tell the truth, I’d love the company for Christmas. And maybe while you’re here you could tell me about Peter.”

“*Certainement*. I would be pleased to do so.”

“Are you and he, uh, very close?”

The edge in his voice snatched her gaze to his face. *Close*? Did he think she and Peter were more than friends?

“We are close friends, but we are not--how you say?--romantically involved.”

His smile brightened. He nodded and sipped his coffee.

She liked his smile. It made her feel warm all over.

Anguish arose at the thought of cursing him to the prison she had endured for so long. He was so generous, opening his home to a stranger.

Her gaze wandered to the Christmas tree, the place on the top blatantly empty. Odd that he hadn’t noticed, but maybe that was the angel’s doing.

The tree sat in front of the large picture window in the living room and twinkled with a lovely array of colored lights. Decorations, both old and new, covered the tree. Still, it looked somehow empty.

“There are no gifts under the tree,” she said, realizing what was missing.

He took a gulp of coffee and set down his mug.

“No, and there won’t be. Peter is my only family and, as you know, we aren’t exactly close.”

She saw the pain in his eyes.

“*Oui*, I understand. My family is all gone, too. I miss Christmas with them very much.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. His fingers tapped on the table-top and soon a smile spread across his face, chasing the melancholy from his eyes.

“I know. Why don’t we give each other a gift?”

She glanced at him over her coffee mug. “Unless you want an angel costume, you will be disappointed. Remember, I have no money.”

“I could give you some money.”

She laid her knife and fork on her empty plate and pushed it aside.

“What kind of gift would that be, bought with your own money?”

“Then why don’t I buy the costume from you? That’ll give you some money to buy something.”

She raised an eyebrow. “We will agree on an amount for these gifts?” The idea appealed to her immensely, but she didn’t want him spending a lot of money on her.

He nodded.

“How about a dollar?” she suggested.

“The costume is worth more than that. A hundred dollars.”

“Then I will give you ninety-nine. Some to give your friend for these clothes, and the rest to you for letting me stay here.”

“Make it ninety-five and you’ve got a deal.”

A smile curved her lips. She held out her hand to shake on it.

As his strong, masculine fingers curled around hers, her smile faded, swept away by the powerful surge of need flooding through her. He shook her hand, then lingered, staring at her.

“Angelique, if you keep staring at me like that, then I’ll ...”

“What will you do, Nick?”

He stood up and drew her to her feet.

“This.”

He stroked her cheek, a light brush of fingertips gliding across her skin. Her breath held as his face drew closer. Her eyelids drifted closed as his lips brushed against hers. She stroked her hands across his cheeks and forked her fingers through his hair. Her heart pounded in her chest as she slid her hands along his neck, down his chest, then released the buttons of his shirt, one by one.

“Angelique,” he murmured against her ear.

“I want you, Nick.”

She shifted lower, sliding her palms down his neck then his chest, parting his shirt, then capturing one of his nipples in her mouth, thrilled at the intake of his breath in response. She dabbed at it with her tongue until it reached pebble hardness, then she rolled it in her mouth.

“I love the taste of you.”

She licked along his ribcage, then shifted upwards again and nuzzled the base of his neck. His hands slid up under her sweater and cupped her breasts over her bra. Heavenly sensations fluttered through her. She tugged the sweater over her head and tossed it to the floor. He skimmed his hands down the sides of her ribcage, sending her pulse skyrocketing. He unhooked her bra and she let it fall forward then flung it aside. Heat seared through her as his lips circled one of her hard, taut nipples. She clung to his head, holding it against her.

“Oh, Nick, I love it when you do that.”

She pulled his head up and kissed him firmly, then guided his head to her other nipple. He chuckled before he sucked her deep into his mouth, causing her vaginal muscles to contract tightly in sympathetic response.

“Oh, God, you make me so hot.”

She pushed him backward and into the chair, then crouched down, enjoying the hard muscled landscape of his chest on the way down. She tugged open his belt, then released his fly. She reached inside and stroked the long, hard bulge. She pulled his stiffening cock free and licked it like a lollipop, from the base, up the shaft, then over the tip. He grew long and hard, his bulging cock so incredibly inviting.

“Mmmm.” She circled the head with her lips and sucked vigorously, teasing the underside with her tongue. She slid her mouth lower, taking him deeper, caressing him with her open throat.

“Oh, God, Angelique. I love that, but I’m going to come too fast.”

She stared up at him, smiling.

“Is that a problem?” she asked.

“Only because I want to come inside you, giving you pleasure, too.”

“Nick, you say the sweetest things.” She stood up and dropped her jeans and panties to the floor, then kicked them aside. He sat in the chair watching her, his rigid cock standing straight up in the air.

She sashayed toward him, adding sway to her hips, then she straddled his legs and eased herself down on him, guiding his tremendous cock into her hot opening. The feel of his rock hard rod impaling her almost made her

sing out in ecstatic bliss. It rubbed along her sensitive passage, smooth and stimulating, her nerve-endings sparking to life. She ground down on him, then raised herself up, feeling the head of his penis dragging along her vagina.

“Oh, Nick, you feel wonderful.”

“Oh, baby, so do you.”

His hands cupped her buttocks firmly. She kissed him and started pumping up and down. His hands helped lift her on the way up. She felt tremors deep inside her, swelling upward and outward, washing through her in a profuse flow of passion and pleasure. Sweeping through her with mind-numbing intensity. A magnificent orgasm of immense proportions.

She clung to him and slowed her pace as the orgasm washed over her, fast and furious. Slowly it dwindled and she slowed to a stop, but he tightened his grip on her buttocks and increased her pace, lifting and dropping back, lifting and dropping back. Pleasure surged within her again, triggering another orgasm.

“Oh, God, Nick!”

It swept through her, leaving her breathless. When she slowed again, he increased her pace again, squeezing her buttocks together this time. Yet another orgasm gripped her, tight, hard, and enormously potent.

“OH ... MY ... GOD!” she gasped as the pleasure burst through her body, sending her to heaven and back.

Nick groaned and she felt him swell, then spurt within her. She cupped his cheeks and kissed him, hard and long. Then she wrapped her legs around him and collapsed in his arms, snuggling against the hard strength of his chest.

“Angelique, I am amazed how well we work together. We hardly know each other, yet we seem to know exactly what the other wants and needs.”

She kissed his chest, then nuzzled his neck.

“*C’est vrai*. I mean, it’s true. You know exactly how to excite me. How to pleasure me. Again and again.” She took his lips again, kissing him soundly. She stared into his eyes, a bright smile on her face. “Thank you for that.”

“Mmm. You’re very welcome.”

He kissed her again, soft and slightly playful, teasing her lips with his tongue. She slashed her tongue into mouth, enjoying the play of his lips on hers. At the same time, she pressed her breasts against him, intending to

tease him. Her soft nipples hardened as they came into contact with the curls of hair across his chest.

He pulled her close again and she felt his cock twitch inside her. He moved his groin in a circular motion, spiraling his cock within her. A wild tornado of cascading sensations rushed through her. Catching her completely off guard, an explosive orgasm propelled her into wild, passionate bliss once more.

Chapter 7

Nicholas guided Angelique to the dollar store on Sparks Street, but she shook her head and disappeared into the holiday crowd. An hour later, he watched for her in the cozy café next door where they'd agreed to meet.

He smiled when she sat across from him at the small, round table he'd chosen by the window overlooking the skaters on the canal. The voices of Christmas carolers mingled with the busy chatter of other diners.

The dark green and gold paper bag she carried was from a department store, giving him no clue what she'd purchased. He couldn't believe how curious he felt. It was like being a kid again, actually looking forward to Christmas. And gifts.

She had brought so much excitement to his life in only a few brief hours.

He wondered what she'd chosen. The gift would reveal a little of what she thought of him. His jaw tightened. What she thought of him was important, he realized, even though he didn't want it to be. It gave her too much power over him.

He dipped his hand in his pocket to feel the small box that contained her gift. He hoped she would like it. He wanted her to smile when she opened it, to look at him with eyes full of joy.

He enjoyed lunch with her, talking and laughing over sandwiches. She was becoming important to him. Although he'd barely met her, he felt he'd known her forever.

He pulled his credit card from his wallet to pay the bill. Strange. He'd never clicked with someone like this before. Could he have known her as a child, before his parents divorced?

When they got home, she withdrew to her room and didn't come out until he called her to dinner. Even those few hours without her seemed an eternity.

He didn't like this growing need he had to be with her. In two days, she would be gone. Sadness flickered through him at the thought, but he shook it away. He wasn't really falling for her. It was just the excitement of Christmas and the connection she provided to his brother, nothing more.

Well, maybe the great sex had something to do with it, too.

“It’s taken a long time to wrap that gift,” he mentioned, as he poured wine into two crystal glasses.

Candlelight reflected in her lovely eyes as she smiled but said nothing.

After dinner, Nicholas went to his room and wrapped the small parcel he’d bought for her.

He returned to the living room and started a fire, then sat quietly awaiting her return. She entered the room and placed her wrapped gift, about the size of a hard-cover book, under the tree, next to his small, two-inch square parcel.

“What is it?” he asked, leaning forward to view it more closely.

Her eyes twinkled. “Surely, you do not want to know now.”

“Of course I do or I wouldn’t have asked.” In fact, his curiosity demanded to be satisfied.

She sat beside him on the couch. “But it should be a surprise for Christmas morning.”

“I’ve never been one to follow rules. Let’s not wait. After all, it is Christmas Eve.”

Excitement quivered through Angelique. She stared longingly at the small, glittering package he’d set under the tree.

“Well ...”

He dove toward the tree and scooped up her gift. “Okay, let’s go.”

She laughed. His exuberance delighted her.

He sat cross-legged on the floor, facing her, then handed her the small package.

“Go ahead. Open it.”

She placed it on the glass coffee table and shook her head. “You first.”

“All right.”

Her stomach fluttered as he tore back the paper. Would he like her gift?

His smile faded, and with it, her heart sank.

Nicholas glared at the four faces he never thought he’d see together staring up at him. His father and himself alongside Peter ... and their mother.

“Did you draw this?” he asked, his voice devoid of emotion.

“Yes.”

Her voice sounded shaky, but the frenzy of emotions grilling his

insides wouldn't allow him to deal with her feelings right now.

"I drew you and your father from the photographs you have on the fireplace mantel," she explained, clearly trying to cover her disappointment at his reaction--but failing. "I drew Peter and your mother from memory."

He nodded, then pushed the picture aside.

Angelique watched with sadness. His obvious rejection of her gift hurt.

He rose and went into the kitchen. She sat back and sighed.

Why didn't he like it? She had thought it would make him happy, but instead she'd seen anger in his eyes as he'd stared at the drawing. And pain.

Did it remind him of the years he had lost with Peter? And with his mother? Another wave of sadness washed over her. She had not meant to cause him pain.

A few minutes later, he returned carrying two glasses of white wine. He handed her one and she took a sip.

"Nicholas, about the drawing--"

"I'm sorry, I didn't thank you. It was very thoughtful of you."

His voice sounded flat, but he was trying. Better to leave it be, she decided.

He settled beside her on the couch and picked up her gift, then held it out to her.

"Open yours now." He smiled warmly.

She returned his smile, allowing anticipation to crowd away her melancholy. She ripped open the paper to reveal a white box. Inside sat a small lapel pin in the shape of an angel.

Her heart compressed at the feelings it triggered. Anguish at the memory of being trapped in the form of an inanimate Christmas ornament. Anger that it had been his family who had caused that anguish. Torment at the thought of trapping him in the same way.

Pain that, even though he had spent time with her as a real person--had kissed her and made love to her--he still saw her in only the most superficial light, based on the angel costume she'd worn when he first met her. All those years as a tree-top angel, his kin had seen only the statue, not the person trapped inside. Now, even with a human body, Nicholas saw no further than that.

He moved closer. She touched the gold with her fingertips, avoiding his gaze.

"When I saw it, it reminded me of you."

He took the box from her and set it on the table, then took her hands in his. His tenderness sent her off balance.

“When I came to your room last night, you looked so beautiful in the moonlight. Like an angel.”

She met his gaze, her heart stirring in her chest. The brush of his fingertips as he stroked a strand of hair from her forehead reverberated through every cell of her body.

“And when I kissed you ... then, the easy, intimacy we’ve shared, the way you make me feel....You’ve touched me in a special way.”

Joy swelled in her heart. When he said he saw her as an angel, he didn’t mean in the superficial sense because she’d worn a costume, he meant as a special woman who had touched his heart. She had affected him—deeply.

“Oh, Nicholas, thank you.” She threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

His arms closed around her, strong and reassuring. If only she could stay like this forever. Spend eternity with this man.

But she couldn’t. Intense pain shuddered through her. In another fourteen hours, either he or she would be sitting atop the Christmas tree.

A small part of her hoped it would be her--the part that was growing to care for Nicholas. She leaned against his chest, hearing the beat of his heart. She didn’t want him to turn into an inanimate object. He was too kind. Too generous of nature.

If she returned to her old form, however, how would she bear watching his memory of her fade? How would she cope with losing him?

She listened to his heartbeat, cherishing the feel of being in his arms. Her body thrummed with the need he aroused in her. For human contact. For passion. For love.

This would be her last chance to feel the intimate, loving touch of a man. *This* man. Maybe spending the night making love with him would provide memories to last her through an eternity of loneliness.

“Nick?”

His gaze met hers. “Yes, Angelique?” His green eyes darkened to the color of pine needles as he watched her.

“I ...”

She hesitated, not knowing how to voice what she wanted. Maybe she could show him.

Chapter 8

As Angelique moved closer, Nicholas felt his pulse quicken. Her first delicate touch stirred the fire smoldering inside him then, as her mouth moved on his, harder and more frantic, passion flared.

His arms tightened around her and her breasts pressed against him, sending his heartbeat thrumming. His nipples hardened to pebbles. His breathing became more rapid.

Her teeth grazed his neck. She tugged open his shirt and he gasped as she raked her fingernails across his nipples, then teased one with the tip of her tongue. His mouth went dry.

“Angelique.” Her name echoed in a low moan and his hands forked through her long, blond hair. Silky strands of sunshine.

“Make love to me, Nicholas.”

Her throaty words echoed through him. Oh, God, yes!

She brushed his hands aside then pushed her sweater over her head. Her breasts, round and ripe, the nipples small rose beads, took his breath away. He leaned forward and kissed one, then drew the nub into his mouth. Her gasp nearly toppled his restraint.

He cupped her other breast, the nipple burning into his palm.

“Nicholas.”

Hearing his name in her whispered voice, husky with desire, thrilled him. He flicked his tongue over her hardened flesh and she gasped again. He sucked and the pace of her breathing increased.

She rolled onto her back and started to struggle with her jeans. He slipped them from her hips and smiled at the little bit of nothing called panties. He trailed his tongue along the edge of the lace, then grasped it with his teeth and tugged them downward. Her pungent scent--of heaven and earth, but mostly of woman--sent his pulse racing.

He licked her navel, then lowered his mouth to the soft, blond down that glistened in the sunlight. A quick, in-drawn breath, followed by her fingers curling through his hair, told him she wanted this. His tongue slid into the soft folds of flesh and he flicked the hard nub hidden there. She gasped. He flicked again--and again--feeling it grow more rigid.

“Oh, Nicholas.”

Her hands tightened in his hair, but he didn't care. Her increasing gasps as he cajoled her to ecstatic pleasure occupied his undivided attention. He cupped her buttocks, bringing her closer, allowing his tongue better access. Her pelvis moved in a rhythmic rocking. She groaned his name, then started to moan in an increasing pitch. He moved with her, and kept on and on until, in a rising wail of pleasure, she screamed out his name and shuddered in his grip.

It was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

She fell back on the couch her legs sprawled over his shoulder. He stroked the hair from her face, revealing the most contented expression he'd ever seen.

She smiled and stretched; languorous as a cat. Her fingers walked up his chest then she tugged at the collar of his shirt.

“At the least, you could undress and join me,” she murmured.

He smiled. “I think it's too late to do the least.” He kissed between her breasts, then captured a sweet nipple in his mouth. She gasped again. “How about I do more?”

Angelique watched as he tossed his shirt on the floor. She leaned forward and lapped her tongue across his chest, teasing each hard nub mercilessly for intense seconds. He groaned as her fingers found his zipper and slid it down.

He tugged off his pants and flung them aside. She slid her finger under the band of his charcoal briefs and dragged it across the warm, hard flesh of his stomach. She paused near the centre, watching his eyes darken to midnight, knowing he was anticipating her touch on his swelling erection.

She smiled, then dipped her whole hand inside his briefs, cupping the base of him, then sliding her hand upward. He felt like kid leather stretched over taut muscle.

The raspy sound of his breathing ignited her desire. She freed him from the cotton prison and licked the tip of him, then drew the head of his penis into her mouth. She kept her hand firmly wrapped around his cock while she tucked her lips around the top of the shaft and twirled her tongue around the corona, noting with satisfaction the intake of his breath.

She tucked her other hand under his testicles, enjoying the feel of the soft hair tickling her fingers. His fingers curled through her hair.

“Oh, God, Angelique, that's fabulous.”

She glanced up at him and smiled.

“I want to make you come like this, Nicholas. I want you to let it happen.” She squeezed his balls, very gently, and he gasped. “I want to taste you.”

She took him back in her warm mouth and continued twirling her tongue around the head of his rod. She released his balls and slid her hand around him to flatten against his firm butt, then she teased her fingers between his legs to stroke the perineum, right behind his testicles. Her tongue spiraled around the bulbous tip of him, upward until she could dab at the tiny slit, tasting the salty drop oozing from him.

“Oh, God, Angelique. I’m so close.”

She pulled him deep into her mouth and he groaned. She slid up and down, grasping his firm butt in both her hands.

“Oh, yes,” he moaned.

She squeezed his shaft between the roof of her mouth and her tongue, keeping the pressure tight while she moved up and down. She sucked on it hard, drawing it deep into her throat. She drew back one hand to fondle his testicles. His hands tightened on the back of her head.

“Oh, God, I’m coming.”

His balls tightened, drawing up close to his body. He tensed and groaned, then exploded into her mouth. She sucked and squeezed until he finished, then swallowed the salty-sweet liquid.

He drew her to her feet and kissed her soundly.

“You are an incredible woman, Angelique.”

She smiled as he lifted her off her feet and dropped her onto the couch, then prowled over her.

“Now for the main event.”

He sucked one nipple firmly into his mouth, pulsing strongly, then sucked in the other one, dabbing it playfully with his tongue. He pressed his cock against her dripping pussy and eased inside. He draped one of her legs over his shoulder, kissing the inside of her knee. The other she wrapped around him.

Angelique caught her breath at the exquisite sensation of his hard, long cock driving inside her, stimulating every inch of her vagina, turning her into a quivering mass of nerve endings.

He thrust and she moaned. He eased out, almost exiting her, then lurched forward again, impaling her with pleasure.

“Oh, Nicholas. Give it to me deep and hard. Make me come.”

He thrust again and again, and she felt her nerve-endings explode like

fireworks.

“Oh, yes. Oh God, yes. Yes. YES!”

Her voice turned to a scream as she rode the scorching climax higher and higher. It went on and on. Impossibly long. Impossibly spectacular.

Nicholas groaned and she felt his seed release inside her.

They both collapsed on the couch, clinging to each other.

Chapter 9

Stretched out on the couch with his head propped on a plump, velvet cushion, Nicholas watched as Angelique pulled on her clothes. She sat on the floor beside him with her legs to one side, a thoughtful look on her face.”

He kissed her ear and she smiled at him, but the thoughtful look returned.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“Why did you not like the drawing I gave you?”

The question caught him off guard. He rolled onto his back, thoughts tumbling through his mind like spilled marbles. How would he handle this?

“I am sorry. I should not have asked.”

“It’s a beautiful drawing,” he said, telling the truth. Her talent was undeniable.

“Thank you.”

Her tone did not match her words. He turned to face her. Her eyes glistened. He could feel the closeness they’d shared only minutes before slipping away.

His jaw tensed. Damn it, he didn’t want to lose that closeness. He’d never felt so complete. Damn her for ruining this.

Well, if she insisted on knowing, then he’d tell her.

“My mother abandoned me when I was five years old.”

Her gaze shifted to meet his.

“She never visited me,” he continued, his tone harsh. “She never sent me a letter or a card, nothing. She didn’t want anything to do with me, so why should I want to remember her?”

He glared at the ceiling, his mouth set in a hard line. Anger oozed from every part of him.

She stared at him, her eyes wide. He couldn’t tell what she was thinking, and realized she probably thought the worst.

Was she disgusted at how he viewed his mother? Annoyed that he didn’t like her gift? Like most women, would she put her own feelings above his pain?

She’d leave now, he was sure. Exit the room in a fit of anger or tears.

He endured seconds that lasted a lifetime, loathing his vulnerability. But she didn't leave him. Instead, she stroked his cheek.

"Oh, Nicholas. I wanted to give you something you would treasure forever. A picture of your family to comfort you, not cause you pain." A tear trickled from her eyes. "I am so sorry."

Tears, but not for herself. For him.

A lump formed in his throat. He scooped her into his arms and hugged her close, his heart swelling with a joy only she could provide.

"Thank you, Angelique."

His voice sounded hoarse, full of emotion. He kissed her, then slid his hands to her shoulders and eased her back so he could look at her.

"I will treasure it always, because of you."

* * * *

Christmas morning dawned with a fresh layer of snow on the ground, reflecting bright sunshine. A shiver of cold rippled through Nicholas. He reached for Angelique, but found only empty sheets. He jolted to a sitting position.

She was gone!

He glanced around the room, looking for any sign of her. A clatter sounded in the next room and the pounding of his heart diminished.

He leaped out of bed and strode out the door. She wasn't in the living room. He heard a cupboard door close. The kitchen. He marched through the door.

Angelique heard the door swing open and she glanced up from the cantaloupe she'd been about to slice to see Nick holding the door open with one outstretched arm. The well-defined muscles on his arms bulged and she longed to stroke them. Her gaze drifted over his broad, hair-sprinkled chest and slid lower, past the hard-rippled definition of his stomach, to his flaccid penis, already starting to stiffen at her examination.

"Ahem."

Her gaze shifted to his face. He stared at her with a stormy expression.

"I thought you were gone."

The catch of emotion in those words grasped her heart and squeezed.

He strode toward her and dragged her against him, holding her as though his life would expire were he to let her go.

"I thought you had left me." His whispered words brushed against her ear, sending tremors through her.

"It's all right. I'm here," she murmured against his ear, stroking the back of his head. His pain washed through her, matching her own. One way or another, she would leave him at midnight tonight. Guilt stabbed through her at the suffering it would cause him. If only there was something she could do about it.

"I want you, Angelique. I need you."

"Moi aussi, Nick. I need you, too."

He captured her lips in a hard, passionate kiss. He pulled back and stared into her eyes with an intensity she found difficult to endure.

He swept the counter top clear with one arm. His hands curved around her waist and he lifted her onto the counter top. He kissed her again, his tongue driving into her mouth, possessing her. She opened, wanting to be possessed. She thrust her tongue forward, entwining with his. Wanting to possess him.

He grasped the hem of the T-shirt she wore and peeled it off, flinging it onto the floor. She gasped as he encompassed first one nipple, then the other, in the scorching heat of his mouth. She clung to his hair, holding his head against her.

"Oh, yes, Nick. Harder."

He sucked hard and deep.

As he complied, she cried out. Good God this man could make love. She wrapped her legs around his waist and thrust against him, almost climaxing at the contact of his hard belly against her hot vulva, paired with the extreme sensations of his mouth drawing hard on her nipple.

He sucked one then the other until her head spun. He eased her legs from around him, placing her feet on the counter beside her, opening her wide to his view. He slipped his fingers under the elastic of her panties and slid into her. One finger, then two. He stroked, then he thrust deeply.

"Oh, God, Nick, I'm going to come."

"Do it," he murmured into her ear. "For me."

He added a third finger and continued to thrust into her. She felt the orgasm begin, tenuous at first, then mounting.

"Ahhhh. Ahhhhhhhhhh! Oh, my God. Yeeeeeeeeesssssss!!!"

The words tore from her throat in a rising crescendo as the orgasm washed over her like a tidal wave.

He planted a quick kiss on her lips then captured her gaze as his fingers tucked under the lace elastic of her panties and tore them apart. The intensity of his dark-eyed stare, the powerful force of his presence, the

shimmering heat between them—all held her breathless. Slowly, he pressed his rigid cock into her softness. She felt it push into her hot flesh. The iron-hard feel of it thrilled her. She squeezed, tightening her intimate muscles around him. Their gazes remained locked together. He seemed to be drinking in her expressions of rapture as he filled her to the full length of his enormous cock. They stared at one another, basking in the exquisite joy of the moment.

Then he started to move.

In.

Out.

As he surged forward again, he wrapped his hands around her buttocks and buried himself more deeply inside her. She groaned.

He pulled back. The feel of his cock dragging along sensitive nerve-endings, sent wild sensations skyrocketing through her.

In.

Out.

Her heart rate climbed steadily as an enormous energy built within her. She thrust forward to meet him. She pulled back, then thrust forward to meet him again.

His breathing accelerated and she felt him stiffen. As he exploded inside her, she exploded in wild, unadulterated pleasure. She rode the wave of bliss and, as it started to ebb, he thrust deeper and harder, sending her over again.

Then again.

As that third climax ebbed, she slumped back, but his finger found her clitoris and he flicked it, teasing it until she screamed in ecstasy once again.

She thought he had finished his onslaught of pleasure, but he circled his hips, spiraling his cock inside her, sending her over the edge one more time.

Finally, she slumped against him, clinging to him in exhilarated exhaustion.

“Merry Christmas, Angelique.”

Still buried inside her, he carried her back to bed and made love to her again, providing her with more dazzling orgasms before drawing her into a deep embrace.

Chapter 10

Nick held Angelique close to his body, luxuriating in the feel of her. She rolled toward him and smiled. "I'd like to shower now. Do you think you can do without me for a little while?"

He kissed the tip of her nose.

"Only a short while."

She laughed and rolled away from him. He watched the delicious sway of her naked, sexy derriere as she headed for his bathroom.

He flopped onto his back. Good heavens, he'd been thrown into a panic because he thought she'd left.

He tucked his palms behind his head and thought about the past couple of days. She'd responded to his touch with a fiery passion. He'd never experienced more explosive, yet poignant, lovemaking. And she had trusted him with her virginity.

He didn't want her to leave. Ever.

As for being hurt like he had been by his mother, he wouldn't allow it.

Love might not be real, but Angelique made him feel special. She touched him in ways no other woman could.

He realized he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

* * * *

After Angelique had showered and dressed, Nicholas took a shower. When he opened the bedroom door, he saw Angelique curled up on the couch in front of the fire.

"Merry Christmas," he said.

She smiled then rose to greet him with a long, languorous kiss.

"Merry Christmas," she murmured softly against his ear, her breath sending tingles radiating through him in a delicious web of yearning.

"Mmm." His arms tightened around her. "It's promising to be the best ever." He nibbled her ear. "I could get used to this."

She nuzzled the crook of his neck. "As could I." She slid her arm around his waist and led him to the table. "I have made breakfast."

As he followed, red foil and a bright green bow caught his attention.

"What's that?" Nicholas asked.

“It appears to be a gift.”

“But we opened our gifts last night, and we agreed to limit what we spent--”

“It was left there by a Christmas angel.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Really?” He slipped her arm from his waist, then kissed her hand. “Wait here.”

He went into the bedroom and retrieved the gift he’d wrapped moments before and slipped it under the tree.

“Saint Nick delivered this one.”

He slid his arms around her waist and kissed the back of her neck as she placed a basket of Danish pastry beside a plate of sliced cantaloupe, honey dew melon, oranges, and whole strawberries on the dining room table.

“I did not know how to use the stove, so I hope fresh fruit is acceptable.”

“Looks wonderful.” He nibbled on her ear lobe. “Maybe we can finish with something even sweeter.”

She giggled and sat down to breakfast. Something close to joy filled him as he listened to carols playing softly in the background, surrounded by the glitter of Christmas, and shared breakfast with the woman he ... loved?

Close enough.

This really was turning into the best Christmas ever.

She finished a last sip of coffee and placed her mug on the table, then smiled at him with an impish gleam in her eyes. She nudged her head toward the tree.

“Is it time for gifts yet?”

He stared at his watch. “Well, I don’t know. There’s a movie on TV I’d like to see and--”

She laughed and grabbed his hand, then dragged him from the chair.

“Come.” She led him to the living room couch. “You sit there. I’ll get the gifts.”

He chuckled when she gave her gift a shake as she returned to the couch.

“That won’t help you figure out what it is. Why don’t you just open it?” His voice sounded amazingly steady given the churning in his gut.

“No, I want you to open yours.” She handed him the red foil package.

As he took the gift from her hands, the excitement that lit her face disappeared, replaced by a nervous vulnerability. She was worried that he wouldn’t like this gift.

He resolved that he wouldn't disappoint her again.

As he tore away the paper to reveal a bundle of envelopes, aged and tied with a blue satin ribbon, an anvil of painful memories crushed down on his heart and he realized he would fail in that resolution.

They were addressed to his father--with his mother's name on the return address.

He dropped them onto the coffee table.

"Why did you give me those?" The flat words had a harsh taste.

She knelt in front of him, then picked up the bundle and pressed them into his hand.

"Nicholas, please read them."

His stomach had become a tight, rigid wall. He didn't want to disappoint her, but couldn't she understand how difficult this was for him?

She drew an envelope from the bundle and held it in front of him.

"Just one?"

"I don't see any poin--"

She took his hand and stared straight into his eyes. "Please." Her wide eyes glimmered with hope. "Trust me."

Trust? Anger flamed within him. Why would he trust any woman?

But the reassuring touch of her hand drained away his anger and filled him with a strength he'd never known he lacked. Strength to face the words his mother had written--and not be hurt by them.

Reluctantly, he drew the envelope from her hand. He noticed it had 'Return to sender' written across the bottom in his father's handwriting. He opened it. Inside was a smaller envelope addressed in neat feminine handwriting. *To Nicky.*

Angelique watched as he read the first letter, his face expressionless. Then he read a second, and a third.

Last night, she had been touched by his pain. She hadn't known he hated his mother. Angelique knew his mother had loved him very much. Every Christmas she had written a letter to him, and had cried over the absence of her little boy.

One year, Angelique had seen her slip a bundle of papers into a compartment in the old grandfather clock that had stood in the hall. The same one that now stood in the corner of Nicholas' living room. Peter must have sent him the clock when he left for Australia.

When Nicholas finished the stack, he returned his gaze to Angelique.

"My mother tried to contact me for years, but my father returned

every letter without ever showing them to me.”

His eyes, although sad, had lost an edge of sorrow that had been there from the moment she’d met him. Now, he seemed at peace with himself and her heart swelled with joy.

She squeezed his hand. “Your mother really did love you.”

He drew her to his side on the couch. She entwined her fingers with his.

“How did you know about the letters?”

“I have known Peter for a long time. Your mother, too.”

“She told you about them?”

“Not exactly. But I knew she wrote to you, and one day I saw her hide a stack of envelopes inside the grandfather clock. She did not know I was there.”

His arms encircled her, drawing her close to his body. “Thank you, Angelique.”

Nick had never known such closeness with another human being. Hadn’t believed it was possible to feel this tender toward someone. To need someone this much--a need that had absolutely nothing to do with sex.

He kissed her. Gently. Tenderly. “Thank you so much.”

When he finally released her, she smiled and touched his cheek with delicate fingertips.

“You are welcome.”

He smiled. Now it was time to ask her. He picked up her gift from the coffee table.

“It’s your turn.” As he handed it to her, the phone rang.

He suppressed his disappointment at the timing as he strode to the corner desk and picked up the receiver.

“Oh, Peter. Merry Christmas.”

Angelique froze.

“There’s a friend of yours here visiting.” Nicholas glanced toward her and smiled. “Angelique.”

She stared at him, then glanced away quickly as his smile faded.

“Yes, I should have realized.” He stared at the small, wrapped gift still in his hand. “No, don’t worry about it.”

He talked for a few more moments, then promised to call his brother back the next day. She heard the soft click as he replaced the phone in its cradle.

“Just tell me this.”

She turned to face him, afraid of seeing hatred in his eyes. Instead, she saw nothing.

“Are you here to rob me?”

She shook her head.

“Are you here to hurt me in any way?”

She hesitated. That had been the plan. She had been sent to turn him into an inanimate object. To steal his life and his humanity. But she knew she wouldn't do it. Not to save herself. Not to save his family.

For the first time in over a century, peace settled within her.

She could not hurt Nicholas Berringer. The man she loved.

She shook her head.

“Okay.”

He sat down beside her, then slipped his arm around her waist. “Then let's forget it and get on with enjoying this wonderful Christmas together.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “But ... why?”

He smiled. “Because, Angelique, I trust you.”

Tears welled from her eyes. Trust was the greatest gift he could give her.

Aside from his love.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He kissed her.

“Merry Christmas, sweetheart.” He handed her the gift.

She tugged off the ribbon then lifted the lid to reveal a dark green, velvet box. When she snapped it open, her heart leaped with joy, then froze and shattered.

A solitaire diamond, marquis cut, with a beautiful gold band decorated with raised vines. The same ring Bertrand had offered her two hundred years ago.

Nicholas watched her hesitation and apprehension seized him. What if she refused? However it had happened, he truly loved this woman, and no matter how much that terrified him, he had to convince her to stay in his life.

He cupped his hands around hers. “I want you to marry me.”

Her flat expression did not encourage him.

“I thought after last night ... and the letters ...” His throat constricted painfully. “Do you love me?” he asked.

She nodded.

Relief surged through him like a tsunami.

“That's all I needed to know.”

He plucked the ring from its velvet bed and slipped it onto her ring finger.

Panic gripped Angelique.

“No,” she cried as she snatched her finger away before he reached the knuckle.

Chapter 11

He stared at her in shock. “What is it, Angelique? What’s wrong?”
“I cannot accept.” She felt a strange stirring through her limbs. “If I do ...” She shook her head and gulped back a sob. “If I do, you will be turned into a tree-top angel.”

He took her hand. “Angelique, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Listen, Nicholas. I do not have much time. I was a tree-top angel for over two hundred years. The one you put on your tree a few days ago.”

Nicholas glanced at the empty place at the top of the tree, wondering when the angel had disappeared, then he glanced back to her. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Then he remembered the angel costume she’d worn the first time he’d seen her. But it didn’t make sense.

Angelique knew he didn’t believe her, but soon enough he’d have the proof right in front of him.

“If I accept your ring, the curse will be reversed and you will replace me as the angel.”

Her blood temperature seemed to be dropping. “I cannot do that to you.” She took his hand. “I love you too much.”

Those words rang through her ears as she felt her flesh harden and her body shrink.

“Angelique! Good Lord, what’s happening?”

Nicholas stared in horror as Angelique shrank and ... transformed.

“No, it can’t be true.” His heart compressed as he picked up the angel that stood where Angelique had been a moment before. The hair, the eyes, it looked just like her. He couldn’t believe this tiny, lifeless angel had been the warm, vibrant woman he’d held in his arms.

Something deep inside him knew her words were true, that she was under some horrendous curse.

Oh, God, he had lost her.

Worse, she would be stiff and lifeless forever. And, from her words, he knew she had been like this for centuries.

He couldn’t allow her to go on like that. She’d already suffered so

much.

He stared at the ring. The cursed ring. It was what had caused this. He threw it into the flames of the fireplace, like a bullet aimed to ease his pain.

But it didn't. In fact, pain encompassed him, and he felt himself shrinking.

A moment later, he was an angel standing beside Angelique. The two stared at each other with inanimate eyes.

Rejecting the ring. Somehow he knew that was what had caused his transformation.

A vision of himself as another man, named Henri, flickered through his mind. He'd loved a woman, more than life itself. Her name had been Celeste, but he knew in his heart it had been Angelique in another life.

He stared at Angelique's stiff form in front of him, and saw her as both Celeste and Angelique, the beautiful woman he had held in his arms moments ago. He had lost Celeste at the birth of their child. He remembered holding their infant son while crying over Celeste's stiff form. He had raised that son to adulthood with pride and love.

When their son had fallen in love, and then died of a broken heart on Christmas day, after being abandoned by his uncaring wife, Henri had desperately wanted to protect his grandson, and all following Berringers from the pain of love. He had taken the ring Celeste had worn and made a special Christmas wish, that his son's sons would be protected from such pain.

He had been the one who had cursed the ring and his offspring! But he had meant to protect them. He realized that without the risk of pain, they had lost the triumph of joy, as well.

Now Angelique must pay the price.

He remembered being Bertrand Berringer, and loving Angelique, but the feeling had been a shadow of what he'd felt as Henri, as though decades under the curse had dulled his ability to feel. When she'd refused the ring, she had transformed--and he had forgotten her.

He saw a lighted shadow hovering in front of him. An angel. The one who had granted his misguided wish.

"Do you understand now, Nicholas?"

"Yes." He stared at Angelique. "Must we both suffer in eternity?"

"Not at all. You are the one who caused this, not me. It is your power."

Hope trickled into the emptiness of his soul. "You mean, I can change us back?"

"All you have to do is believe in yourself. And in her. Are you willing to face the potential pain of love?"

"Yes."

He realized a moment more in her arms would be worth a lifetime of pain without her. He also realized that he would never really be without her. Because one lifetime was only a fraction of existence and love truly lasts forever.

Nicholas concentrated and a shimmering light encompassed both he and Angelique. Tremors arced through him as their bodies glowed, then expanded to normal size. A moment later, they stood before each other, transformed, both physically and emotionally.

He took Angelique's hands. "Angelique, I am the one responsible for the curse. I--"

She closed the distance between them. "I know." She kissed him. "Dear Bertrand. Dear Henri. I know."

-"We have loved each other for more than two centuries."

He stared at her beautiful face in awe. Love penetrated every cell of his being, no longer impeded by the curse. Deep, profound love. Heart-rending and painfully sweet. His soul ached with it.

He took her in his arms and tenderly brushed her lips with his. Her arms curled around his neck and she returned his kiss with a rising passion.

Still clinging to her, he lifted her from her feet and carried her to his bed. She stripped off her clothes and he followed her lead, watching her, remembering her in two previous lifetimes. He remembered losing her as Celeste. The mind-numbing pain splintered through him.

But he had found her again. His heart swelled with the joy of knowing he would never lose her again. She would be with him through eternity.

He caressed her breasts with reverence, then tasted their sweetness.

"Oh, my darling, Nicholas."

He stroked and caressed her silken skin, which felt like heaven under his fingertips.

Angelique smiled at Nicholas, her beloved, reveling in the knowledge they would be together. Forever.

As he drew her nipple deep into his mouth, she cried out in pleasure. This lifetime together would be heaven on earth. She stroked the length of

his glorious erection with the tip of her finger and it twitched under her touch.

Her vagina ached with wanting him. She arched her pelvis upward and he trailed a hand down her stomach and dipped into her moistness.

“Ohhh, yes.”

She opened her legs, inviting.

“We have a lifetime for slow languorous lovemaking. Right now, I want you inside me.”

He smiled broadly.

“It’s my pleasure to oblige.”

He kneeled between her legs and nudged his cock against her smooth, wet opening. The intense pleasure sent her pulse racing.

He leaned forward and kissed her, then his penetrating gaze locked with hers.

“Angelique, I love you.”

She felt cold, then a flash fire raced across her skin.

He loved her.

Joy spun through her, knocking every cell topsy-turvy.

He had admitted his love, to her and to himself.

“I love you, too, Nicholas. I always have.”

He pressed forward, sliding inside her. Long and hard. Giving her incredible pleasure.

They moved as one. Forward and back. He thrust deeply and she moaned in pleasure.

“Yes, my love. Yes,” she cried.

The passion of love, long suppressed, rushed through them, overwhelming them both with urgent need. Time and space compressed around them, flinging them to a place of intense, exhilarating joy. She could feel his body thrusting into her, driving her ever closer to orgasm. At the same time, she felt rapture surround them both, assimilating them, expanding to infinity then contracting to a single point. She clung to him, riding the roller coaster of bliss, until they both cried out in a blistering, mesmerizing release.

He drew her close to his body, holding her tightly.

She glanced up at him. His eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“Angelique, I’m sorry for the pain I’ve caused you. I’m sorry--”

She grasped his face and smothered his words with kisses.

“Nicholas, my darling. Do not regret the past. It has made us what we

are.”

She gave him a long, lingering kiss, then stroked the hair from his face.

“I love you, Nicholas. I always have. And I always will.”

As Nicholas held her, enjoying the thudding of their very human hearts pressed together, he realized he had truly been blessed with a Christmas angel. And his Christmas wish really had come true.

Peace in his heart. Joy in his life.

And love everlasting.

The End