



BABES IN TOYLAND

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The Curiosity Shoppe

Jefferson Dane
All I Want

Lizzie T. Leaf
The Nutcracker Returns

Brenda Williamson
In Winterland

Diane Charles Linford
The Christmas Card

JM Snyder
Boytoys

Warning

This e-Book contains sexually graphic scenes and adult language and situations including scenes of male/male and ménage sexual encounters.

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Brenda Williamson

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The Curiosity Shoppe

Rayne Forrest

Zebadiah LaCroy leaned over the clear polymer railing that ringed the level B6 concourse. From here he could see all the way down to the bottom of the central atrium of Station Janus. From his vantage point, a quarter of a mile above, the shoppers scurried dizzily about like busy ants.

Looking up he saw the faint lights of a Bascevii freighter hovering near the open view port at the top of the atrium, almost a half-mile above his head. The central core of the massive Station Janus was simplistically beautiful in its graceful circular design, he'd give the architects that much.

The bottom line for him, though, was nothing manmade could really compare to the Bayou and he was going back to its still and silent splendor. He was going home. He'd come to the conclusion that he was one Cajun that did not belong in space regardless of the pay. He

wondered sometimes, when he was home and alone in the Bayou, if he even belonged in the twenty-third century.

“Are you lost?”

He turned to the owner of a crystalline clear voice. It was a young girl, human in appearance, although he knew she was not. Her sparkling golden eyes gave her away as being from somewhere in the Delta Eridani solar system.

“I’m not lost, no,” he said, smiling down at her. He wasn’t, not in the sense she meant. She was a pretty little thing, maybe ten or eleven years old. “I’m seeing what there is to see.”

“That will not take you long. You can see the world, and more, from here.”

He thought that an astute observation from one so young. “Ah, well then I’m disappointed. I thought the world to be bigger.”

The little flirt tilted her head and batted her eyelashes at him. “You have seen many worlds? Are you a merchant?”

“I work on a merchant vessel. Or rather, I have. My tour is almost up. I’m going home to Earth soon, and then I suspect I’ll stay there.” A wave of homesickness for the life of wanderlust he was giving up caught him off guard.

“You will miss space,” she said with a voice sage beyond her years.

“I suspect that you are correct, to some small degree.” He could confess that to her. He’d never see her again. She put one hand on her hip and looked him up and down.

“You suspect much. What do you know for a certainty?”

“I know you are quite smart and very pretty. I bet you live here and I bet you can tell me where to purchase a special gift for my sister.”

Her eyes darkened. She frowned, obviously displeased. “Sister?”

“A female sibling born at a later time from me.” Birth order was of great importance to some races. He'd learned to state he was eldest and thus avoid confusion.

“Ah.” She smiled brightly again, moving a half step closer. She tilted her head, glancing up at him from under dark, fringed bangs.

“You should be careful. People who suspect much, only know one thing as certainty, and then gamble, often running afoul of good fortune.”

Wasn't she just the literal minded little cutie, too?

“Are you going to help me out and suggest where one should go to find the truest treasures?”

Her gaze drilled into his. The world spun around him, placing him in the center of a brightly colored vortex. The sensation ended abruptly leaving him to wonder what had come over him.

His companion reached out and lightly stroked his hand with her fingertips. Tingling heat snaked up his arm sending an unwelcome frisson of apprehension through his consciousness. His fingers curled of their own volition and he moved his hand away so she couldn't touch him again. He shook off the feeling. It certainly made his curiosity about where she was from increase.

She nodded in obvious agreement with some unvoiced thought. “Go to Level AQ, Section GC. What treasure you truly seek is there. If

you can't find it there, you won't find it on Station Janus or anywhere else."

With that she sauntered away, twitching her prepubescent hips. He shook his head, grinning. She was going to break hearts when she grew up.

Level AQ was fifteen levels down from where he was. If he wanted to get there he'd better start walking. He wasn't about to spend the money to buy a pass for the high-speed elevators.

He'd never been to AQ, never spoken to anybody who had. Deciding he'd better take a look at the level directory before he just started blindly bypassing levels, he walked over to the wall display and flipped through the screens until the correct one displayed. Level AQ wasn't exactly upscale. It was probably as downscale as anything on Station Janus

Filled with small shops, he suspected its merchants barely eked out a living selling their wares to tourists and to those members of their own races who lived and worked on Station Janus.

Maybe the young girl was right, though. His sister had asked for something unusual, something out of the ordinary. If he couldn't find it in one of those small shops he was either not trying hard enough or he was being too particular. Either way, he'd see what he could find for Susan.

The stairwells were crowded, which didn't surprise him. A lot of people wouldn't spend the money on the convenience of the turbo lifts. He got as far down as Level AV and decided it was time for a break. He

left the crowded stairwell and wandered until he came to a small coffee shop.

He jumped when someone lightly touched his back. He spun around to find the young girl. He smiled at her and kept his hand out of her reach. “You seem to get around.”

She returned his smile, but looked uneasy. “Are you going where I told you to go?”

“Sure am. I’ve decided I need coffee first. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Oh, no. I’m sure I don’t have time.” She looked at him solemnly. “Remember. Level AQ, Section GC.”

“I got it. I won’t for—”

The attendant behind the counter started talking to him. “C’mon, buddy. Place your order.”

He turned back to the counter. “Okay, okay. Earth beverage. Coffee. Sugar. Cream.” He turned back to the girl. She was gone.

Why didn’t that surprise him?

Because nothing surprised him anymore, that was why.

He took his coffee, paid the attendant, and found a stool along the window where he could perch and watch the people walk by. He quickly identified twelve individual races and noted about a dozen others that he didn’t recognize. Station Janus was a hub, opening her docks and doors to everyone. The trip to Earth would take six long months. He could upgrade his data files, and if the mood struck, spend some time reading about the changes to the station and see what new races visited

here. Anything to occupy his off-shift hours on the long, boring, trip home.

The boredom was another reason he'd decided not to sign on for another tour. There was only so much to do on a slow ship traveling from one exotic port to another. He wasn't good enough at gambling to make it a lucrative pastime and female companionship was at a premium, not to mention occasionally hazardous. Interspecies mating was done with great care.

So those were his choices for on the way home. Reading, cards or females. It was pick one or wear his cock down to nothing more than a nub playing with himself to relieve the boredom between his duty shifts. These days he was feeling a little past the stage in his life where he wanted to spend all his extra time masturbating. It reminded him, painfully, of what was missing in his life. Something he hoped to find when he got home.

He wasn't sure when the desire to settle down had crept up on him, but it had. Lately he'd been thinking, or daydreaming, of what his life would be like if he had a special person to share it with. God help him, he'd even wondered if he'd like to have a family. It was scary stuff for a space vagabond to be contemplating. There was one thing he was sure of, though. If, no, when, he met that special lady, he'd be able to promise her his wanderlust would never get the best of him again. He'd seen enough of the settled universe.

He gulped the last of his coffee and headed back for the stairwell.

It took him another twenty minutes to get to the AQ concourse. The doors opened onto a surreal scene. Aliens of all shapes and sizes

meandered about in traditional garb. There wasn't another human in sight. Fifteen years ago, Zeb would have found it fascinating. Now he'd been gone too long from his home and a lot of what was in front of him barely registered.

It would be Christmas by the time he made it home. He'd not celebrated the season with his family in nine years. It was only June by Earth reckoning, but he couldn't wait to get home and see the family's traditional home all decked out for the midwinter season. He imagined he could already smell the magnolia, pine, citrus, and sugar cookies. After the holidays, he might even take himself north and see real snow again.

So what would Susan like? She was a collector of all sorts of things, little knickknacks and dust catchers, glass this, porcelain that. He turned to his right and started walking, passing shop after shop and checking out their window displays. Nothing appealed to him.

He stared into a window that held an assortment of potted plants. It was an odd thing to find on the space station. He wasn't purchasing anything he had to nursemaid for six months.

Walking further he came to a dimly lit corridor. Dark, empty storefronts lined each side, but at the very end there was one shop with light showing inside. Well, he wasn't walking all the way down there just for one tiny shop. He kept going, past woven goods, past a potter, past an eatery that smelled rather vile to his human nose. This was getting him nowhere. He turned around and found he was standing in front of the dimly lit corridor once again. Alone.

There was no sign of the throng of fellow shoppers he'd dodged and tripped over for the last hour. His skin prickled with unease. Every hair on his body rose. Premonition licked at him.

Come and see.

Zeb all but jumped out of his skin. Where had the voice come from? There was no one standing close enough to whisper in his ear.

Come. You will be amazed.

Okay, he'd had enough of this. He was going all the way down to the human level. Better yet, he'd just wait and buy something for his sister when he docked on Luna.

Come. Can you leave without seeing what is possible?

"That's it. Stop playing games with me." Great. Now he was talking to himself. Out loud.

Soft feminine laughter washed through him, over him, like a warm breeze and soft rain, and so very much a part of his imagination. It made his knees go weak in a very unwelcome way.

Come. You will see it is real.

Oh yeah, he was spooked now.

Come. All the way to the end of the row.

"I don't think so. I need to be on my way." He started to walk away. Fast.

If you wish. But you will always wonder what true treasure you could have had.

He stopped in his tracks and looked at the ceiling.

Damn. She had him there. Damn. Damn. Damn.

His curiosity always got the better of him. He took a deep breath, turned around and starting walking down the long, dark hall. A shadow darted past him. Instinctively, he reached for his stinger only to remember a split second later he didn't have a permit to carry it on Station Janus.

Besides, you couldn't shoot a shadow. Usually. He had the distinct impression he'd have hit something solid had he fired on that particular moving dark spot.

The door to the shop at the end of the corridor cracked open. A long sliver of golden light streaked across the deck to end right at his feet. Someone was certainly determined that he stay on course.

"All right, I get the picture. When I get there, no more games." He heard the soft feminine laughter again.

As you wish, Zebadiah.

He stopped short. "How do you know my name?"

I know, and that is all.

"You mean that's all you're going to tell me."

No. I just know. Come.

He could've no more turned away than he could fly to Jupiter in nothing but a propulsion suit. Whoever she was, whatever her game was, she had his full attention. He squared his shoulders and strode purposely for the shop, his long legs taking him there faster than his better sense said was necessary. He stopped outside the door and considered what he was doing.

Up close the shop appeared empty, the windows darkened. No light shone from within. Somebody was playing with him and he

intended to get to the bottom of it. He pushed open the door and stood staring, gawking actually, at the contents of the little shop.

It was full of red, green, and gold. It was full of twinkling lights and sparkling crystal. It smelled of fresh greenery, of pine, of wood smoke. It was Christmas.

Or at least Christmas the way some people decorated for it. His own traditions were a little different. He looked closer at the greenery. Sure enough, the wreaths and swags now contained the broad waxy leaves from magnolia trees. The scent of oranges drifted to him.

This was bizarre.

You do not like it.

Her sad tone made his stomach drop. And just how did she know, anyway?

“It’s not that I don’t like it. I’m not sure how this can be real.”

You seek a gift to be given at the time of midwinter. Is this not how your world prepares for Dark Night?

“Well, you know, some folks of my world decorate like this.” He looked around. “Whoever you are, come out so I can see you. Tell me how it is you know my name.”

Would that please you?

“Yes, it would. I’m...uncomfortable talking to voices in my head.” That was an understatement.

The lights dimmed. The decorations faded and in their place appeared the most peculiar of curiosity shops. Shelves filled with oddities lined the walls. Tables laden with a wide assortment of goods,

animal, mineral and vegetable, filled the spaces between. All that remained of the ghost of Christmas was the fruity scent of citrus.

A movement caught his eye and he turned. The shadows moved in the darkest corner of the room. A woman stood there. He stepped towards her and she backed away. He tried to sound reassuring. It wasn't easy considering he still saw flight as an option. Imprudence with aliens could get a man killed.

"I won't hurt you. I just want to see you."

It could be unwise. There is a risk.

"I have seen aliens before."

Yes, you have. But you have not seen me as I truly am. I tell you again, there is a risk.

"What risk? Why speak to me in riddles? Why not just show yourself and tell me the truth?"

He sensed her hesitation and wondered at the reason behind it. His brain seemed to be functioning again, albeit on a low frequency. What sort of alien was she that she could speak telepathically to him? He had no knowledge of any race having that ability.

If she was even speaking to him at all.

Perhaps it was just his imagination running away with him. He feared it was. Maybe he'd contracted Liresan flu. That made a person imagine voices sometimes.

The only thing was, he was sure he wasn't imagining it. He wanted it to be real.

"I've done your bidding and come this far. Would you disappoint me now?"

There was a rustling of fabric, a tinkling of tiny bells, as her form glided to the very edge of the light.

You must be sure. Once you have seen me as I really am there is no turning back for either of us.

“I don’t understand. Why lure me here and then not show yourself? Who are you?”

I am Semele.

Hands, light as feathers, caressed his body. He spun around. No one was near him, but he could still feel her soft touch, her hands stroking him. Imagined or not, he longed for it to continue. He opened himself up to it. He sensed her surprise. The touch immediately stopped.

He wasn't supposed to be able to feel that.

How did he know he was supposed to know *that*? He shivered and stood aching for her to do whatever it was she'd been doing again. Imagined or real, her touch had struck tinder deep in his belly. Desire sparked within him, a tiny glow that held promise.

“Semele. Pretty name. Where are you from, Semele?”

No place you know, Earther. No place you will ever see.

Her mental tone held a cold edge, surprising and angering him. This really was too much. He was losing valuable time. He had to report for his duty shift soon and he still didn’t have a gift for Susan. This indulgence was just that. He should go.

He would have if he could have. He had to see what she looked like. It would haunt him even to the grave if he didn't.

“I’m really tired of whatever game you’re playing. I’m leaving.”
Zeb turned to go. It had the desired effect. She started talking. Or whatever it was she was doing to communicate.

I hesitate for your own protection. Be sure you wish to see me. Be sure your desire for one true treasure is genuine. Once you see me, there is no turning back. Once you hear my voice, you will never be free of me.

Christ, she was going to kill him with his own curiosity.

“Why do you say that? Just where are you from?”

My star is Beta Circini. It is very distant. Your kind would not believe it possible for me to be here at all.

Visions of a sunlit world flooded his consciousness. Vivid reds and yellows, muted blues and purples all filled a night sky. The scent of fertile, tilled soil reached him. Home was near a crystal clear lake. She slept, unclothed, in a small alcove lit by white candles. Her skin glowed golden in the candlelight. Her long thighs were slightly parted. One elegant hand covered a generous breast.

He snapped back to the here and now.

His heart fluttered in his chest. His stomach did a strange little dive. He knew the answer but he had to ask the question. He’d seen the answer, and more, in her mind.

A lot more.

The compulsion could not be denied. His thighs quivered like jelly.

Sweaty palms and knocking knees aside, he had an erection that could break a stack of ten karate blocks with a single blow.

“Why are you here?”

I seek my truest treasure. I seek you.

That was not reassuring in the least. He didn't like the sound of that at all. Well, his brain didn't like it. Other parts of him were way too energetic and hopeful.

"Why do you seek me? I don't understand."

Do you truly wish to understand?

Did he? There was an abyss opening in front of his feet. He sensed it with alarming clarity. But he couldn't walk away, not now. It was time for him to take the leap he'd been avoiding for so many years. It was time for a leap of faith.

He'd been brought here by a series of unusual events beginning with a last-minute crew shuffle while his previous ship had been docked at the Titan-Jupiter transfer yard. The past months he'd had the feeling he was headed toward something major in his life. He was caught in some current he could sense but not see. It was too strong and quite determined to push him along. He couldn't fight it or break free of it.

Now here he stood, engaging voices in his head in conversation and becoming sexually aroused by some flash of fantasy.

Lord, just get me home in one piece and I'll never leave there again.

"I like a good mystery. Okay, Semele. I do seek to understand. Isn't understanding worth a few risks?"

So you do like to gamble.

He caught the amusement in her tone but her words chilled him all over again. She knew what he'd said to that little urchin on the concourse. How she knew he didn't want to question.

Yes, Zebadiah, it was a projection of me as I was many years ago. I had to be sure you would come.

“Why?”

With another rustle of her robes her shadow moved a step closer. He could see the hem of the rich fabric, the swirls of rich golds and dark reds. He could tell she was tall, almost as tall as him, and he was six foot two without his boots on.

I saw you in the crystal. I sensed your approach. The nearer you came to me, the nearer I came to you. We were both drawn here.

“My career brought me here. I’m out of time and patience, Semele. Talk to me. Let me see you. Then I’ll go.”

No, you will not. To hear my voice and to see me as I truly am is to bond us forever. Do you truly wish this to happen? My very name means ‘only once.’ And only once will I bond with a mate.

Mate? That was a bit more than he was looking for.

Wasn’t it?

“What happens to you if I walk away?” He didn’t think he could walk away, not now.

I do not know. I am strong, perhaps strong enough.

Panic jolted through him. “Strong enough for what?”

To continue to live.

Fear for her life surged through him. He couldn’t be the cause of her death.

Oh, hell. What about his own life?

“What happens to me if I walk away?” Christ, he had lost his mind. He was buying into her fantasy.

You may leave here. You are not yet truly bound as I am. When I approached you as my younger self, I knew then I had chosen you. There is no other for me as there may be for you.

The air around him moved, becoming hands that caressed his face with whisper soft touches. The scent of oranges and magnolia blossoms drifted to him. Warmth infused him, raising gooseflesh on his skin. The sensation of her lips on his mouth tightened his groin to the point of pleased pain. He felt her body beneath his, felt himself encased in her heat. He managed to find his voice, barely.

“Semele.”

Forgive me. I need you so.

Sweet gods. He was well and truly caught in this web. He reached for the vision of them coupling. It was there, in the air between them, burning him. He jerked away from it before he was unmanned in front of her. Her face remained shrouded.

He was past the point of no return. He would never be free of her fire now. Not until it had consumed him, cleansed him. Not until the promise of the vision was fulfilled. He might be ten times an idiot but he wanted her.

“I need you, Semele. Come to me.”

Her joy washed through him, startling him. Surprise compounded surprise as she said his name aloud. Her voice was low and strong, rich despite its clear echoing timbre.

“Zebadiah.”

A wall of nothingness slammed into him, dropping him flat on his back. The chilly deck rose to meet him, giving him no quarter as it

collected him. He lay there, wheezing and disoriented, while the ceiling spun in sickening spirals. His head pounded painfully. His stomach roiled in a very nasty way. What the hell had she done to him?

There was a rapid rustling of silk. The little bells rang frantically. She was suddenly kneeling beside him. A slender hand with skin of pale honey-gold reached for him, then abruptly stopped and withdrew.

Thank the stars she hadn't touched him. It might have killed him. Sort of.

He moaned and closed his eyes to blot out the swirling ceiling. The darkness helped. He was going to have quite a knot on the back of his head, too. He lifted the hand on the far side from her and felt his skull. Now she owed him.

"Are you injured?"

Her voice now was soft and clear, reminiscent of the voice of the young girl, but with the richness of maturity. The strange echoing quality had vanished. If it had been there at all.

He tried to imagine what the girl turned woman looked like and could not. The image wouldn't form. Soft tendrils, like mist, floated through his mind.

"Stop whatever it is you're doing, Semele."

"You seek to see me. Be sure Zebadiah. Be very sure."

"I'm sure. I need to see you." He opened his eyes. The ceiling was a dull grey unmoving surface above him. Very cautiously he levered himself up on his elbow.

Semele knelt beside him, her head bowed tightly to her chest. Her long black hair hung in waves of loose, silken curls, shielding her face.

Her hands were clenched tightly to her stomach. She looked so stiff he feared she'd develop cracks. He stretched out his hand to touch her, reassure her he wouldn't hurt her.

She jerked away, scrabbling back into the shadows, startling him. She'd lured him here yet now, she seemed terrified of him. It confused him, more than just a bit. Despite it all, he wanted her with unsettling strength.

"Semele, what's wrong?" He spoke as softly as he could. She didn't move. "Semele?"

He heard her take a quick, sharp breath. "I'm frightened, Zebadiah. There is no turning back for me. I did not know I would fear this moment so."

He gingerly rubbed the back of his head again. The goose egg forming there was painfully tender but he'd survive.

"Are you afraid of me, too?"

"Yes. I did not suspect until very recently you were human. And now the bonding is complete for me."

That was sobering. Humanity had indeed earned its less than stellar reputation in space. He had to get her to come closer. If she had somehow bonded to him then they had a big problem.

He didn't feel bonded to her. At least, he didn't think he did. He'd admit to being achingly, wonderfully, excruciatingly aroused by her, but that was all he was sure of.

The strange rhythm to his heartbeat wasn't reassuring. His father had died of a heart attack. He'd better get his brain working again and figure out what the hell was really going on.

It was that or get over the denial stage. Either way, his gut instinct said he was in way over his head. So, I'm your mate now?"

"Yes. I am sorry. I did warn you."

Her mate. She was serious.

His groin tightened. His balls tightened. Hell, he'd swear his belly button was begging for sex.

He snorted. "Yes, you did. It worked well, don't you think?"

He sensed her relax just a bit. A few tiny bells jingled as she shifted. He looked up at the ceiling and tried to figure out his next move. He looked back at her sharply, realization dawning.

"You're creating that shadow you're sitting in, aren't you? There isn't any way for the lighting in here to make a shadow where you are."

"Yes," she whispered unhappily.

It was time to see just how bonded to him she was. It was time to be firm with her.

"Stop it now, Semele. Let me see you."

The shadow lessened, turning into a shimmering silver veil. He could see her form but she still hid her face. Her shoulders shook. A small sob escaped her.

He didn't stop to think beyond the fact she needed him and whatever comfort he could give her. He'd never been able to turn from any wounded or hurting creature. He rolled to his knees and reached for her.

She cried out and shoved at him, fighting him, then collapsed in his arms. Searing heat flashed through every molecule in his body eclipsing his concern for her. His heart was doing funny things in his

chest again, beating wildly, then slowing, only to pound again. She was limp in his arms, her breathing irregular.

His fingertips searched her wrist for a pulse point and found it. The pain in his chest grew. He loosened his grip on her as she struggled to sit up.

"Easy, Semele." He tried to assist her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him. Her breathing slowed. The pain in his chest eased and he suddenly realized her heartbeat was slowing to match his. The knowledge spiked his pulse. Hers echoed it. *Damn.*

He took a deep breath and did his best to slow his pulse and relax. Once again, he sensed his efforts echo in her. Would this always happen to her? Was this part of the bonding she spoke about? If he were in pain would she feel it? Did she feel how badly he wanted her?

The questions beat at him even as the logical part of his brain told him answers might take some time.

He pried her loose from him, thwarting her efforts to shield her face. He grasped her chin more roughly than he intended, but she wasn't being agreeable. Wide emerald eyes with amethyst flecks met his. Not the eyes she'd shown him in her younger self.

"Zebadiah," she whispered, her gaze locked with his. He gentled his touch, pleased that she didn't look away. He couldn't keep drowning in those deep green depths if she looked away.

He shivered as her trembling fingertips caressed his face, learning its curves and angles. She licked her lips. Need jolted through him. He wanted her, badly enough to take her here on the floor, and he wasn't at all comfortable with the feeling.

"You fear me?" Her voice was a whisper, the barest song in the stillness between them. She'd spoken and yet he'd hear her voice in his head, too.

"I don't understand what is happening."

She nodded, touching his face again. "We are given to each other." She paused, uncertainty clouding her gaze. "It will take time for you to understand and to trust."

"Yes, it will." Lord, he was talking like they had time. He had a ship to board in just a few short hours.

It didn't matter. He knew in that instant he couldn't let her go. Ever.

Understanding or not, trust or not, he would have her. He knew that, too. The siren song that teased him shrieked. He didn't have the willpower to resist it and walk away from her. She'd warned him that once they touched there was no turning back.

"I will go where you go, Zebadiah."

"I'm going to Earth," he said flatly, fearing she couldn't live there.

"Then I am going to Earth," she replied calmly. She swallowed once, hard.

"You should lift me from the floor. I'm cold." Her voice was the voice of the little girl again. It shot straight to his heart.

He was burning up. His back was sticky with sweat. He'd give her his jacket if he could figure out how to get out of it without letting go of her.

Breaking physical contact with her felt wrong. If this was part of the bonding she spoke of he was in trouble. He wasn't such a rich man

that he didn't have to go out and make a living by working a job. Even once they made it to Earth he'd have to play some part in the family business.

He gathered her up and got his balance, rising with her in his arms. Her eyes widened in surprise then the corner of her mouth twitched. She ducked her head and looked up coyly at him from under her lashes.

Uh-huh. Cold his ass. He'd have to keep on his toes to stay a step ahead of her. He cocked an eyebrow at her. "I don't suppose you have someplace to sit down, do you? And I mean furniture. Not something you've somehow conjured."

"Yes, Zebadiah," she said meekly, her voice once again that of the woman. "Carry me behind those bookcases." She snuggled in against him.

"Carry you, huh? Drop you on your sneaky little bottom is what I should do." He was on to her now. He'd not be so unsuspecting the next time she used that sweet, little-girl voice on him, unless he was in the mood to play at being gullible.

"I would not like that, Zebadiah." She held him tighter. Her head dropped to his shoulder and he melted all over again. No one had ever said his name the way she did.

She was light in his arms and he easily carried her around the end of the bookcase. There was a door, ajar, with soft, flickering light coming from within the room beyond. He shouldered the door open. His mouth went dry.

It was difficult to see just how large or small the room really was. Lit entirely by small white candles, three of the corners were shadowed. The walls were covered by drapes of the darkest blue. A white chair occupied the one visible corner. Beside it was a small table upon which sat a crystal bowl. The candlelight made the brightly colored gemstones that filled the bowl dance and swirl.

What really drew his attention was the bed.

Canopied in the same dark blue, plush fabric, the bed beckoned, its private darkness offering fantasies substance, and pleasures sought, found.

That he could lay her down on that bed and take her without offense or trespass was without question. He knew, in that odd way of knowing that suddenly had come upon him, that she wanted that very thing. He wanted it, too, and it made him hesitate.

He sat in the small chair, arranging her to a comfortable position in his lap, pulling her tightly to him. It was a foolish move. She pressed her bottom to his groin, a subtle pressure that provided her a good feel of the hard ridge of his maleness.

Her eyes widened.

He grinned. "Like what you feel?"

She opened her mouth to speak, then snapped her jaws together so firmly he heard her teeth click.

He did the only thing he had blood enough left in his brain to do. He slipped his fingers into the silken mass of her hair, cupping the back of her head.

Her eyelids fluttered. She slipped her arms around his neck. She wasn't human.

He didn't care. He lowered his mouth to hers.

Her soft lips parted, quivering under his. She tasted like some exotic honey, sweet and pure. Gently, carefully, he kissed her, fighting the ancient male compulsion to plunder, to stake his claim to her.

She was unmoving, neither accepting nor rejecting. Her fingers fisted in his shirt. Beads of sweat broke free, running down his side. Then she sighed and it was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard.

Heat seeped into his chest, making him aware of the strange phenomenon of their hearts synchronizing. His groin was tight, uncomfortably so, and he shifted restlessly.

She jerked away from him, staring at him with huge, startled eyes.

He knew what she was thinking.

He knew.

He knew quite a bit all of a sudden.

She hadn't known what kissing was all about. Her limited intellectual knowledge of humans hadn't included what a kiss did for a man, hadn't known how it could fuel his ardor. She knew now, though.

"Semele." He smiled at her. He stroked the curve of her cheek. "Don't your people kiss?"

She shook her head. "You do not understand. You resist."

Obviously. All he really understood was it was becoming harder and harder to keep from tossing her to the bed and taking her. The

greedy demon in his belly howled for release while he struggled to be civilized. "I understand a little."

"No, you do not. Why do you hold back? We must mate for the bonding to be complete and you hesitate." She opened her robe, letting it fall from her shoulders.

He stared. Her full breasts were two perfect golden globes the color of ripe wheat fields. The skin darkened near the coffee brown aureoles. He hastily scooped her gown robe up, covering her but not temptation. She tilted her head and frowned.

"Am I not pleasing to you?" She reached for his zipper. He covered her hand with his, stopping hers. He'd embarrass himself completely if she touched him right now.

"You are very pleasing to me. So pleasing I'm about ready to expire of it. But you've got to give me a little time here, Semele. I've known you all of about an hour and now we're married?"

She looked puzzled. Her delicate eyebrows knit together. Her rosy lips pursed. She cocked her to the side again. He recognized the mannerism to be the outward indication of deep contemplation. He'd remember that, too. She was too quick a thinker not to pay close attention to the signs. She shook her head.

"We are not married. Marriage can be dissolved. The bonding cannot. I am yours, Zebadiah. It remains to be seen if you will become mine." She pressed her bottom down into his lap again.

His eyes crossed.

She jerked upright, her spine straight. She blinked wide green eyes at him. "Have I misunderstood that..." she looked at the

pronounced bulge he sported, “*that* is an indication of desire to mate in a human male?”

“Oh, jeez.” What had he gotten himself into? He tapped her nose lightly with his index finger. “Now listen, wife.”

She treated him to that wide-eyed blink again.

“I’m going to try to survive kissing you again. No talking. No sending me subliminal messages. No reading my mind. No hands on my crotch. Got it?”

She blinked several times. Then she smiled.

Not a welcoming, friendly, pleased, happy smile, no. Not a smile of compliance, not her. She smiled like the cat that just ate the canary in the old nursery rhyme his gran had told him.

“I understand, Zebadiah. You must lead.”

Oh, hell. She’d outflanked him again. He’d just give in gracefully before his oxygen starved brain shut down.

“Yeah. I must lead.” *At least for now.*

He tipped her head back.

Her eyelids fluttered closed. Her fingers tightened on his shoulders.

He touched his lips to hers.

She inhaled sharply then melted into him.

He feasted on her mouth, nibbling on her bottom lip, teasing until she squirmed in his lap.

He slipped his tongue past her surprised resistance.

She rewarded him with a sensual dance of give and take, delving into the heat of his mouth when he pulled back.

She tried to pull away when she realized what she'd done.

He tightened his grip on her and began again, boldly stroking her lips with his. Hers parted and he accepted the invitation once more. His skin heated everywhere their bodies made contact.

She moaned into his mouth and abandoned all better sense.

He rose with her in his arms and took the two short steps to the bed and laid her down beneath him. He stretched out above her, carefully easing his weight onto her. She was so slight, so slender he feared crushing her.

She allayed his fears, fisting her fingers in his hair and refusing to stop kissing him.

To hell with breathing. It was overrated. He slipped her robe off her shoulder.

Her skin was silky smooth under his lips. He worked his way down her throat. Her pulse hammered under his mouth. She was panting.

"Am I too heavy, Semele?"

"No. Too slow."

Her robe finally parted as he worked the fabric free. He kissed his way down her body, down to the valley between her breasts.

She turned restless beneath him, arching up to him. Her nipples were twin taut brown peaks.

He'd go mad if he suckled at her. He'd go mad if he didn't. He left the sanctuary of the valley and climbed the perfect slope. Gooseflesh popped up under his lips. He sucked a pebbled nipple into his mouth.

She jerked then melted beneath him. Her breath came in short, panting sobs.

He shifted his weight, bringing the hard ridge of his maleness to her mound. Her hips rose to his.

She struggled beneath him.

He rose up, leaning on his elbow, concerned that her fear had resurfaced. He stroked her cheek, a gentle caress of his knuckles across her flawless tawny skin.

Her breathing calmed.

“What’s wrong, baby?”

She answered in a rapid string of alien words he didn’t understand, then glared at him when he didn’t answer. She pursed her lips.

“Don’t give me that look, woman. Speak Terran.” He bent his head back over her breast.

She sighed, a breathy sound that made his toes curl with the effort not to howl.

“I’m tangled in my robe, Zebadiah. Set me free of it.” She blinked her wide green eyes.

He sucked in a deep breath, forcing air into his lungs. That innocent look was going to be his undoing every time and he knew it. Compliance with her wishes would be his pleasure. He yanked the fabric from underneath her bottom, surprised the gossamer stuff didn’t rip. It pooled in shimmering soft ripples across her sun-kissed thighs.

Her scent drifted up to him, a delicate musk, rich in a flavor that sank into his psyche, burned into his memory. It was heady and he

knew without being told that he was blinded to all other women. He was hers as much as she was his. He could wait no longer.

He pushed her robe aside, laying her bare before him. She was very female, with lush swells and gently curving lines, slender but in no way thin. She glowed in the candlelight that birthed the stars sparkling in her eyes and shadowed her secret places. She was free of body hair, did not even have any soft down, and he wondered fleetingly if it were by nature or by choice.

Ever so gently he cupped her. Her body tensed, then her thighs opened. He forgot to breathe as his fingers explored her flesh, mindful of the fact she was not human. Human enough, though. His groin throbbed with an insistent demand for release and relief.

Her eyes were closed. Her lips trembled.

He lowered his mouth to hers, leading her, calming her with what she already knew. She met his kiss eagerly, opening to him, inviting the mock battle for supremacy.

His fingers slipped lower on the welcome her body prepared. He thumbed across her, once, then again, seeking. Her nails dug into his shoulder. He applied a firmer pressure to her, finally discovering her sweet spot.

She writhed beneath his touch.

Slow, he had to go slow and learn her. He had too many clothes on. The heck with buttons. He opened up just enough space between them to pull his shirt off over his head. The cooler air sent shivers across his damp back.

She laid her palms flat to his chest, covering his nipples, then began her own explorations. “Are all human males covered with hair?” she asked, her voice so low he barely heard it.

“It varies from man to man. I have more than some, not as much as others. Do you like it?”

She didn’t answer immediately. Her fingers traced the treasure trail of dark hair that ran down his center. She splayed her fingers, then closed them, trapping the curly hairs between. She lifted her hands allowing the short, springy hairs to escape. *Yes, Zebadiah. I like this.*

He laughed wickedly. Her mental voice was a smug little purr. She ran her fingers through his chest hair once more. Her fingers slipped under his waistband, brushing the tip of his penis.

His eyes wanted to cross.

Her eyes widened. She blinked several times, rapidly, and then swallowed.

“What’s wrong, Semele? Cat got your tongue?” He could almost hear her thinking about that.

She met his gaze and ran one questing finger across his tip again.

His cock pulsed, swelled. He’d only thought he was hard before.

I wish to see all of you.

“Unbuckle my belt, then.”

Her quick fingers nimbly completed their task. His belt loosened. The waistband of his jeans loosened. She fumbled with his zipper but it gave way to her determined efforts.

He slipped his hand between them again, finding her, slick with her want of him.

She dropped her head to his shoulder. Her tiny, sharp teeth nipped at him.

Slowly, so slowly, he teased at her gates. She worked her fingers under the soft cotton of his briefs, touching bare skin for the first time. She rolled her fingertip across him and he knew he'd leaked a few drops, something he rarely did.

He eased his middle finger into her. She was hot, and tight, her walls greedily grasping at the invader. She inhaled, a short, sharp breath that echoed through him.

She grew bolder.

He was suddenly free of his underwear and in her hands. His breath clogged in his throat. His thighs tensed. His balls drew up tight against his body. Sensation skittered across his nerve endings. He cast his thoughts about, desperate to hold his climax at bay.

She released him.

Thank god. He closed his eyes and struggled back against the tide.

"What have I done, Zebadiah?"

The sorrow in her voice snapped his focus back to her. He wrapped his arms around her, finding her lips.

She returned his kiss as boldly as before, sending a frisson of delight through him when she nibbled at his lower lip.

He pulled away. "You're wonderful, Semele. I just need to go slower."

"Why?" She blinked at him.

He groaned. She really was going to be the death of him. “Maybe you’d better tell me what happens when one of your males finishes ahead of one of your females.”

She blinked. “This can happen with humans? This can happen to you?”

He nodded and grabbed at her hand before she could get it worked below his belly button.

She shook her head. “Humans are strange.”

“Very,” he replied wryly. It was time to show her how strange. He rolled away from her and finished stripping to stand naked before her curious gaze.

She chewed on her lower lip. “There is a lot of you, Zebadiah.”

Well, yes, Mother Nature had been kind. He was a healthy eight inches with a two-inch diameter. He knew because he’d made the mistake of opening his cabin door one night to a Plizi female. She’d made a rather clinical examination of him just before she’d declared his proportions within her safety tolerances—barely—and fucked his brains out. He swore off anything Plizi after that. Now the question was had Mother Nature done him in where Semele was concerned?

"Semele, have you ever done this before?"

Her beautiful eyes widened in shock. She wasn't blinking now. "Before the bonding? No, Zebadiah. It would not have been possible."

Bonding. His penis was sending urgent signals to him to forget his curiosity about her, the bonding, the universe in general, and just get on with it and make him a happy member. His penis obviously didn't remember the Plizi female with anything less than extreme fondness.

He sat on the edge of the bed. Her gaze was riveted on his groin. Doubtless her curiosity, and concern, matched his. He stretched out beside her again. She didn't move. He took her hand and brought it to his lips.

"Now that you've seen me, tell me the truth. Will we be able?" His brain was shutting down again. The prospect of not being able to have her was inconceivable.

She blinked. Several times. She nodded slowly then inched closer.

I do not think I mind there is so much of you.

Oh, sweet Lord. He was worried about hurting her and she was pondering her good fortune. He guided her hand to his shaft.

Without hesitation her fingers closed around him.

He rolled her beneath him, heedless of any protest she may have mustered. He took her mouth, branding her as his. Heat swept through him. He welcomed it. Let it burn, let it consume him.

She met his kiss, bolder now. Her fingers moved over his maleness, stilling as he deepened the kiss. He moved against her hand, coaxing her to pleasure him. So what if she took him to the brink of madness? He was ready for it now.

He kissed her until her grip on him tightened past pleasure. Pulling away he kissed his way down her dewed body. The spicy sweetness of her sweat flooded his senses. He slipped his hands beneath her, cupping her bottom. She pressed her thighs tightly together. He kissed the soft skin of her belly.

"Open for me, Semele. I would never hurt you." It was nothing less than truth. He couldn't hurt her. He'd never be able to even raise his voice to her.

He paused, searching within himself for the source of the strange knowledge invading his being. Was this part of the bonding she spoke of?

Something was happening to him. He could feel it. He couldn't fight it and didn't think he really wanted to. He slid his hands down the back of her legs and up the inside of her thighs.

"Open for me," he repeated softly. He brushed a kiss as low to her mound as he could reach.

Her thighs quaked beneath his hands, opening ever so slightly. He applied a gentle pressure, running his thumbs over her mound in encouragement. Carefully, so carefully, he set his mouth to her. She jerked in surprise. That strange sense of knowing told him nothing she knew had prepared her for this.

Nothing had prepared him for her, either. Her scent was sweet, musky, and like nothing he'd ever experienced. It sank into his brain, embedding itself, erasing memories of other times, of other women. All he'd ever remember was her heady fragrance and her exotic honeyed taste.

He marveled at her smooth flesh. She was similar to those now faceless others, and yet not. His lips slid over her hairless skin filling him with the delight of discovery. Her hips rose to meet him as the surprise and tension flowed out of her to be replaced by her willing participation.

Her hips rose and fell, her thighs tensed, then relaxed. Deep in her throat she moaned. Her hands covered her breasts.

His groin had never ached with such need, not like this. He slipped a finger into her and concentrated his efforts on the one spot that would lift her skyward.

She moaned; a long, low string of unknown words.

He didn't need to know the words to hear the pleas of her body. He slipped another finger into her. Her body rained down its nectar. Stars danced behind his closed eyelids.

Her fingers clenched in his hair. He lifted his mouth from her, blowing softly across her wet skin. Her nails dug into his scalp. "Let go, baby. That stings."

Her grip eased. He kissed the silky skin of her inner thighs, all the way down to her knees and back up. She spread herself wider. His fingers closed around his erection and he treated himself to a squeezing stroke. Pleasure jolted through him.

Part of him wished she were bold enough to take him in her mouth. She would, some day, and it would probably be soon. All that held her back now was the newness of his touch. How he knew he didn't question. He knew and that was enough.

He trailed kisses across her body, up to her breasts. Kissing one lovely peak, then the other, he had one thought, one need.

He wanted to sink into her, to feel her heat fist around him as she sheathed him. He shifted, covering her body with his own, easing his weight carefully onto the cradle of her hips.

She was pliant beneath him, accepting him with upraised arms that embraced him. She held him tightly, burying her face into his neck as he brought his sword to her very gates.

He pressed forward and the tender softness of her body yielded to his steel. He plunged, giving her no quarter, seating deeply within her. The world shifted on its axis.

A wave of dizziness spun him, turning him inside out. He held on to her, the only anchor he could reach.

She hurt, burning where his flesh invaded hers, but she reveled in the pain. It confused him to know that, but know it he did.

It was amazement and revelation at once that a woman's passion could rise on such pain. It rippled sinuously through him, gathering force in the pulse beat that throbbed with such exquisite promise in his groin.

And yet, she held him tightly, holding him safe while colors and tastes bombarded him with whisper soft caresses. He could make sense of nothing but where their bodies were locked together.

I am here, Zebadiah. Let go. Accept. It will pass quickly.

He didn't know if she spoke of her pain or his confusion. Perhaps it was both. He pumped into her, needing to give her whatever she desired. Her body yielded again.

It was as if he'd walked through the leading edge of a massive heat wave. On the other side was only Semele. He lost all sense of the candlelit room, the softness of the bedding. He could smell the orange and magnolia of home. He thrust again, hard, heedless of anything but

her voice whispering inside his head and the demand of her hands gripping his flanks.

We need, Zebadiah. I need. Only in this can we truly be one.

To be one with her was all he wanted. It was life itself. His eyes stung with unshed tears. His chest tightened. Joy that he belonged to her suffused his being. And she knew it, too!

Her happiness in her mate rose to meet his joy. They still had shadows to face, a future to decide, but they would not part, not now. He was bonded to her as she was to him. The fog in his brain cleared. The bonding that would link them forever completed. He snapped back to the outward awareness of her body beneath his.

She moaned. The long, low sound sank greedy talons into his groin. She flexed her hips to his. He gave himself over to the ecstasy overtaking them.

She met him thrust for thrust, setting a pace that would not let him slow. He felt her need as surely as he felt his own. Her desire flowed over him, drenched his thighs. Sweat pooled between their bellies. Her legs rose to lock around his hips. He shifted his weight forward and felt her pleasure increase. She was coming. He was with her, feeling the storm gather between her thighs as it thundered down his spine.

There was no longer separation; no longer Zebadiah and Semele. They merged in one heart-stopping moment where he could feel her body open for his even as she rippled around his shaft. She threw her head back, his name a breathy moan on her lips as she climaxed.

Her orgasm fueled his. Shockwave after shockwave coursed through him, a pounding surf that demanded he submit to the need to cast his seed. He spilled into her as they fell into dark bliss as one.

The ecstasy swamped him and her. He knew her surprise and wonder as surely as he knew his own. His mind searched for meaning within this new awareness of an expanded self and found Semele. She wrapped her being around his as securely as her body still held his.

Fear of what the future held welled up in his chest. Her presence was a quiet reassurance that she was his. Her very nature, a female Cincietel, gave her the ability to adapt to her mate and his culture.

Her surprise at the independence of human females reached him. He gathered her closer.

Do only what pleases you, Semele. This is what I want for you.

Then I will do what pleases you, Zebadiah.

He let go of conscious thought and she was there.

How long they drifted on that dark sea, rocked on those gentle waters, he didn't know. He had no sense of the passing of time. It was her sigh, her increasing physical need for him to remove his weight from her that brought him back to full awareness.

He levered up onto his elbows and looked down at her face. Her long, dark eyelashes suddenly swept up and her gaze met his.

She cupped the side of his face. "Please do not be sorry we have bonded."

"I'm not." He kissed her lightly and eased off her.

She put her head on his shoulder and burrowed in as close to his side as she could get.

It was true. He wasn't sorry in the least. He'd never be alone again.

She kicked his ankle. Their strange connection grew misty. His sense of her faded. "No fair, Semele. Don't do that until I learn how to do it, too. Besides, feeling you with me is too new, too wonderful. I want to share it fully for a while."

The strange awareness of her blossomed once more. "I want to share it fully, also. I wanted you to know that privacy is possible. That is important to you."

"Yes, it is." He lifted a lock of her hair and toyed with it. "Can you sense any other males?"

She sighed—a long, breathy sound of mock disgust. "Only if you anger me."

He laughed. She was fibbing to him and he knew it. Whatever this bonding was, it was exclusive. She would only know him.

"Do not be smug, Zebadiah. You will know only me, too."

"I don't mind that idea at all." He wondered if she would want to make love again. She might be a little tender, after all.

She flipped over on her stomach and smiled at him. "I would like that very much. And I will like your home, too. Your bayou. It seems peaceful."

He flipped over on his stomach, mirroring her position. It was all so simple now, so matter-of-fact. She was his wife, or she would be soon. They'd have to make it legal for her to live on Earth.

He'd gotten out of his bunk this morning with no more thought to the future than getting through the day. Now he had a life companion and his future was illuminated with joy and with love.

"I hope you will like the bayou. I hope you like Earth."

She smiled. "I can see more of you than you of me. That will change. You will grow in our bonding. I see Earth as you do. I will like it."

He ran his hand down her back until it rested on her rump. She wiggled her hips for him, smiling.

"You still need to find a gift for your female sibling, Zebadiah. There is not much time left to accomplish this."

He grinned at her and tapped the tip of her nose.

"I've found what will make her the happiest. I've found my truest treasure."

The End

The Nutcracker Returns

Lizzie T. Leaf

Chapter One

“It’s mine!” Chuck shouted at the top of his lungs.

“No, it’s not. I saw it first.” Diane’s shriek pierced the air.

Claire reluctantly dropped into the trunk the pictures she’d been going through. She’d been lost in memories of good times with her mother until the latest fight between the twins interrupted her daydreams.

What disputed treasure had they discovered plundering through the boxes in her parents attic? God she hated this job. The death of her father brought home the reality—she was now an orphan. Okay, maybe a thirty-six year old, married woman wasn’t technically an orphan, but she certainly felt like one.

“Okay, you two. What’s the battle about this time?”

“I found this box with all this cool Christmas stuff and he’s trying to take it.” Diane snuffled and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her sweater, a habit that drove her insane, but Claire chose to ignore for now.

“No, I saw it first and called dibs.” Chuck went into the whine he used when he wanted to get his sister in trouble.

Sitting down cross-legged on the floor, Claire pulled a doll dressed in silver from the cardboard carton. The fragile wings bent at odd angles, but a few minor tweaks and they would be good as new. “I don’t think this belongs to either of you. This is mine, the Sugar Plum Fairy. But, I think we’ll make her part of our family Christmas decorations.”

Next, she fished out a large box. Setting it on the floor between her and the twins, she worked the tight box top until it came open.. Whatever was in there, the person who packed it wanted to make sure it was well protected.

She pushed back the tissue paper covering the contents. “Oh.” A soft gasp escaped and memories flooded in. “My Nutcracker and one of his soldiers.”

“The one guy looks kind of ugly and scary.” Diane pointed at the nutcracker before she scooted back a little, her large dark eyes filled with uncertainty.

“Yeah, he’s cool. But the one in red looks sort of girly.” Chuck’s upper lip curled into a sneer the way his father’s did when David saw something that didn’t meet his approval.

“Can we play with them, Mom?” Diane held out her hands.

“No. They’re not to play with since they’re old and fragile. They’re decorations and we’ll make them part of our family tradition. In fact, we’ll take all the decorations and see what we can use when we decorate the house for Christmas next week.”

“So what makes all this junk special?” Chuck demanded.

Claire smiled and stoked the wooden doll. “The Nutcracker was given to me by my Uncle Fred when I was a little girl. He’d taken a trip to Germany and brought back gifts for me and my brother, Gabe.”

“What did Uncle Gabe get if the Nutcracker was your present? A doll?” Diane giggled at her little joke.

“No. His gift was an army of toy soldiers. This looks like one of the officers.” Claire flicked the medals on the red jacket.

“He’s a Colonel.” Conviction rang in Chuck’s voice on the rank of the soldier Claire held in her hands.

“I’m sure you’re right.” She leaned over and smoothed back the brown hair from her son’s dark eyes and planted a kiss on his forehead. Another thing for the ‘to do’ list, get Chuck a haircut before the holiday madness became completely out of control.

Holidays. That word brought so much joy when she was a child, but now the season added more stress to an already busy schedule as a full time working mother.

“Mom, tell us about when you were a little girl.” Diane used her best pleading, puppy dog look which always worked on her father and depending on the situation, worked on her mother as well.

Claire wrapped her hands around her legs and placed her chin on her knees and let the memories of the Christmas she received the

nutcracker roll over her. “Okay, I’ll tell you a little before we have to get going.”

“The Christmas Uncle Fred brought my special gift is my favorite. I danced and danced around the tree with my nutcracker in his shiny uniform and hat. Then your Uncle Gabe decided he wanted to play with him.”

Diane picked up the nutcracker and looked at him. “Look Mom, his face has a crack.”

“That’s right. When I wouldn’t let Gabe have my prince,” she grinned at her daughter, “...by then I thought of him as my prince, your uncle grabbed him and whacked him against a table, breaking his jaw. I became hysterical when I saw teeth scattered on the floor.”

“Wow! I didn’t know Uncle Gabe could be so mean.”

The admiration in Chuck’s voice at his uncle’s evil deed caused Claire to look at her son and sigh. Oh well, aggression was programmed into the male gene. Still she couldn’t let the remark pass without comment. “Don’t get any ideas, young man.”

“More, Mommy. Tell us more about the story.” Diane had become impatient with her mother’s loss of focus.

“Well, your grandfather glued the broken jaw and put the teeth back in place. I put my special prince under the Christmas tree and told him goodnight. Then when everyone was asleep, I slipped back downstairs to check on him.”

Diane leaned forward, a frown puckering her brow. “Was he alright?”

Claire smiled. It was like her tender-hearted daughter to want things to be right. “Yes. The glue did the trick. Happy again, I turned on the Christmas tree and sat watching the lights dance over him. Your uncle had set his soldiers up under the tree too. It looked like an army marching off to a battle with my prince in the lead.”

Chuck scoffed. “Yeah, right. The colonel wouldn’t let some dinky prince take over his army.”

“Is that right, mister?” Claire tapped him on the shoulder with the back of her hand. “Did you know a prince out ranks a colonel, or even a general for that matter?”

Diane shook her mother’s arm. “Then what, Mommy?”

Then what? Claire asked herself that question a lot over the next few years. Her parents said it was a dream, but a little part of her always wanted to believe what happened next was magic. “I fell asleep and all of the Christmas decorations came to life. There were mice who loved to dance and my nutcracker was a real prince.” She picked up the doll and traced her finger along the hairline crack in his jaw. “There was also a rat king and his army. My prince and the soldiers had to fight them and the rat king was killed. Then the prince took me back to his home and said I was to be his princess.”

“And then?” Diane’s eyes danced with excitement.

“And then I woke up and my beautiful dream was over, just like this story.” Claire stood and dusted off the back of her jeans. “Let’s get this stuff loaded up and head home. I think we’re done with cleaning out the attic until after the New Year.”

* * * *

Claire slipped down the stairs and turned on the Christmas tree. Sitting on the couch, she tucked her feet under her and watched the twinkling lights reflect their colors off the gaily wrapped packages underneath.

Once again, the memory of the Christmas she received her favorite present played through her mind. Just as he had that year, the wooden nutcracker stood guard with the assistance of the toy soldier Chuck insisted was a colonel. Her son had arranged the rest of the army behind them in case anyone tried to sneak in and steal the presents Santa left. No doubt about it, the boy was blessed with a vivid imagination.

How her life had changed since that holiday so long ago. Both her parents were gone and her brother Gabe lived in New York with a family of his own. They usually spent Christmas together, but since Gabe had been home a few weeks ago for their father's funeral, they'd forgone the expense this year. Maybe that was a mistake. She missed him more than ever.

A yawn escaped, but not ready to go upstairs yet to the warm bed where David, her husband, blissfully snored, Claire pulled the red cashmere throw from the back of the couch and placed it over her legs. She allowed her eyes to close for a moment until a sound started her.

Glancing around, she opened her mouth ready to let out a scream when she saw what created the noise. But then her scream turned to a smile.

Chapter Two

Three rather large mice whispered among themselves.

“Do you think she’s asleep?” The roly-poly one peered up toward the couch.

“Well, her eyes are closed,” the shortest one declared. “I must say though, she has certainly grown since the last time I saw her.”

The tall, lanky one scoffed. “Of course, you idiot. It’s been over twenty years. What did you expect?”

Twenty years? Claire thought she’d misunderstood. When did she meet this trio before, especially that long ago? There was one sure way to find out. She cleared her throat. “Excuse me, have we met?”

Roly-poly jumped and crashed against Lanky, toppling him which caused him to tangle his long legs between Shorty’s. All three ended up in a heap on the floor. Claire put her hand over her mouth to smother the giggle that threatened to escape.

“Oh my, I’m sorry if I startled you.” She tossed the blanket aside and rushed to help the mice to their feet.

“You didn’t startle me. I...uh...I tripped when I took a step forward.” Roly-poly puffed out his chest. “These fools got in my way.” He glared at his two companions.

“Those things happen.” Claire fought to keep a grin off her face at the falsehood. “Anyway, do I know you? What are your names?”

“We were soldiers in the army of the Rat King when he fought the nutcracker dude. We’re just soldier mice.” The tall one looked a little dejected. “We don’t have names.”

“Everyone needs a name.” Claire smiled. “I’ll give you each your own special one.” She pointed to the round one. “Your name is Roly-poly.” Placing a hand on the head of the shortest she declared, “And you are Shorty.”

“What about me?” the tallest asked impatiently.

“Lanky. From now on, you’re called Lanky.”

All three mice mumbled their names out loud and grinned. Claire was delighted to see their new monikers met with approval.

“Uh oh, we got company.” Shorty nodded toward the Christmas tree.

Claire turned and felt her heart race with excitement. The nutcracker and the toy soldier walked toward her. My, oh my, but they both had grown into fine specimens of adult males. It had to be magic since nothing else would explain how two foot tall wooden dolls had grown into six feet of eye candy.

“Claire!” The nutcracker came forward and took her hands in his, planting a kiss on each cheek.

He wasn't handsome in the Hollywood pretty boy sense; too rugged, but his broad shoulders tapered down to a lean waist and his thighs could probably crack anyone who had the fortune of being trapped between them.

Claire's fingers itched to slip under the waistcoat and run her hands over what had to be unbelievable pecs the way the jacket fit across his chest. She bobbed a little curtsy and hoped her face wasn't as red as it felt at the lustful thoughts playing through her head. "My Prince."

"Please, Claire. We are old friends." He smiled and her heart did a little flip-flop. "Call me Phillip."

"Phillip." Claire resisted the desire to reach out and trace the line down the side of his face. Father did a good job on the repair work, but it had left a scar.

"Do I get an introduction?" The toy soldier stood beside the nutcracker demanding to be introduced.

Be still my heart. With any luck the saliva collecting in her mouth wouldn't run down her chin in a stream of drool. *Move over Brad Pitt, you've got competition.* This guy was to die for. Where did she start appreciating his beauty? The blonde curls, the blue eyes, or the athletic body? So much lusciousness to take in, her eyes didn't know where to look first.

"Hi, I'm Claire. So nice to need you...I mean meet you?"

Lord, help me before I make a complete fool out of myself.

This situation was totally different than the one she experienced as a child. These guys were hot in totally different ways and her

thoughts went way beyond being a princess. She wanted to jump their bones. Either one would do or better yet, why not both?

“Claire.” The soldier clicked his heels, bent over the hand he held in his and placed his soft lips to the back of it. “At your service, madam. My name is Captain Liam Holbert.”

“Yes, Claire. The Captain and I were friends, but since we spent so much time together in the same box the past few years, we now have a special relationship.” Phillip stroked the arm of the man beside him and smiled.

Claire watched the tender look exchanged between the two. “Please don’t tell me you’re gay.”

“Gay?” Liam frowned. “Well, I admit there were moments of depression packed away as we were, but yes, I think for the most part we were gay. At least we tried to be happy, don’t you think, Your Highness?” He picked a piece of lint off the nutcracker’s uniform.

“I think it’s safe to say we were happy and our friendship helped keep our morale intact.”

Crap, they think I’m talking about happiness. Well, it has been a long time and maybe the term gay didn’t mean the same thing back then. “No...I mean don’t tell me that you like each other in a...sexual way.” She didn’t think she was getting her message across and decided to enhance more. “That you’re life partners.” They couldn’t be so dense not to understand what she meant here, could they?

“Oh my.” Liam’s mouth fell open. “You mean like getting naked and getting it on?”

“Claire my dear, we’ve never seen each other without clothes. We just spent a lot of years in close quarters and it’s to be expected we formed a close bond.”

Lanky nudged the nutcracker. “Yeah, about the most they could do in the cramped quarters was celebrate with a few hand festivals. Right boys?” The other two mice laughed until they held their sides when Lanky moved his hand up and down over his crotch.

The nutcracker turned red in the face. “You have to realize men have certain desires and there are times when they have to be accommodated.”

“Yeah, the wood men had woodies.” Roly’s belly shook with glee at his joke.

“Roly, Liam—we don’t have time for the jokes right now or the sexual innuendo.” Shorty’s voice had taken a serious tone.

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry about that.” Roly hung his head and Lanky nodded in agreement.

“What’s wrong?” Prince Phillip demanded.

The three mice exchanged glances and Lanky sighed. “Do you remember the fight with the Rat King, Your Majesty?”

“Most certainly. I dispensed with him in no time at all.”

“Well, Sire. He had a son who has sworn to avenge his father’s death. He’s been waiting for you to come out of hiding.” Shorty stared at the floor when he uttered the last few words.

Prince Phillip glared. “Hiding. I’ve not been in hiding. I had no choice about being packed away like a piece of unwanted clothing.”

“We are well aware of that Sire, but that is the rumor he has spread. We’re here to tell you he’s gathering his army and preparing for battle.” Lanky squared his shoulders and met the Prince’s glare.

“We’ve come to offer our services to you. The new Rat King is far more cruel than his father and not a very good leader. He spends his days gorging on sweets and fornicating with young females.”

Liam stepped forward and saluted. “Not to worry, Sire. Our army is ever at the ready.” He inclined his head toward the mice. “We will be honored for you to serve with us. Come, let us gather the troops and have a strategy session.

“Miss Claire, I look forward to the opportunity to get to know you better once we have rid ourselves of this latest nuisance.” Captain Holbert turned smartly on his heels and marched away with the mice in tow.

“I’m afraid, my dear, I must go too.” The Prince graced Claire with a sad smile. “This battle will decide the fate of Toyland.” He bowed in her direction. “Liam is correct. We will both look forward to seeing you once this confrontation is over. When it is safe, I shall return and once again spirit you away to my world.”

* * * *

“Well, well, if it isn’t the human bitch that caused my father’s downfall.” The new Rat King steadied the fat mole on whose back he sat and sneered at Claire.

Startled, Claire turned and felt anger surge through her at the despicable creature's accusation. "I didn't cause your father's death. Greed and pride caused him to pick a fight with someone superior to him in sword fighting."

If possible, this creep was uglier than his old man and not nearly as tall. Magic had not been kind to the new rat king. With luck, he was four feet high and about the same width. Bugged eyes covered the nine heads, reminding Claire of warts. The mouths on the two faces in the middle moved at the same time and the single nose set in between the talking heads looked more like a snout. As for his complexion, she'd seen warthogs with smoother skin. The poor mole on whose back he perched was about the size of a donkey and definitely looked like a beast of burden with the way his back swayed downward with the weight of its rider.

"No matter my dear, he's dead and I am now king. Once I've taken care of the two pansies, I'll be back for you. A nice morsel like you will make a fine addition to my harem. Maybe I shall make you my queen and rule Toyland with you at my side."

His insane giggle echoed in Claire's ears as the Rat King spurred the mole with his heavy spurs, causing the poor animal to rear back before he galloped off, while his rider tried to adjust himself in the ornate silver saddle.

The thought of the freaky Rat King touching her, let alone taking her to his bed gave Claire the hebbie-jeebies. No way would she allow that creep to lay a hand on her. She scanned the room for a weapon and

spied the baseball bat under the tree waiting for a delighted Diane to find it Christmas morning.

Settling on the couch once again, she clutched the bat and waited to see who would come for her.

Chapter Three

“Claire.”

She opened her eyes and released her hold on the baseball bat, letting it drop onto the couch beside her. Prince Phillip’s uniform was torn in a couple of places, but other than that he looked none the worse for wear.

“I promised to come back for you.” He held out his hand. “Are you ready?”

Claire rushed into his arms and laid her head on his shoulder. “Oh yes. I’m so glad you’re safe.” She’d carried him in her heart for years and wasn’t about to give up any time she could spend with him now. Married or not, a girl had to live her dreams.

“The Rat King is dead. Liam and I defeated him. Would you like to see Toyland as it is today?”

Her heart pounded in her ears. This had to be a dream, just as when she dreamed of making the journey as a child. No harm would come of her indulging a in few hours with a man she’d lusted after before she knew the true meaning of lust.

“Yes,” she whispered.

In the blink of an eye, they stood in the Christmas Wood. The trees glittered and sparkled, not with snow, but with fruits of silver, gold, and gemstones.

Flute music tickled her ears and various creatures came out of the woods and danced. Luminous images of pink and white dancers twirled across the snow, delighting Claire as much now as they had when she was a child, only now as an adult she towered over them as the nutcracker had then.

When the song ended, the dancers faded back into the trees and Phillip took her hand in his. “Come, we must make our way to the city where my palace is and where Liam awaits us.”

Delicious scents of gingerbread and spices of cinnamon and nutmeg treated Claire’s sense of smell as she and Phillip made their way across a valley of candy canes and cookie trees before they came to a lake. Waiting was a swan boat of crystal and gems which sailed them across the water to the other shore. They took a path of baked sugar cookies sprinkled with almonds to the palace gates that opened as they approached.

A trumpet blast heralded their arrival. Claire twisted her head in an effort to see into the throng of people crowding around them.

“Are you looking for Liam, my dear?”

“No. I hoped to see the Sugar Plum Fairy again.”

“I have to admit I’m surprised she didn’t meet us when the boat landed, but I’m certain she’s making sure everything is ready for the feast.” The crowd parted as Prince Phillip stepped forward and led

Claire through the crowd. “We have a few hours before the feast. Why don’t I show you around?”

They stopped before a large door decorated with gold and diamonds. “These are my private quarters.” Phillip opened the door and motioned for Claire to enter.

“It’s about time you two got here.” Liam stood by a table that held a bucket of champagne and three glasses. He grinned at Claire and winked. “I think we’ve grown up enough to leave the fruit punch behind, don’t you?”

Claire laughed and rushed forward, delighted to see him, with or without the bubbly. She took the offered glass and proposed a toast. “To the three of us.”

“To the three of us.” Both men raised their glasses and Claire caught the look exchanged between them. *What are they up to?*

Claire watched Liam place his glass on the table and felt Prince Phillip come up behind her and place his arms around her waist.

“Claire.” His breath tickled her ear, shooting a tingle down between her legs. “We have discussed our feelings for you. Both of us want to make love to you. We decided, if you’re agreeable, we’ll do it together.”

Agreeable. Hell, that’s what she’d wanted since she set eyes on the two earlier. What woman wouldn’t want to have two gorgeous men fulfill her desires? One so masculine and rugged, the other beautiful to the point of frightening. *Oh yeah. Bring it on.*

Instead of responding as the wanton hussy she felt like, Claire lowered her eyes and whispered a demure, “Okay.”

Let them take the lead since it was their suggestion.

While Phillip nibbled on her neck and ears, Liam came forward, taking her left hand in his and kissed the open palm. His mouth started a trail up her arm, allowing the tip of the tongue to slide up to her elbow.

Goosebumps sprang up all over her body when Liam pulled back and looked into her eyes. Intense heat replaced the chill that caused her to shiver. Phillip's hands moved up and cupped her breasts, massaging the nipples through the material of her robe and nightgown.

"I think we should take these off." Liam untied the belt to her robe and the pink satin fell apart exposing the matching lace trimmed gown.

"All of us should undress, but first let us help you." Phillip released his hold and led her to the bed. Both men worked to slip the robe off her shoulders and then rained kisses on each of her creamy shoulders.

The ache between Claire's legs turned into a burning need. She wanted one of them to reach down and touch her; to use his hand to ease some of the desire that flamed there. Instead, they stepped back and started to unbutton their uniform jackets.

Claire reached for the belt buckle on Liam's breeches. Unfastening the clasp; she worked to open the button and then slid the zipper down. Next, she turned to Phillip and performed the same task. There was no doubt both men were ready for action. Their rigid male members were good soldiers and stood at attention, tenting the boxers they wore under their breeches.

She sat on the edge of the bed and watched as they shed the rest of their clothes. Gluttony was the word that popped into her head as she beheld the studs in front of her. One thing for sure, she'd never get her fill of these gorgeous males if she sat here a lifetime.

They moved over to Claire and reaching out in unison, each slipped a nightgown strap off her shoulder, pushing them down to free her arms. The pink satin and lace slid to her waist and two sets of hands caressed her shoulders and bare breasts while she massaged the erect cocks in front of her.

Leaning forward she took the velvety tip of Phillip's in her mouth and swirled her tongue around. Rewarded with a groan, she moved her hand down the shaft and followed with her lips, moving the magnificent appendage in and out of her throat. Phillips fingers tangled in her hair, urging her to take him deeper.

Her free hand stroked Liam's massive maleness, at times slipping down to squeeze the full sack of his scrotum. Not only did the man have a great slonge, he had the balls to match.

She released Phillip's pulsing erection with a pop and turned her attention to Liam's. It wouldn't do to neglect either of the studs with the little teasing she enjoyed, but this wasn't the way she wanted to finish them. No sir, she wanted to feel each of them buried between her thighs.

She opened her eyes and glanced upward. The two men had leaned toward one another and were in a lip lock.

Holy shit. I thought they'd only given each other hand jobs while packaged away all those years.

From her angle, she could see the battle of tongues taking place and the heat between her legs intensified. Watching them nibble each others lips and deepen their kiss, Claire's hand stroked faster and her mouth sucked harder.

"Stop Claire." Phillip, grabbed the hand she stroked him with.

Liam pulled his cock from her eager mouth and grinned. "It's our turn to taste your delights now." He pushed her back on the bed and positioned his long lean body beside her. His tongue, that only moments before had been buried in Phillip's mouth, now invaded hers.

Phillip got her attention as his deft fingers massaged her feet, working up her legs. Soft, gentle stroking soon reached her thighs and at the same time Liam worked down her neck with kisses. This was more intense than any of the daydreams she had about two men making love to her and something she didn't want to forget.

When Phillips fingers reached the wetness between her thighs, they played briefly with the curly hair before parting them for access to her vulva. She spread her legs further and he slipped a finger inside, moving the digit in and out. He sure knew how to give a finger fuck. When the heat of his mouth replaced his hand, Claire thought she'd died and gone to heaven. His tongue tickled her clit, licking and sucking against the sensitive organ.

Liam worked on her breasts, teasing them into burning mountains of desire. Each man had their sucking, licking, and kissing down to a fine art. How often had they indulged in a threesome to reach this level? Who the hell cared as long as she reaped the benefits?

Surely, she'd explode at this rate. Talk about sensory overload. Convulsions racked her body and she bucked on the bed. Each man held on with effort and continued their attention to the parts they were focused on at that moment. She gasped, "Please, please. Stop."

They ignored her plea and within minutes, Claire felt the spasm of another orgasm flood through her. Could one pass out from pleasure?

One of the men flipped her over and positioned her on her knees. At this point she had no idea who entered her doggie style from behind. Talk about filling the well! As he thrust into her, a hand lifted her head up and she felt the tip of a cock on her lips. Opening her mouth, she sucked with gusto as her other lover pumped from behind. Listening to the guttural sounds emitted by both men she knew their time was fast approaching.

The one in her mouth lost it first. "Aaahhh." He held her head against him as he shot his cum down her throat. His friend wasn't far behind. A low gut wrenching groan, almost a howl, told her he'd gone over the edge.

Exhausted all three of them collapsed in a heap; entwined like puppies in a litter. Soon soft snores told Claire her lovers did what men in all lands did after sex. She shifted to find a more comfortable position; her tired body flooded with satisfaction.

A smile on her lips, Claire closed her eyes and joined the men.

Chapter Four

Whispered voices intruded into Claire's dream. She slowly opened her eyes and saw the men pulling on their uniforms.

"Rest awhile longer, Claire dear." Phillip leaned over and kissed her, then traced the outline of her lips with his tongue before he stood. "We must make sure all is ready for tonight's celebration. I'll send someone to help you dress later."

Claire paused in the middle of her stretch at the word dress. Crap, she had nothing to wear. "Clothes. I don't have any clothes to wear to a celebration."

"Not to worry." Liam planted a soft kiss on each cheek and then her mouth. "Phillip has already taken care of that. When you get up, look in the closet."

After the men left, Claire debated going back to sleep, but curiosity got the better of her. She tossed aside the covers, located her satin robe on a chair in the corner, slipped it over her bare body and made her way to the closet, throwing open the double doors.

Inside, she found a long gown of layered forest green chiffon and a matching cape. "Oh my, I'll say he thought of it." The detail of jewels

along the neckline of the dress took her breath away. Never had she worn anything so lovely.

A knock at the door interrupted her admiration. “Must be the person Phillip said would help me get ready for tonight.” Carefully, she hung up the dress and made her way to the door.

“Oh, it’s you!” Excited at seeing the Sugar Plum Fairy, Claire caught herself before she threw her arms around the lovely creature and crushed a wing or wrinkled the silver gossamer dress. The slender woman looked as much like a confection as Claire remembered.

“Claire, how lovely you’ve grown up to be.” The Fairy reached out and touched Claire’s cheek. “I can see Prince Phillip’s fascination with you.”

For a brief moment, Claire thought the smile on the fairy’s lips faded, but her eyes must have been playing tricks. Everything about the woman was luminescent, including the smile.

“We must hurry, dear. I need your assistance on a matter and you want to have plenty of time to get ready for this evening’s celebration.”

“You need my help?” Claire wondered what this magical being needed from her. Whatever it was, she’d do anything to help the woman who had been so kind to her on her first visit to Toyland. “Are we going out of the palace? I only have this to wear,” she cinched the belt on the robe tighter, “and the dress for tonight’s party.”

“I see what you mean. We do have to travel a little way.” The Sugar Plum Fairy studied Claire for a moment, then waved her wand.

The satin robe was replaced by a long white tunic, covered by a short velvet cape. Talk about magic, Claire thought as she followed the

fairy down the hall to a waiting sleigh pulled by a pair of white unicorns with golden horns.

“Hurry, get in. We don’t have much time.” The fairy glanced around and then ducked in beside Claire.

Settled under the warm furs in the sleigh, it seemed only a matter of minutes before they arrived at a crystal palace. Blinded by the sparkle of the sun’s rays against the glass, Claire shielded her eyes with her hand and gaped at her surroundings.

They were in a land befitting a Sugar Plum Fairy. The forest surrounding the home consisted of sugar cookie trees tinted with green frosting. Garlands of gumdrops hung from the branches and gingerbread men labored to hang more of the tempting delights from the wall above the entrance gate..

Inside the palace, the Sugar Plum Fairy led her along what seemed to be a never ending corridor that finally led to a spiral staircase. Claire rushed to keep pace with the woman who floated along at speedy clip.

“Here we are.” The fairy stopped in front of a clear door and opened it, bidding Claire to enter also.

Stepping into the room, she saw a single bed against one wall and a small dresser. A few books sat on a table by the bed. Everything in the room was white and crystal giving it a hospital feeling. A little color would go a long way in here, Claire thought as she looked around.

“Welcome to your new home.”

“New home?” Puzzled, Claire turned to face the fairy. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh you will, dear, not to worry.” Gone was the beguiling smile and warmth in her eyes. The gossamer silver and white dress and shimmering wings that earlier appeared luminescent and radiant, now appeared as hard and icy as the pale blue eyes staring at Claire.

She shivered, chilled to the bone by the hatred she saw directed toward her. “What have I done to make you dislike me so? I thought you were my friend.”

“You grew up dear. Making nice when you were a child was one thing. Contending with you as a woman is all together different.”

The fairy smiled, only this time there was no warmth to make Claire feel welcome. “You come back and snatch from me the thing I want most.”

“What did I take that you want?” Claire racked her brain trying to think of what she had taken from the Sugar Plum Fairy. Hell, she hadn’t even nibbled on a gingerbread man this time.

“Prince Phillip, you fool.”

The fairy’s eyes turned dark and hard as sapphires. “Do you think I invested so much of my time and energy into keeping this land going while he was off doing whatever for the fun of it? I’ve earned this kingdom and the way it becomes mine is by marrying the man who will be its king.”

The shimmering wings trembled in rage. “Then you come back and he barely remembers who I am. And to make matters worse, you have also enchanted Liam. I know what the three of you were doing this afternoon locked away in Phillip’s room.”

A sly smile played across her lips. “I’ve planned that game with them, too and no way will I let you destroy my dream. The reek of sex is a very distinctive odor, don’t you think?”

The Sugar Plum Fairy swooped to the door and paused. “You come here and not only try to take my land, but my men as well. Be glad I’m not inclined toward homicide. Keeping you locked up will meet my needs well enough. They will forget you soon and I will be there waiting.”

The door closed and Claire heard the lock click. Dazed, she sat on the bed. “Looks like the Sugar Plum Fairy ditched sweetness and light to cross over to the dark side and became the Bitch from Hell.”

What to do now was the question. She couldn’t stay locked away here forever. David wouldn’t be any too pleased when she wasn’t there Christmas morning to open gifts, plus once the kids realized she was missing they’d be hysterical.

Hysterical seemed like a good thing for her to be right now. “No. Stay calm. You can’t think if you lose control.”

Okay, Phillip and Liam would find her gone when they went back to Phillip’s room. Maybe someone saw her leave with Her Bitchness. Then again, maybe not. The fairy did seem to take a lot of precautions not to be seen by anyone.

Tears welled in Claire’s eyes and she leaned back against the wall. “Wait a minute. For glass this wall sure smells sweet.” She licked a finger and ran it down the slick surface and tasted. “I’ll be damned. Sugar. Frigging crystal sugar.”

Great, she could lick her way out, but as thick as the walls were by the time she finished she'd waddle her way back to the palace from all the sugar consumption. Plus, who knew how long it would take to lick through two feet of the sweet concoction.

"Claire."

She looked in the direction where her name had been called. Someone or something was trying to make their way through the wall. A grunt, followed by Roly's head brought a smile to her face, the earlier tears forgotten.

"Roly, how did you find me?" Claire leaned down and helped the plump mouse wiggle his bottom through the last few inches.

"We saw the Sugar Plum Fairy spirit you away in her sleigh. She seemed to be in a big rush and the way she kept looking around as if to see if anyone was watching made us suspicious."

"Oh honey, let me tell you, is her name ever a misnomer. There's no sugar there and the only plum about her is plum mean. She has everyone fooled, even the humans."

"Good thing we followed, then." Roly massaged his backside. "Guess I've put on a few pounds."

"How did you chew a hole through all that sugar so quickly?" Claire knew mice could chew, but this little guy was impressive.

"Oh, that. I did that a few months back. She held the woodcutter in here for a few weeks. Wanted to teach him a lesson about something. Never did get the full story."

So, she wasn't the first to be trapped in the house of sugar. Claire wondered if this was a habit. Piss off Her Sweetness and she locked you out of the way in a dungeon of sugar. Talk about hell.

"Wait a minute. You said 'we'. Where are the others?"

Still rubbing his bottom, Roly waddled over to the bed. "Shorty and Lanky went back to get help. It took me a little longer to get through the tunnel than I thought. Had to expand the size since I seem to have increased. They can scamper fast when they need to. Help should be here soon. Wait, I think I hear something."

Claire listened for a moment and agreed. The thunder of hooves and high pitched neighing brought Roly to her side and they reached for each other's hands. Hope colored her words. "It sounds like horses."

"Claire. Claire, where are you?" Phillips voice echoed down the stairs.

Claire leaned against the door and screamed at the top of her lungs. "Here, Phillip. I'm here."

Other voices drifted into hearing, one of them female. "Oh, my prince, you don't want to go down there."

The Sugar Plum Fairy was trying to convince Phillip not to come for her. Bitch. Taking a deep breath, Claire screamed "Phillip" so loud Roly covered his ears.

The mouse hit the side of his head with the palm of his hand. "If he didn't hear that, he's deaf, which is what I am now."

"Claire." Liam came around the corner with Phillip right behind him, a female hanging onto Philip's leg. Liam reached down and pulled

the fairy off the Prince and snarled in her face. “Open the door woman.” His voice demanded no argument.

Sobbing, the fairy raised her hand and mumbled a chant. The first two attempts failed, but on the third try the lock clicked and the door swung open.

Phillip looked every inch a prince as he walked forward and put his arms around Claire. “What happened here?” He focused his glare on the Sugar Plum Fairy.

“I...I made a mistake.” The fairy pushed her fine gold hair back and worked to straighten her clothes. A smile played across her lips. “You know how stressful running the kingdom can be, Your Highness.” Her voice took on a cooing tone and she batted her eyes. “I’ll make sure it won’t happen again.” She continued to wave her eyelashes like flags and tossed her golden locks.

Oh good grief, if he falls for that ‘poor me’ routine, he’s not the smart man I think he is.

Claire held her breath and eyed her competition while waiting to see Philip’s response to the fairy’s ploy. *Wonder how the slut manages to open her eyes let alone bat them like that. You’d think the weight of all that mascara would keep make it impossible to lift her eyelids.*

“You are correct.” Phillips voice remained cold. “It won’t happen again because you’ll never be left in charge. You are banned from Toyland.”

“Banned? But, Sire, where will I go? What will I do?”

“That, my dear, is not my problem.” Phillip reached for Claire’s hand. “Come Claire. Liam. We have a feast to attend.”

Chapter Five

Claire decided that never seeing another piece of candy or sugar would be a good thing. Didn't the inhabitants of Toyland ever hear of a healthy diet? No matter, if the menu was lacking, the celebration went off without a hitch. The party was still in high gear when Phillip whispered in her ear it was time to go.

She lay on the bed and watched the two men shed their clothes, her dress tossed across a chair shortly after she arrived. They took her breath away, one dark eyed and intense, with black springy curls covering his broad chest. Her fingers itched in anticipation of weaving through the growth. The other slim and blonde, with a set of six pack abs to die for. She knew if she rubbed her hands across his chest the skin would be as smooth as freshly waxed legs.

Talk about most women's idea of died and gone to heaven.

Anticipation curled in her belly, like a snake ready to strike. The heat between her thighs building, she licked her lips and waited to see what the two had planned as they moved toward her.

Liam tangled his fingers in her hair and urged her to the edge of the bed. Her greedy lips sought his hard cock, capturing and sucking it deep down her throat. He groaned in appreciation.

Glancing to her left, she saw Phillip stroking his shaft. *Fresh meat* drifted through her mind along with new meaning of the term, *organ grinder*. Stiff and ready for what appeared to be more action than the throbbing rod received from its owner, she felt one of Liam's hands release her head. He pushed Phillip's fingers aside and took over caressing the Prince's engorged phallus.

Unable to comprehend the value the Prince placed on this new development, Claire allowed Liam's cock to slide from her mouth and tilted her head back for a better view. The look of ecstasy on his face said it all and she cast a peek at Liam whose lips carried a smile the Cheshire Cat would envy.

Heat surged deep to her core, along with a feeling that could be jealousy. They needed to save their enjoyment of reciprocal hand jobs for the alone times. Right now they had a live, hot blooded woman needing attention.

"Hey, you two, remember me?" Claire didn't make any attempt to hide her pout at being ignored.

Liam's hand dropped Phillip's cock as quickly as a hot potato. "Sorry, my dear, if we're neglecting you. It's just...uh...hmmm..." he blushed, "touching him brings back memories."

Claire lay back on the bed and stretched, giving them a good view of her assets. "Touch away boys, but don't forget to include me in the play."

Phillip laughed. "Our sweet, innocent Claire has become a greedy little morsel, hasn't she Liam?" He dropped to his knees on the edge of the bed and pushed her thighs apart. "Do you think she'd object to my burying my head between her legs and tasting her delights?" He leered at her. "Is that the kind of attention you had in mind, my dear?"

Nodding her head in confirmation, Claire gasped as his hot breath played against the small patch of wet hair surrounding her sex. She didn't think she could get any wetter, but found out different as Phillip's tongue probed inside her opening and Liam's hands kneaded her aching breasts.

Sounds tore from her throat, but her mind formed no coherent thought as passion ripped through her body. The orgasm left her a pile of goo, wanting only to curl into a ball, but they weren't finished with her.

Liam assumed the space between her legs barely vacated by Phillip. The soldier's mouth traveled up her thighs. If possible, his tongue was hotter than the one it replaced and it lapped the juices flowing from her body before attacking her clit.

Her body squirmed in anticipation of things to come. Phillip clasped her chin in one of his strong hands and turned her head to the side. He used his other hand to position his rigid cock against her lips. She readily accepted the offered gift and indulged in the sensation of one man feasting between her thighs and another thrusting into her willing mouth.

Soon, Phillip pulled out and whispered, "Not yet, darling."

Liam lifted his head and moved back. Two sets of hands flipped Claire onto her stomach and one pulled her ass into the air while a pillow was slipped under her. She resisted when the tip of a cock teased her anus.

“Not going to happen, boys. I don’t take it in the ass.”

“Are you sure?” Phillip’s mouth whispered against her ear. “You might like it.”

“I’m sure she’ll like this.” Liam thrust deep into her throbbing vagina and shuddered. “I know I do.”

The slap on her bottom that accompanied each stroke gave new meaning to heat for Claire. The few movies she’d watched with David where the participants played this game always left her wondering why. Now she knew. Envisioning her red butt cheeks as Liam pounded into her and the sting each time his palm connected sent her over the edge again.

If sex centered in the female brain, hers went into overdrive. The spasms generated by the mental picture of Liam buried deep in her abyss pushed her out of control and screams replaced groans.

“Let’s change locations.” Liam pulled out and helped an exhausted Claire off the bed. He led her to the couch where Phillip waited, arms open.

She turned around to allow Phillip to pull her onto his lap, slipping his throbbing cock into her heated well as she sat. His fingers worked their way between her legs where they located the bud of her still engorged clit and began to massage.

Liam stood in front of her and encouraged her to take him in her mouth. His hands cupped her breasts, pinching and tweaking her hard nipple tips.

Claire gave in to the pumping and thrusting in her two filled orifices, allowing herself to flow with the sensation. The men moaned in unison and she felt Liam's heavy testicles in her hand tighten, signaling his impending climax.

He threw back his head and gave a strangled yell. "Oh. Oh!"

Liam's juices flowed down her throat and she felt the hot gush of Phillip's release deep inside her. Each of them prayed to various gods as they pumped their essence into her. If they were as exhausted as she, all three of them would be in for a long nap. They'd done well in not ignoring her.

"Claire. Claire."

Which one of them called her name so intently? How did they have the energy left to put that much emotion into it? She wasn't able to open her eyes to see what whoever called wanted.

"Claire?"

Hands shook her, gently at first, and then with more force. Unable to ignore the demanding voice and the hands shaking her shoulders, she pried her eyes open.

"David? David." Confused, Claire struggled to sit up. "David, what are you doing?"

"Trying to wake you up."

She saw worry and concern, along with confusion in his dark eyes.

“What I thought was a scream woke me. You weren’t in bed and I came to look for you.”

“A scream?” Shit, did she scream out loud when she dreamed about the best orgasm of her life?

“Yeah, I must have dreamed that, but when I came down and found you on the couch you had those dolls clutched to your chest and you were mumbling in your sleep.”

Claire looked down and realized she still held the Nutcracker and the Toy Soldier in her hands. Crap, that must have been what triggered her dream.

“Come on, honey. We better get back to bed. It won’t be long before we have to get up for real.” David extended his hand. “You know the kids will want to see what Santa brought.”

Taking the offered hand, Claire stood and marveled at the wetness between her thighs. Erotic dreams brought real body reactions. She turned to David, a question on her lips and gasped instead.

“What’s wrong, honey. You look a little flushed.” David reached out and felt her forehead. “Nope, you don’t have a fever.”

“Nothing. Just thought I’d forgotten to put one of the Christmas gifts out, but I did it.”

Plus, I just realized how much you look like the prince in my dreams. “Go on up, I’ll be there in a minute.” Claire motioned David toward the stairs. “I need to check one more thing in the kitchen for Christmas dinner.”

David laughed and headed for the stairs. “Don’t be too long. I’ll have your present waiting, wrapped with a big red bow.”

His leer gave Claire no doubt what he had in mind and she flashed him a thumbs up. After an evening of erotic dreams, a girl had the right to be horny, didn't she?

David paused on his way up the steps. "Oh, by the way, hope we have enough food for an extra mouth. I forgot to tell you, I ran into Mark today and his holiday plans fell through, so I invited him to join us. Is that okay?"

"No problem. We have enough food to feed an army." Claire smiled and turned toward the kitchen.

Or a prince and a toy soldier.

David's friend Mark was the image of Liam. With any luck and careful planning on her part, her dream of getting it on with two luscious men would be a reality before the end of the year.

After all, a girl is entitled to more than just dreams. Isn't she?

The End

Or

Is it the beginning?

All I Want

Jefferson Dane

Copper Burney tenderly dragged his ruddy brown fingers down along the folds of Anne's blouse, inviting her to step forward into his arms without ever saying the words. In spite of her age, in spite of his busy holiday escort schedule, Anne Weick continued to be Copper's favorite client, seasonal and otherwise.

Rich women favored him for his exotic appearance during their expensive agency purchased date. Usually after an intimate night with Copper, these same women found other reasons why they favored his presence.

However, he and Anne shared a special bond. Something outside damn good sex, even outside the stereotypical need for some older women to dangle an exotic looking pretty boy escort on her arm.

Well built, yet erudite, Copper's appeal hung on more than his looks. As his nickname suggested, his skin tone was burnished like copper, his

dark salt and pepper textured hair was streaked and marbled with hints of light brown, while his eyes gleamed a deep indigo blue. The mixture showing in his facial features didn't look mongrel at all. Rather the symmetry in his countenance exhibited a sort of flamboyant handsomeness even men envied. In fact, one time when he escorted a woman into a hotel bar, a drunk who'd come off as a rather intolerable homophobic patron admitted: "Damn, a kid like that could almost turn me into a fag."

Women often marveled at the curious mixture of masculinity and Hollywood pretty boy he exhibited. Needless to say, Copper Burney's romance book cover presence often caused panties to moisten wherever he went. He'd been offered modeling jobs by both photographers and artists; however, he'd turned them down. Working as a model stifled him.

"I don't want to be that dumb or that bored," he admitted to Anne. "Besides, I'd have to pay three years of dues to get the money I'm making now."

* * * *

As for Anne Weick, the knowledge of his profession didn't bother her in the least. So what if she seemed to be just another body in a long string of older paying escort clients. She knew the two of them had a special bond, a secret longing that they both shared. They'd talked. Exchanging both wishes and dreams, the two of them had become intimate spiritually as well as sexually.

With the unexpected development of *Make-Up Dot Com*, Anne Weick had gone from ordinary career woman to successful entrepreneur millionaire in a matter of two years. By the time she turned thirty-five, Anne's career zoomed—well on its way to the top. Her company offered both everyday street make-up and specialty make-up: Goth, Halloween, and even theatrical, all at incredibly low prices.

Right at this moment, Anne Weick leaned forward to allow the burnished dark bronze fingers of a handsome man, some sixteen years younger than she, to undo button after button on her expensive silken blouse. He fumbled as his digits quickened the pace.

"No need to hurry, Copper. I'm not going anywhere." She looked into his eyes and grinned.

"Sorry. I seem to be especially eager tonight."

"I know." Anne smiled. She knew she was still an attractive woman. "I often feel that way about you. That's the real reason I come into the city so often now. To be honest, I could pretty well take care of all my business online."

His hands pulled open her blouse and tugged the silken material from the beltline of her skirt. "I guessed that. Thank you for the compliment, by the way."

"You're a bit of an addiction, you know." She shrugged her arms to coax her slick blouse sleeve material off from her shoulders. Now she stood before her young, mixed blood escort wearing only skirt, bra, pantyhose and heels. "An expensive one, too."

"I told you I'd go out with you gratis!"

She dropped her bra straps from each shoulder, and turned her back to him. "I know, but just as soon as we scheduled a night to ourselves, you'd be booked from the agency. This way I know you're mine for the night."

Copper undid the hooks on her bra. "I suppose you're right."

"Damn straight I am. I know how difficult it is to book you. I missed your timetable for all of the long Thanksgiving weekend by two weeks. It's like you were the prize turkey hanging in the shop!"

"So you had to settle for the Monday after."

"Monday and Tuesday, if you remember right."

Anne's pale white breasts jutted out nicely from her chest as her dark companion cautiously outlined the curved folds of where her breast touched her skin with a single digit. "Umm...did I ever tell you how gorgeous your breasts were? They'd have been perfect to breast feed a child of yours."

Her face scowled. "Stop it, Copper, you're teasing me."

"Not at all!" He dropped his mouth to the closest nipple and licked it once. "These breasts are perfect for suckling."

She watched his hands drop to the fastener on her skirt. With a studied motion he undid the fastener and the waistline of her skirt fell open under his practiced fingers. "And these creamy hips...whew! Fabulous."

"Don't be silly, all my weight goes right to my hips." She shimmied out of her skirt and stepped to side to leave it behind on the floor.

"You say that like having a great ass is a bad thing."

She looked back at her companion's face. "Isn't it?"

“You’re impossible, Anne.” Copper shook his head as his thumbs slipped into the elastic lining of her pantyhose and he carefully rolled the nylon material down her ample hips. “I mean for God’s sake what is all this emphasis you white women put on weight loss?”

“You mean like those Hydroxicutt television commercials? Where they show the side-by-side, before and after comparisons of women walking along the beach?”

“Hydroxicutt! You are out of control, lady. Call me unique, but I prefer the...ahem...healthier looking ‘before’ woman.”

“Spoken like a true black man.”

“Damn straight!”

Anne’s hand dropped to the front of Copper’s slacks to feel the strength of the bulge behind the material. “Damn straight is right.”

Once again, Copper brushed the red brown nipple on Anne’s breast making it stand erect. “You are gorgeous!”

“What have you got on that dirty young mind?” Her fingers continued to play at the intumescence pressed against the front of his slacks.

“It’s not my mind you should be worried about,” he replied as he knelt, peeling her pantyhose from her thighs and knees.

“What makes you think I’m worried?” Then she gasped as her dusky young companion’s face reached the same level as her exposed brunette pubic hair.

Her eyes widened as Copper pressed his nose and lips into the pungent triangle of her loins, stroking the hidden pink flesh with his tongue and spending an extra minute or two thoroughly examining her

pussy first hand. She put her hands on his shoulders in order to keep from falling over in a faint as the tension between them shook her very core.

* * * *

Nine months earlier, Anne's friend, Ekaterina, recommended an agency that specialized in erudite, well-educated escorts of the various physical and ethnic types that women like Anne and her colleague favored.

The agency set up a double date for the two of them. Ekaterina went with Copper, while Anne accompanied a young man named Philip. Of course, by the time dinner ended, the two women had all but exchanged dates.

Small talk over the table influenced the choice to trade their companions for the night. Ekaterina didn't care for getting to know her escort and Philip didn't seem to be interested in anything other than how luxurious the hotel suite would look or how many drinks he could pack away. She encouraged Philip to dance with Ekaterina, while Copper and Anne continued to exchange information about themselves.

Was he from the city? No. He hailed from a small bedroom community outside the city. Had he lived there for most of his life? No. He'd been in and out of two foster homes as a young child until he'd been adopted by a local family at the age of three. How did that happen? From what he understood, his birth mother had been much too young when she had him and she'd been forced to give him up.

Anne told him she understood that situation very well, as Anne too had been adopted. No matter how much her adopted parents loved her, Anne always had an empty hole in her soul where she thought her own birth mother should have dwelled. Happily, neither of them had any real foster home horror stories. At least, she'd undergone her foster care as an infant and had been adopted rather quickly. She had no memories of her foster care months.

"The only parents I ever knew were my adoptive parents. However, you know what they say about the cycle of life often coming full circle..." Anne stopped and took a sip of her wine.

"What does that mean?"

She shook her head. "I'll have to tell you all about it sometime."

Copper Burney told her that his parents loved him and he had no regrets about growing up with them, but he echoed Anne's feelings about suffering a vacant hole in his life. That night she learned that even though Copper seemed extremely sophisticated, he was actually a mere nineteen years of age.

"You look much older."

"It's one of my charms."

Anne went over to the phone once they reached her hotel room. "Do you want me to order anything from room service? A bottle of something, maybe?"

"I don't do alcohol on the job," he told her. "It's bad for sexual performance and leads to performance anxiety. Why would any man do that to himself?"

Anne's mouth dropped open. Thinking back on the evening, she realized he hadn't ordered any alcoholic beverage. "Wow! No wonder you didn't try to get me drunk."

"Men and women are alike in that manner, you know." He rummaged through the hotel room refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of filtered water. "Alcohol dries out the body and robs you of moistness when and where you need it the most."

"What?"

He grinned. His teeth showed a perfect smile. "Tell me something, Anne. Were you planning on consummating our evening?"

Startled by his question, she stared into his mysterious indigo eyes for a second and then wordlessly nodded.

He smiled. "Then you'll need one of these. I suggest you make sure you drink at least eight ounces."

A puzzled look crossed Anne's face as she looked at the water bottle in his hand. "Why is that?"

"Sex is a situation that calls for natural body moisture. You can't do better than nature's own internal moisturizer."

"Wait a second, how come I always heard that water dries out a woman's skin?"

"Two reasons," he replied. "One, who do you think pays for those moisturizer ads? It sure isn't your local water company. And two, you're not using it on your skin. You're replenishing the moisture inside your body."

Anne blushed as she took the water bottle from his hand. "Thank you."

“My pleasure.”

That remark made her grin. “I sincerely hope so.”

That night Anne discovered what so many other women found enthralling about Copper Burney. His fingers well oiled in warm lubricating lotion, her evening’s escort caressed and fondled the white bouncy globes of her breasts stopping occasionally to tweak or lick at the now reddening nipples which stood steadfast at attention in tribute to his skill.

Then with no fanfare, he stopped and reached down to lift her naked body from the floor. She clung to Copper’s neck as he carted her the few feet to the hotel room bed. The vivid memory of his laying her down on the bedclothes and stepping back to look at her while she waited breathlessly on her back, haunted Anne. She felt vibrantly alive--older and more experienced; yet, young and supple enough to demand any man’s attention. She stared at the thick bold erection jutting forth from his midsection.

Then she enjoyed more of his attentive touches.

He continued to work the warming, slick unguent down her ribs and belly, oiling her cautiously until he reached the edge of what had once been a distinct panty line. Then scooting and sliding his fingertips across her abdomen, Copper’s right hand slipped deeply into the slick wetness that lubricated her vulval lips. She shivered under the rhythmic ministrations of his probing fingers.

Soon his tongue replaced those dexterous fingers. He worked his tongue and lips around her labia and clit while she trembled under his

efforts. His head came up from the vertex of her thighs. “How beautifully alluring you are, Anne.”

“The better to keep you with, my dear,” she purred. “By the way, that erection is going to be wasted unless you get it up here soon.”

“We won’t waste it.” He reached for a condom package.

That first touch, skin-to-skin, generated pure nervous electricity. Reaching down to grasp his erect cock she could tell Copper anticipated their bodies’ combined total delight as Anne used her own fingers to rub the tip of his dick back and forth through the slick and eager opening of her cunt. Then she slackened her pace, inhaling deeply as the young man atop her initiated his penetration once more.

Copper grasped her shoulders and back with both hands and leaning forward, he shifted his hips forward to apply pressure where Anne was most vulnerable.

Through his angular momentum, he had pushed firmly forward, implanting his long blunt cock into the pliant tissues between her outspread legs. “Ahh, beauty...my beauty! Some men only dream of a fuck like this.”

She grunted out a low pitched squawk. “You are one magnificent liar.”

Her hands snaked around his back to clasp him as close to her as she possibly could and her legs wound around his hips to continue doing the same. It took a little bit of time and effort to establish a sensual rhythm between their bodies, but once she found it, Anne didn’t dream of leaving her partner’s embrace.

There was no subtlety between them as far as she was concerned. As he banged away at Anne with a ramrod stark motion, she felt an enticing need on her part to let Copper indulge and enjoy her body in his own sweet way. He pandered to her needs and she attempted to meet his, doing a dozen variations of the oldest dance known to man—fast, slow, holding extremely close at one moment and then spliced by only a single sensual area the next.

Once his body rose up and away from her totally, leaving only the link between his cock and her pussy as their contact point, Anne experienced his commanding plunge, as the full length of his erection thrust steadily into the confines of her supple sheath.

She watched Copper's body react to their conjoining the way male bodies have done throughout the ages; his breathing came forth in staccato gasps, his hands and arms gripped her full force, his hips and legs worked furiously to insure a strong steady rhythm and his driving erection, clasped deeply within Anne's loins, stiffened and probed further and further inside. Suddenly grimacing and throwing his head back, Copper went penultimately still, halting any motion while his body strained with a new urgent craving.

Had it not been for the condom between them, she knew Copper would have marked Anne as his territory right then and there.

Amazingly enough, even after an orgasm as strong as the one he'd exhibited, the young man still stood strong, erect and very, very hard in his midsection.

"Oh my, what is this?" Anne squealed. Delighted, she kept them both going. Rolling to the right, she straddled him from above. Then

she took control of their sexual cadence. Her young man's hands came straight up, each one centering on and caressing one of her breasts—fondling her with enormous care, massaging her with incredible skill. She sensed his need matched hers at first, and then slowly, surely attempted to top her lover's petition, Anne demanded that he escalate their rematch like some sort of orgiastic contest.

Anne's body culminated; uncontrollably wracked by the persistent prodding, plunging and probing of his penetration. Like too much of a good thing, his constant motion with her set off a string of quick firecracker climaxes, bursting one after another. Especially after so long a time away from such wickedly fantastic sex such as his, the experience felt way too intense.

Exhausted, Anne nearly fainted. She'd never experienced such giddiness during sex before.

* * * *

Her memories from nine months earlier retreated in the excitement of their current lovemaking. However, their shared reality of the present easily matched Anne's initial remembrances.

As the two of them lay in bed together the Tuesday morning after Thanksgiving, Anne kept her eyes riveted on her beautiful male escort until he opened his eyes to see her staring down at him.

"Good morning, beautiful. How long have you been awake?"

She shrugged. "A little while, I didn't want to disturb your sleep."

"I wouldn't have minded."

“I like watching you sleep. It’s special to me. You’re so...I dunno...peaceful when you sleep.”

“Peaceful?” He laughed. “That’s not a word I’d expect to hear from you.”

She shifted on the bed. “Tell me something, Copper. What would you like for Christmas?”

“It’s too early to be thinking about Christmas, Anne. Why don’t you just get me whatever cologne you think smells the best on me?”

“No. I want to get you something meaningful...something personal.”

He laid his hand on her breast and traced the nice circle of flesh that ran close her underarm. “Don’t you think we have something personal?”

“Aww Copper, I don’t kid myself that making love to me distinguishes me from the other women in your sex life.” She leaned toward him and pulled the bed sheet up over her breasts.

“Of course, you’re special, Anne.”

“I’m talking about something totally unique between us—something other people—other clients wouldn’t necessarily understand.”

“Like what?”

“Like wouldn’t you like to locate your birth parents?”

“That’s a monetary and emotional expense I’m not willing to undertake.”

“Maybe I’d be willing to front the money for you.”

“Anne, don’t. I don’t want to know who my birth parents are.”

“Why not? Don’t you think as you grow old...that is...as you mature, you’ll want to know?”

“No.”

She snorted a sound that was half a sigh and half a growl. “Now, you’re just being unreasonable.”

“Anne, leave it alone. Suppose you do find my birth parents. How am I going to explain to them that I’m basically a high class hustler? I don’t know if I have the strength to deal with that. Let me live my life my way.”

“But your adopted parents suspect, don’t they?”

“They know I’m a paid escort. However, that’s all. They both look the other way when it comes to all the rest. Denial runs big in my family.”

“Copper, I really think your birth parents will understand.”

He turned away from her. “Leave it alone, Anne!”

Nevertheless, from that moment on, she had her mind set on giving him a very unique Christmas present. Yes, that’s exactly what Anne would do for him. Hang the expense!

* * * *

When Anne went online to nose around into adoption investigators she discovered that Prime Adopt International worked with several nearby private investigation agencies including one in her home city—the Coyal Rambeau Agency. Taking a chance, she called the agency to set up an appointment. Happily, someone from the agency could see her immediately.

Mr. Rambeau wasn't at all the dapper Frenchman she'd expected. The detective's dark rust colored skin bespoke a mixture of several different races, as did his curious French Canadian accent. Where the mixture in Copper's genes augmented his beauty, the same mixture in Coyle Rambeau would have dismayed the Daughters of the American Revolution. The man wasn't exactly ugly, just unnervingly homely.

No! Anne changed her mind. *His features pretty much crossed over into ugly.*

"I guess the first thing I should tell you is he seems rather adamant about not wanting to find his birth parents." Anne told the head of the agency.

"Then why are you pursuing it?"

"He's only nineteen. Copper's not old enough to know what he really wants. I think he's afraid he'll be hurt."

"You can't force him to meet them."

"I know, but...well..." Anne sighed. "If you don't mind going through the motions, I'll continue to cover your expenses. I decided I wanted to give him something personal, something truly meaningful for Christmas."

"It's not reasonable to expect that we'll find either of his birth parents by Christmas, Ms. Weick."

"I realize that, but I'd like you to try, anyway."

"All right, it's your money." Coyle Rambeau swiveled in his office chair. "Ms. Weick, if you don't mind my asking, are you adopted as well?"

Anne caught his eyes, let out a long, breathy sigh and nodded. “Is it that obvious?”

“You know what the shrinks say about transference, don’t you? Tell me, have you tried to locate your own birth parents?”

She shook her head.

“I’d be happy to cut you a two-fer, a discounted price deal, if you’d like.”

“Ah, thanks but no thanks, Mr. Rambeau. Let’s focus on one mystery at a time, shall we? If...I mean, when we work things out with this assignment, someday I’ll hire you to do some work for me, but it won’t be to search for my birth parents. My needs go much deeper.”

Coyal stared at her for a few minutes letting the silence permeate the room. Then he nodded. “If you insist...” He opened up a file pad full of forms. “Let’s go over what you’ve got and where we can look to find out more. Do you have Mr. Burney’s adopted parent’s address?”

For well over an hour, Anne gave the private detective what details she had plus more. He asked her some rather unusual questions including the nature of her relationship with Copper.

“I take it Copper is not his real name.” Coyle stated flatly. “Sounds like a stage name to me.”

Anne grinned. “It’s Norman. Believe it or not a very sweet little Jewish couple gave him the name of Norman Bernstein II.”

Rambeau took another glance at the mixture of features on Copper’s agency portrait and grinned. “Nice Jewish boy like this...make a great catch for some gal someday.”

Anne started to feel the raw edges of her nerves grate at that last remark.

As soon as he saw her face change, Coyal Rambeau laughed out loud. “I’m not much of one to talk, Ms. Weick. There may even be some Jewish blood on my Canuck side. As it is I’ve got Hispanic, Black and Native American blood swishing through my veins and cloggin’ up my arteries. I’m about as mixed a Creole and Cajun as you can get—mostly ‘coon’...not so much ‘coonass.’ Is that amalgamated enough for you?”

Her facial features softened, but she looked puzzled. “Coonass?”

His eyes flashed. “Pejorative term I might be able to get away with ‘cause I’m part Cajun. Otherwise it’d be like somebody on the street calling Mr. Burney the n-word.”

“I see.”

“Underneath we’re all just human beings after all with human frailties and human secrets, am I right?”

“Yes, you are, Mr. Rambeau.”

“Strangers and bill collectors call me Mr. Rambeau, ma’am. My clients and my friends call me Coyal.” He pronounced his name “Coil.”

“Thank you, Coyal.” There seemed to be a warmth hidden inside that frightening exterior. “I appreciate you taking this case on.”

“I’m interested in bringing this investigation to fruition so we can move onto the more important case. Ms. Weick.”

Anne sat forward in her chair. “Excuse me, what more important case is that?”

“We’ll search for the baby you gave away.”

* * * *

That night she combed through old boxes in one of the two storage areas she had near her home. One was a room attached to her condominium. The other she rented at a secure site off premises.

Where is it? I thought I left it in here?

Box after box stood opened and tossed through as she continued to search for her old diary. With each new box Anne opened, her frustration mounted. She just couldn't locate the lost treasure.

Damn it! How could that man have known?

Did she sport a tattoo that said "*Unwed Mother*" on her forehead? Or was he fully aware of the stereotypical statistics that follow adopted women around? God! You're not even a human being any more...just a statistical stereotype.

She punctured the taped seal on another old box with a pair of shears. "Where are you?"

There! Her fingers reached for the compact volume hesitantly. Here she'd written down all her old secrets and all her old hurts hoping to hide them away forever and ever.

No such luck, lady!

God, the handwriting of that fifteen year old girl looked like some cryptic code. Had this been written in English? Okay, it sort of looked like a distant cousin to English. Locked away inside the clasp and key were all the adventures of her sophomore year in high school and all the sorrows of turning sweet sixteen as a teenage mother-to-be.

Checking the lock, she toyed with the clasp to her diary. She didn't really need the key—a simple bent paper clip or safety pin would do the trick in a matter of moments.

October 14th

Dear Diary,

What a wonderful holiday season this will be! Today they announced that I got the lead role of Juliet in the Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet that the Greenwood Community Theatre is putting on. The show runs the weekends of December 3rd and 10th. I can't believe how exciting this is!

Signed,

Me

Anne shut the small book and for a second thought about re-taping all the boxes she'd opened. No, not tonight, she thought. She wouldn't have the strength tonight. Tonight was for reopening old scars and pouring salt—no, Drano—on the exposed wounds.

Oh God, she wanted to talk to Copper. Anne wanted him to hold her and tell her that everything would be all right. Wanted to take him to her bed and give him access to her body until he filled her up with so much comfort and strength she'd have no choice but to feel like a whole woman again.

Wishful thinking...

Tonight was a working night for Copper. This evening some other woman would claim his time and his body by paying his escort agency a large fee. The realization of that fact had never made Anne truly

miserable until tonight. Even if she could hear his voice for just a few seconds that might reassure her.

No! She couldn't do it. How would she feel if someone called her at work to whine about something personal in their life?

Anne stared at the tiny volume for a few minutes before she decided to pick it up and leaf through the pages once more.

October 20th

Dear Diary,

I don't know which side first started the joke but this production of Romeo and Juliet has been dubbed "The Capulets and the Montgomerys" as our director has cast Romeo's family, the Montague's, with an all black cast. Oh yeah, that's gonna cause some stir in Greenwood proper. I haven't told my parents yet, but I guess I better, 'cause they're gonna shit when they find out I'm playing a love scene across from a black Romeo.

On the other hand Terrill Hill is one of the most bodacious guys I've ever met in my life. A prime hottie! Anybody would believe that my Juliet fell for this fine Romeo. In fact, I'd say the only thing hotter than Terrill is his real life cousin Raleigh Dawson who has been cast to play Romeo's foxy cousin Mercutio in the play. God what a total babe--a real hunk! Of course, he's twenty years old. Wonder if he's out of my league. Ha! Ha!

This is gonna be quite an experience.

Signed,

Me

She slammed the diary shut. No more torture tonight. Anne walked back into the dining room and opened her liquor cabinet where she'd stashed away some Tavel Cotes du Rhone rose wine for a special occasion. *What the hell*, the reality of her own buried miseries made the occasion special as well. Absentmindedly, she took the pricey wine bottle into the kitchen to find a corkscrew and a suitable glass.

How had Coyal Rambeau read her so plainly? It must have been her association with Copper's case. Maybe pushing so hard for investigating his parents had given her away. Maybe if she hadn't appeared so desperate to please by locating Copper's birth parents. What was it Coyal had called it—transference? More like transparency...

Was she that easy to see through?

Anne filled her glass, swirled and sniffed her wine out of habit. *Oh yeah. Nothing is quite like the good stuff.* She sat down and let her mind wander.

Peter and Lauren Weick raised their children Pro-life Catholic no-*"ifs, ands, or buts."* They paid the doctrine more than lip service having adopted two children before they conceived one of their own. Anne grew up with two brothers—one natural and one adopted. However, she always knew she needed to fill the empty hole in her self-esteem her biological mother left behind.

Then along came *Romeo and Juliet* and Anne's life transformed from giddy school girl into sexually active being. Part of it had to do with Hamilton Casey's play direction. Hamilton Casey, a black stage manager, directed *R & J* for the Greenwood Community Theatre. In

fact, he suggested the play to the GCT board who naturally thought William Shakespeare played safer to white community audiences than works by Leroi Jones, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, or Lorraine Hansberry.

The memory made her smile. *Suckers! All of them.*

Casey encouraged his black actors to play “black first” incorporating their heritage into Shakespeare’s lines. Yes, the words conveyed strict Elizabethan English, but the stage pictures showed something that frightened Greenwood audiences. Rather than the traditionally eloquent declaiming of the lines, Casey allowed his actors from both houses to bash against pseudo-stereotypical racial divisions.

He explained to the cast that in the 1950s *West Side Story* approached the subject as far as 50’s Broadway audiences would allow a homogenized gang of so-called second generation Americans, the Jets, to go up against the totally Puerto Rican gang, the Sharks. The director told his cast that now was the time to push the limits even farther.

The Capulets represented the properly conditioned responses of white socialization while the Montagues flaunted an alternate conditioning; a streetwise, totally antisocial pheromone driven excitement nobody could predict. The sexual tension and violent stage combat brought an edginess to the production that no one could have predicted.

One of the things that stood out for Anne remained how close Terrill got when portraying Romeo. He’d been instructed to get next to Juliet, clinging to her in a modern “street” style as if she were some impressionable white prey; getting right into her face, touching, talking,

and whispering in her ears, pressing up against her body almost as if he tried to plant his scent on his next conquest.

The local papers had a love/hate relationship with the production. Needless to say, Hamilton Casey never directed another show at GCT again. The very next play produced at the community theatre was that old turkey *Oklahoma*, so the patrons of the theatre could rest easily again.

Of course, what most amazed Anne was how this treatment of Romeo and Juliet worked so well in real life. She'd seen it happen! At first, when a girl didn't act very interested or impressed, the guys in the cast wouldn't let up. They just kept putting on the pressure—moving in closer, very face-to-face, and maintaining strong eye contact.

All the warning signs should have gone off for her! One, he'd moved too close into her personal space. Two, he didn't back off when she gave him the *conditioned signs* she'd learned over the years to warn off unwanted advances. Three, he stood near enough to allow her to decide whether she intended to allow his pheromone scent to excite her.

Behavior that would not be tolerated from a white male a percentage of white women fell for this tactic.

"These men may not even know why they do it. But obviously it works," explained her therapist, Dr. Lester. "That's why people think of blacks as more natural or more animal. Again that's alternate conditioning. Black men tend invade personal space because they can. They're used to it. This behavior is part of their conditioning. It's the sort of thing that is maddening to many whites—particularly white males and so alien to white females. The three foot comfort zone is

broken immediately and young white women respond to that because this is unique to their experience! This is all, of course, strictly anecdotal and based on my personal observations. I'm unaware of any official scientific study on this particular attraction."

Anne took another sip of wine. The fifteen year old white actress playing Juliet gave her virginity to Mercutio, not Romeo, way down in theatre sub-basement. Raleigh Dawson discovered the old prop bed in the property storage area and that was that.

Anne flipped open the diary one more time to look for a specific date.

November 19th,

Dear Diary,

Raleigh took me to the sub-basement property shop and showed me the old bed and mattress which he cleaned off. After he laid me down his hand played with me. All of me!

I remember a moment when one hand caressed my breast while another hand stroked my face right at the hairline, and still another hand pressed hard up against my pussy.

Another hand? Wait that's three hands! Oh my God! What could this sensation mean?

Well this couldn't have been what Mom was talking about when she told me of all the pain I'd suffer when it came time to endure my honeymoon. I didn't quite understand what was happening, but it felt okay.

But brother, what a rude mess Raleigh made when it was all over. I'd never seen such sticky white goo covering my thighs or matted down in my pubic hair.

He asked me if I was okay. I said yes. Then he said, great, wanna do it again?

I said no. We had to get up to rehearsal. Anyway, I needed to clean up all this thick liquid he left behind.

So he straightened up the bed while I went up to the restroom.

That's all that happened. 'Cept I sorta lost my virginity.

Signed,

Me

From the middle of November through the second weekend of December, Anne Weick and Raleigh Dawson explored their sexuality over a dozen times by her reckoning. At the time, she never quite got used to the strangely fascinating encounter between them, particularly the necessity for her lover to channel his excitement in such a way that his body bathed her in that curious fluid of his each time.

Still, the whole thing was kind of fun.

Then the production ended its run.

December 21st,

Dear Diary,

I don't understand why Rawls is avoiding me. He won't call or take my calls, it's all so frustrating. Finally this week, I called Terrill and asked him to get a message to Raleigh for me. That's when Terr

admitted to me that Rawls intended to go off to Hollywood to try to get into television. He said Raleigh wanted to make it on his own out there before he sent for me, and I should be excited for him.

I gave Terrill specific instructions to intercede with his cousin for me. After all, he could at least call me. However, I haven't heard a thing.

I feel so...used!

Signed,

Me

Christmas and New Years zipped past and pretty soon she'd gone back to school and settled into the routine of her second semester of her sophomore year. Around the end of January, Anne received a postcard from Culver City, CA. When she'd read Raleigh Dawson's signature that day, Anne's mood leapt.

That twenty year old postcard was nestled in the pages of her diary as well.

Dear Anne,

Hey, sweetheart, I can't tell you how much I miss you!

The other day I auditioned for a TV pilot program, and I thought I did really good, but the assistant director told me later that even though I was the best looking candidate for the job, he could tell I hadn't yet paid my dues.

Honey, could I borrow \$100 so I can pay my dues?

Love,

Rawls

Yes! He still loved her. No doubt about it, she remained a major part of his life no matter how far away they lived from each other.

Anne remembered running straight to Lauren and showing her the postcard. She begged her mother to advance her the one-hundred dollars so she could promote Raleigh's career.

Lauren laughed at her. "Anne, I don't believe you fell for this."

Fell for it! Fell for what?

"This is just his way of conning money out of you."

"How can you be so heartless?" Anne remembered her jaw dropped in disbelief. "This is the man I love!"

"I know, dear." Lauren sighed. "But, if you don't let him do this on his own, he'll never respect you."

"What would you know about respect?" She'd screamed in rage. "You don't understand. You never take my side—ever!"

With that pronouncement, Anne ran out of the room. Then turning around at the edge of the stairs, the fifteen year old threw the only verbal dagger she knew could cut as deeply as the hurt she felt.

"My real mother would understand!"

* * * *

She refilled her glass of Tavel and set the bottle close to where she sat at the dining room table. The emotional wounds triggered by that moment didn't heal between Anne and Lauren for over a decade.

To top it off, February brought new troubles.

February 12th,

Dear Diary,

I can't believe how sick I got this morning. As I left the house at seven o'clock, I took a detour into the side yard and threw up all over Lauren's dead flower bed. Good thing I hadn't eaten much or the incident could have been much worse. As it was, Mrs. Lowenstein next door happened to be looking out her window right at me when I puked.

How humiliating...

I got off to school though. Anyway, after I threw up, I felt better for most of the rest of the day. I gotta tell you it sucked. Especially Mrs. Lowenstein watching me. That woman gives me the creeps.

Signed,

Me

She had no idea how the old biddy could have known, but her neighbor cornered her a couple days later when Anne deliberately delayed heading off to school to duck into the back yard for a minute to vomit all over the snow covered ground once more.

Dressed in a heavy robe and house slippers, Mrs. Lowenstein rushed out of her back door and across the slushy lawn to confront the teenager. "I'm going to drive you to school today, Anne, so we can talk. There's no reason for you to try to pretend you're not experiencing morning sickness."

"Morning sickness? Oh no! It can't be."

* * * *

Coyal Rambeau had to be related to Mrs. Lowenstein. They both knew from looking at her face what kind of a teenager she'd been. Anne nursed the last glass of wine, staring deep into the dregs of a couple of fingers-full of the rich pink rose colored vintage. Pictures from close to twenty years ago swirled dream-like through the liquid.

Once she'd started to show, Peter and Lauren intervened with the school to allow her to finish out the final month of the semester, but the stress of enduring May and part of June nearly destroyed her emotionally. She hated hiding the fact from everyone. Besides, she resented being told that she couldn't deal with the baby on her own.

"Who's the father, Anne?"

She hadn't wanted to tell. However, eventually she gave Raleigh Dawson up. Apparently, Lauren suspected as much, although she'd kept her suspicions to herself.

Surprisingly, her parents accepted those particular facts of life. Why? Because they managed to figure out a way not to deal with the issue at all.

"We've made arrangements to have the baby put up for adoption through a Pro-Life adoption group." They made the announcement together. No arguments allowed. No variation from the planned agenda. Peter and Lauren's decree was final.

At the age of sixteen, Anne delivered her baby. The hospital staff whisked her little boy out of the delivery room and she never saw him after that. Of course, Lauren and Peter had been right. Too young to

be a mother, Anne had risked ruining her entire life if she'd kept the child. However, there had been a complication with the birth.

Sadly, even tenderly, her parents informed her that the doctors found something wrong with her internal plumbing, so she'd never conceive another child of her own.

She went back to an entirely different school in the fall and concentrated totally on her career skills. The rest, as the pundits say, had been history.

* * * *

A few days later she found a message on her answering machine that disturbed her.

"Anne, my parents told me that a man came around to talk to them. He'd been hired to look into the history of my birth mother and father. They also told me that he wouldn't say who'd hired him. As if I couldn't guess! I asked you not to get involved, didn't I? Call me. We need to talk."

The message clock said three-fifty-one. Over two hours ago.

Uh-oh, she grimaced. *Time to look for shit stains on the fan.*

She dialed his number and got his answering machine. "Hey, it's me. Yeah, I instigated the search for your birth parents. I'd say I'm sorry, but I'm not. You've got a chance to find them and begin to heal the wounds. Besides, the guy from the agency told me I could do both searches at a discount price. I couldn't pass up a bargain."

Okay, so she lied, but Copper didn't have to know that.

“Call me back—whenever.”

Her phone rang after two in the morning. Anne mumbled an incoherent word into the receiver after she picked it up.

“Did I wake you?”

She grunted an affirmative.

“Good! What did I tell you about butting into my private affairs?”

“Copper, don’t be silly. You always tell me everything...eventually.”

He growled on the other end of the phone line. “What did I specifically tell you about the search for my birth parents?”

“Look, I...”

“No, you look! I specifically told you that subject stays off-limits. Did you think I was kidding?”

“But you needed to know.”

“No, Anne! I don’t need to know. Drop this, now!”

She sighed. *You don’t mean that.* However, she needed to calm him down. “All right, I’ll talk to the agency tomorrow.” She knew she probably would have done that anyway.

“I’m serious, Anne.” His tone hadn’t changed. “Call it off!”

“All right! All right! I’ve got to get some sleep if I’m going to deal with people in the straight world tomorrow. Talk to you soon.”

She heard a click from the other end. Did he hang up?

“Copper, are you there?” *Damn him and his stubbornness.*

* * * *

Coyal Rambeau answered his own phone the next morning. “Ah,

Ms. Weick, I've been thinking about giving you a call. Mrs. Bernstein allowed me to copy a lot of material which she'd kept over the years. Stuff she got from the adoption agency, when they first adopted him. A lot of medical material pertaining to the mother's health and background and stuff like that. However, the Bernsteins seem to know next to nothing about Norman's father."

"I see." Anne scribbled down notes in a memo pad as quickly as she could.

"Plus, now that I know which agency handled the adoption, I can deal directly with them."

"Even if the subject of the search wants nothing to do with it?"

"That's what I needed to call you about, Ms. Weick. Believe it or not, Mrs. Bernstein is on your side. She wishes to meet the birth mother as well. Apparently, Mr. Bernstein is neutral. So that's two and a half versus one. We can 'circumvent the system' if you wish. However, your costs will more than double if you decide to go forward at this point."

"I don't understand."

"I'll be happy to explain it to you, but not over the phone. Where can we meet?"

* * * *

Coyal Rambeau met Anne Weick in one of the quiet parks on her side of the city.

He gestured to the right. "Walk with me."

"If you insist..." She followed his lead.

“I don’t mind taking the chance that other people might overhear a portion of our conversation.” Coyal surveyed the immediate area. “But I don’t want to put myself in a situation where a listening device might record what I say.”

Anne recoiled in surprise. “What?”

“What I’m about to suggest is illegal. Although, I think its ethics are debatable given the circumstances.”

“Well, you’ve certainly piqued my interest.”

“I thought as much. How badly do you want to know? Mrs. Bernstein indicated that Norman...that is, Copper appeared to be dead set against the whole affair. However, like I said before she’s just as eager to find out as well.”

Anne glanced down at the ground. “Are Mr. and Mrs. Bernstein willing to contribute to the extra cost?”

Coyal smiled. “No. They’ve made that very clear.”

“I see. Well, let’s talk hypothetically, shall we?”

The private detective gestured in an easterly direction as the two of them continued to saunter along the park walk. Parks and recreation crews had started in on the week long job of stringing holiday decorations on all the light poles in preparation for the city’s celebratory gathering next week. Whenever they passed a group of workman, Coyal indicated that they stroll quietly by or changed the subject.

“If I’m covering all expenses, I’m entitled the final say as to whether or not the Bernsteins are informed as well.” Anne gazed at the decorations which had been hung up already. “Does that sound fair?”

“As a matter of fact, it sounds more than equitable.”

Anne smiled. "I'm glad we're in agreement—hypothetically, of course."

"Of course." He glanced upward. A few tiny flakes floated down from the gray sky. "Small adoption agencies like this particular one are always in a bind financially. They deal with a lot of volunteers, while the staff workers are generally underpaid and overworked, if you get my..." He held out a gloved hand to catch a snowflake. "...drift."

She nodded. "I believe I understand."

"Now hypothetically, we have two ways to go. A sizeable donation would benefit the entire adoption agency as well as your tax deductions. However, a more...let us say 'moderate donation' would benefit a single dedicated social worker. However, you wouldn't get the advantage of a tax deduction."

"I see would you recommend one over the other—hypothetically?"

"I'll have to see what options offer themselves first before I can make this...umm... hypothetical recommendation."

The snowflakes increased in their intensity. Anne pulled her coat collar up around her neck. "So I'd have your costs, plus the cost of a donation, is that right?"

"You've summed it up quite nicely." He pulled a small piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to her. "I've listed three dollar amounts here. The first one is an approximate cost of my service. The second is my best guess for a tax deductible donation. The third figure is someone's...uhh...Christmas bonus."

He watched Anne nod and look down at the figures. "What I'm about to say is going to sound very petty."

When the private detective turned to scrutinize her face more carefully, Anne jerked her head aside for a second breaking eye contact. “When the Bernsteins ask, let them believe I wouldn’t pay the extra money. Tell them I requested that you drop the case.” She pivoted back toward him. “Do I make myself clear?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Crystal.”

She looked him in the eye again. “In that case, we have an agreement.”

“I’ll get right on it.” With a wave of his hand, they turned around to head back to where they’d parked their respective cars.

“How will you proceed?”

He shook his forefinger in the air and *tsked*. “Professional secret. The magician doesn’t reveal his tricks.”

* * * *

“So how come you didn’t schedule my entire weekend? That’s not like you.”

Anne had purchased an assignation with Copper for Friday night a week later. Although she could spare the money for only a single night with him this time, Anne didn’t want to mention why her current financial circumstances dictated their current outcome. As far as her young lover knew, she’d dropped everything concerning the investigation into his birth parents.

That had been one of the benefits of urging Coyal Rambeau to tell the Bernsteins of her dropping the case. She understood a little bit

about their family dynamics.

“I’ve got to go spend some time with my family this weekend.” Anne shifted her body on the bed to turn toward him. “We’re going to exchange gifts and go out to dinner.”

“Aww,” he crooned. “That really sounds sweet.”

Yes, it does. She really should try to take Peter and Lauren out to dinner tomorrow. Or at least give them a call.

“I found my diary last week.” Anne murmured.

“Your what?” A curious expression crossed his face.

“The one I wrote as a fifteen year old. My story of playing Juliet across from—”

“Romeo?”

“Actually Mercutio...”

“Am I allowed to be lost?”

“Don’t you know the play?” She giggled. “So do you want me to read you all the juicy adolescent bits about my first time?”

“I don’t know.” His deep indigo eyes burned into her soft blue eyes. “Do you think I’ll get jealous?”

“Jealous over something that happened twenty years ago?”

“Look, I know it’s not logical. Especially compared to how I make my living, but I get very covetous of you and I don’t like to think of you with other men, Anne. You’re my woman and that’s that!”

She leaned in to kiss him on the lips. “Oh, Copper! That is so amorous—and so weird. I mean, I’m in my mid-thirties now. How much longer can it last between us?”

He rose up and used his weight and strength to push her down flat

against the bed. “How about forever?”

“What about all those other women?”

Copper swooped in to give her a long demanding kiss. “They’re work.”

“Oh, some work!” Anne stretched her neck to accommodate the soft lips slowly bussing across it.

This time he descended from her neck to pay attention to her shoulders. “Just part of my job.”

“We should all have that excuse.”

“That doesn’t make it any less true.” He ran his mouth and tongue around the fleshy outside of her breast in prolonged circuitous route toward her areola and nipple. Then cautiously, carefully scooting down lower, his fingers preceded his mouth down her abdomen heading straight for her pubic mound.

For several minutes Anne’s vocalizations reflected echoes of the expressive motions and educated ministrations Copper’s mouth, lips, and tongue put her through. Her skin first flushed red, then her body suddenly stiffened and shuddered. Literally wracked with passion, Anne dug her fingernails into the flesh of his shoulders.

Suddenly, he scrambled up the bed to plant a kiss on her mouth. She tasted her own juices on his lips and tongue. Then with an accomplished, cultivated and perfectly smooth motion, Copper slipped his erected cock gently into his woman’s accommodating loins.

“When I’m pushing and pulsing up inside your pussy, I feel like I’m always welcome, as if I’ve always belonged there. I don’t feel any pressure to perform either.”

She gasped out a long exhaled breath before she could reply. “You feel pressure? I-I can’t begin to imagine that.”

“A high priced whore is still a whore, sweetheart. I have to offer the customer her money’s worth.”

Anne caressed his face with her fingers. “I had no idea.”

“Not to worry.” He nuzzled her ear. “I could never put you in that category.”

She nestled her own face into Copper’s hair and inhaled the clean aroma that stemmed from him. “As long as you can find a way to put the essence of you into me, I’m perfectly content.”

As always, the culmination of their togetherness towered over the needs of a single individual. Her demands coaxed his excitement to the utmost, while his very presence displayed his love in dozens of ways both major acts and gentle deeds.

Now panting and still conjoined, they clung together in an all encompassing clinch.

“I love you, Anne.”

“Oh, baby, I love you too.” She clasped him even closer. “I can’t imagine my life without you.”

* * * *

Coyal Rambeau scanned a photocopy of the last document before he slipped the papers into the manila envelope. He’d completed his assignment via expensive and less than ethical means. After brokering a significant donation to the agency, Coyal played the intermediary

between his client and one of the underpaid social workers who acted as interim manager when the director of the agency suddenly found herself unavailable for an evening's interview. Ms. Weick surprised him by going both routes: she took advantage of her tax deduction and purchased private personal service as well.

The double ploy—almost financial overkill—worked in this case.

Now the rest of his job fell under the category of delivery service. However, transferring this particular consignment would bring no sense of accomplishment. Professional courtesy demanded he turn over the documents to his client. Anne Weick had paid for the special handling of this material.

No matter how heartbreaking its contents.

* * * *

"No!" Anne paled as she read the final report. She combed the adoption papers and birth records time and again hoping beyond hope that she misread the documents the first time. "No, this can't be!"

"I'm so sorry, Ms. Weick."

"You-you're sure this is the correct file?" Even as she asked the question, Anne knew what the real answer was. "No, of course, you're certain."

"I'll tell you what." Coyal Rambeau offered his client a cup of strong coffee. "I'm only going to charge you for my expenses on this job. The agency fee will be waived—gratis."

"Don't be..." She shook her head. "It's not the money, Mr.

Rambeau. You earned every cent of your fee. I don't have a problem paying it..."

Just living with the results!

As if he couldn't bear the look of anguish on Anne's face, the private detective walked to the window appearing to stare at the snow rolling in like a thick cascade of gray and white spray. "Are you going to tell Mr. Bernstein?"

"I can't!" Her voice broke into a sob. "I told him—told all of them that I dropped the case. This will be one time a lie works in my favor." Anne knew no matter what she did from this point on, her life with Copper would never be the same. "Have you ever been forced to tell a lover that you'd just like to be friends, Mr. Rambeau?"

"Like I said, 'I'm sorry, Ms. Weick.' If only your news had been...happier."

"How ironic." Anne sniffed back another tear. "Looks like I saved the fee for my own legal search."

Coyal Rambeau stifled an embarrassed snicker. "Told you I'd offer you a two-for-one deal."

Anne Weick shook her head and glared at the words on the paper once again.

"What will you do now?"

"I have no idea." She sighed and looked at the detective. "Other than destroy a young man's faith in humanity?"

* * * *

Thirteen days later, Anne Weick met Copper Burney for dinner in an upscale restaurant festively decorated in bright holiday colors and seasonal garland a few days before Christmas.

“Where have you been these last two weeks?” Copper poured the wine as he queried her. “It’s been like pulling teeth to get a moment with you.”

“Oh, I am so sorry, Copper.” Anne looked into his piercing indigo eyes. What a beautiful boy her Copper was. *Why didn’t she see the similarities before?* “M-my damn business has eaten every spare second from my day. I haven’t been able to break away.”

“I’ve missed you—everything about you...”

She nodded. “I know. I’ve...missed you, too.”

“We’ve been away from each other far too long.”

“Why would you say that?”

“My life doesn’t feel complete, Anne, unless you’re beside me pushing me to explore my own need to comprehend...” Then she saw a familiar twinkle in his eye. “...To grow.”

She decided to ignore his double entendre and change the subject. “Thank you for inviting me out to dinner on your night off, by the way. How did you manage that?”

“I told the agency that I needed an evening to myself so I could go see my parents.”

Anne felt her jaw lock up as her eyes widened. She quickly gulped down a large draught of wine to distract herself from his words. Then after a moment, she responded. “Well, that was ingenious.”

Copper snickered. “Besides, we need to talk.”

“Do we?”

“I don’t understand why you’ve been avoiding me.”

“Think of it as...an old woman finally coming to her senses.” Anne ran her finger along the edge of her silverware and refused to look into Copper’s eyes, “This whole affair has been brewing inside my brain for a long time. You’ve got so much ahead of you, and I think the real potential in your life lies beyond me.”

His eyes narrowed. “Where did that come from?”

“You need to move on, Copper. It won’t be too long before you outgrow me.”

“That’s absurd. In fact, I’m thinking just the opposite. I want you close to me always.”

“Oh Copper.” She kept her voice low. “No. It’s not absurd. Life is change!” She swallowed a small gulp of Pinochet flavored saliva. *In a very real way she would be close to him always.* “Anyway, why did you ask me here tonight?”

“I’ve been thinking about your generous offer, Anne, and now that it’s nearly Christmas Eve, I want to ask you a favor.”

“My offer?” Anne’s face tensed as her eyes focused on his.

“About my Christmas gift.”

“Wh-what about it?” Anne Weick blanched visibly.

Copper scrutinized her for a moment. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Something sticking in my gullet.” She tugged at her diamond choker necklace and cleared her throat. “The wine maybe...”

“You’ve been so encouraging these past few months. I’ve decided I’d like you to find my birth parents after all.”

The End

In Winterland

Brenda Williamson

Chapter One

Winterland was like saying home.

Crystal had mixed emotions about her return. She'd left behind unfinished business, some of which she hoped to clear up so she could be free from the place.

With less than five miles to go, her thoughts should have stayed on the driving conditions. The snow had stopped, but the roads had patches of ice that she should have watched for. When a deer leapt across her path, she hit the brakes and the icy surface made her car act more like a sled. Losing control, she had a horrible feeling she faced death when her vehicle took a new route.

Crystal screamed beyond a deafening sound. It had to be, since she couldn't hear herself. She didn't think the roads were bad. Sand and

salt coated the pavement, yet her car went skidding into the opposite lane.

Jingle Bells played on the radio. It had come to the appropriate *dashing through the snow* as she cut the wheel into and against the sideways slide of her car. She couldn't remember the rules of what to do if you were skidding on ice, and it didn't matter. The wheels weren't helping to stop her from the careening glide.

The tree would.

The crunch of fiberglass and metal made an awful sound. She jerked forward hard upon impact. The seatbelt prevented her from hitting anything, but it didn't lessen the pain from the pressure of the strap knocking the wind out of her lungs.

The windshield shattered and tossed chips of glass at her. The cold night air swept the fresh scent of pine into the car. Things didn't appear bad. She consciously smelled the evergreens as well as heard the song continue on the radio. It was a morose moment when *laughing all the way* came through the speakers while she groaned with pain.

Crystal shivered. It amazed her at how fast the heat in the car dissipated with the draft coming at her from all sides. She kept her eyes shut and wondered if the wetness on her cheeks was blood.

Her teeth chattered in sync with *...up on the rooftop, click, click, click*.

"Hey, are you all right?" a voice asked, during the radio songs *...down came ol' Saint Nick*.

"M-man or a-angel?" she stuttered.

“What?”

“N-never m-mind.” The bits of glass sticking to her lips fell into her mouth and she spit them out.

“Don’t move.” The voice instructed. “You have glass on your face.”

Too shaken to think clearly, she sat motionless as cool fingers swept over her lips.

“Better?” he asked.

She didn’t answer. Her mind clung to the sound of his voice and whirled with fragmented thoughts and pictures.

“Let’s do this carefully, all right?” His hand slid behind her head. “Lean forward slightly, but only if it doesn’t hurt.”

She tipped her head down.

“That’s good.” He brushed at her forehead, nose, and eyelashes.

Another Christmas tune intruded on her thoughts ...*‘tis the season to be jolly*. It almost made her laugh, but she forced herself to listen for the man’s voice again. Anticipation rose within the confines of her blind position. She wanted to talk, yet with the way pieces of glass bounced off her face as he flicked a finger at them, she decided to keep her lips pinched together.

“There, I think I got it all.” He held her jaw. “Open your eyes slowly.”

Evan. The name popped in her head and she couldn’t believe she didn’t recognize his voice. Evan Montgomery was both the love of her life and the biggest heartbreak.

The scent of a spicy musk captured her attention and she sniffed.

“What’s wrong?” He stroked over her hair. “Did you get glass in your eyes?”

“No. You smell.”

“Oh?” His tone sounded shocked.

Crystal realized how the statement sounded. “No, I don’t mean you stink, you smell...” she inhaled again, “very nice.”

With her head tilted down, she decided to give lifting her lashes a try. Staring at the glass in her lap, she thought how much they resembled tiny doll-sized ice cubes.

“Look up here so I can check you better with the moonlight.” Evan’s fingers pulled her face around toward him at the side window.

She saw the glass there too had shattered. Snowflakes fluttered in the halo of moonlight over Evan’s head. Heaven appeared very inviting.

“Crystal?”

She blinked a couple times with an inward sigh at the memorable intonation making her insides quiver. She hadn’t forgotten Evan’s voice at all.

He backed away and she didn’t want him to leave. Suddenly, the car shook and she absorbed the actions of Evan trying to get her door open. He jerked on the door handle again and when it didn’t budge, a slow panic began a spiraling ascent from inside her belly. The nausea backed down when the door groaned open on his next tug.

The dome light came on and she saw his features. The strong jaw she remembered had disappeared beneath a thick short beard. His beautiful mouth had a moustache shadowing the curve of his delicious lips. The hair on his head framed his face with a shaggy, unkempt

appearance, very unlike the clean-cut boy she recalled from ten years ago.

“Do you hurt anywhere?” He reached across her middle and unbuckled the seatbelt.

“I don’t feel anything.”

“You can’t move?” his voice caught on the last word.

She closed her eyes to the wash of his heated breath on her face. The accident gave her a plausible reason to cry, even though it was his presence that stirred all the old feelings of love and desire in her.

“No,” she slid her arm up to his neck. “I meant I don’t feel any pain.”

One of his arms slipped beneath her legs and his other arm snaked around her back. She opened her eyes and stared at him while he concentrated on getting her out of the car without bumping her head.

“Here we go. Tell me if anything hurts.” He lifted her off the seat.

“You’re still strong. Do you lift weights?” She closed her eyes feeling silly. Maybe the rattling car accident turned her brain to mush.

“Something like that.”

She hung her head back and looked up at the sky. In the city, lights from the buildings didn’t let her see the brilliance of stars. She missed that. Holding onto Evan, she realized there was much she missed about her hometown of Winterland.

“Oh, my purse.” She waved a hand at the wrecked car.

“Do you think you can stand?”

She stared into his eyes. The moonlight made it easy to see the beautiful blue-green irises lacked the luster of happiness.

“Yes.”

Whether she could stand or not, she'd try. Something in his tone made her think he still held a grudge against her.

Evan carefully put her on her feet, but his arm remained a secure support around her back until she stood steady. If pride didn't get in the way, she would have wobbled and leaned on him for much longer.

“It's on the backseat,” she told him when he went to lean in the front door.

Evan put a knee on the seat and leaned over to reach in the back. His jeans went taut across his ass. The moon glowed like a lamplight and she stared. She'd never forget the first time he bent over on the football field. As a cheerleader, she saw all the perfect angles of the boys practicing. Evan had the nicest bottom on the team, naturally she was partial to his above the others—he was her boyfriend.

“Anything else?” He handed her the black leather bag.

Crystal shook her head not wanting to ask for too much. He kept the annoyed tone.

“Suitcase?”

He read her mind.

“I have a bag in the trunk.” She admitted.

He turned the car off before he got out, and everything went quiet, including *silent night*.

Carrying the key from the ignition, he walked around to the back of the car. With his bulky jacket on, she saw the silhouette of a jock. Memories of them breaking down on a back road came to mind.

Deja vu.

This was not the place, the car, or the time of night, yet, she felt as if she had lived this very scene before. She wished she could go back in time and right a lot of wrong choices she made. Do-overs would make life easier.

Evan carried the bag from the trunk and took her arm. They trudged through the tire tracks in the snow uphill to the road and to his car.

“Your car is totaled,” he commented.

“It’s a rental.”

“Not much in your bag.” He jiggled it. “I reckon you’re not here for very long.”

“I sold my parent’s house. I came for the closing tomorrow.”

“Nothing else?” The bitterness leached into his words and she felt guilty.

“No,” she answered.

If she had a right, she would have said, that more than anything, she wanted to see how he was, but she had vowed not to go looking for him on this trip. The pain of facing a lost love meant facing a hard truth, she hadn’t been happy without him.

In the first few years after she left town, she thought she’d come back and apologize to him. He had plans of them getting married and she abandoned them for the city. When she heard he had married, she felt relief and a bit jealous. Lack of love was never the basis for her departure, but that she was still in love with him was the reason she didn’t return.

“I didn’t think you’d ever sell the place.” Evan put a hand under her elbow, gripping firmly to help her up the embankment. “It’s been ten years since you’ve had anything to do with it.”

“I rented it.”

“I know.”

“Of course, you live here and would know. It seemed time to let go and get on with my life.” She didn’t know how difficult that would be until now. “There’s nothing here for me to come back to.”

The snow fell heavier. Large flakes of white thickened the air. The road already had a dense layering.

“I have a cabin not too far from here. It’ll be rough getting to town tonight.”

“You want me to come home with you?”

She didn’t want to meet his wife. It would be awkward for everyone, but more so for her. The woman would see her as a threat and watch her closely. Crystal didn’t think she’d be able to hide her emotions.

“It’s the practical thing to do.” He opened the passenger door of his car and she slid inside.

She watched out the front window as Evan went around to the driver’s side. The snow made it hard to see him clearly. Still, when he glanced her way, she felt the heat in her belly flare to her lungs.

The old, red Dodge Charger of his father’s hadn’t changed much. It surprised her to find that he kept it. The thing had to be over forty years old.

“The car looks good.” She told him when he got in behind the steering wheel.

“I don’t use it much.”

“That explains how it’s stayed so nice.”

Nerve endings in her fingers and toes did a jitterbug dance and she had a notion that it was shock, and it might be doing a number on her. Sitting in the same car she first had sex in with Evan, didn’t help calm her emotions.

“Your wife, she won’t mind?”

“I don’t have a wife.” His tone gave her a worse chill, while an inward smile blossomed to her lips.

“Oh, I heard you got married.”

“Married and divorced in the same year.”

“I’m sorry.” She turned her head away for a second hoping he didn’t see the news made her happy and then she looked over at him.

“I’m not. I shouldn’t have gotten married in the first place.” He stared straight ahead while driving. “I was drunk.”

Silence engulfed the car. Evan appeared to have a lot of anger in him and she felt trapped into remaining quiet for fear she’d say something else wrong. The dour expression on his face depressed her.

As he drove slowly on the icy road, he turned on the radio. Maybe he wanted to break the silence or he hoped the holiday music would cheer him up. It did nothing for her.

...have yourself a merry little Christmas... continued to play on the radio.

Two days until Christmas and Crystal's mind harbored an immediate doubt she'd find anything merry about the holiday.

Chapter Two

The cabin Evan spoke of was small—one, maybe two rooms, she noted as he stopped the car in the yard near the door. Crystal considered their night together. In such close proximity, the attraction she thought she might have blown out of proportion was stronger, not weaker than her recollections of him.

"I'll get the door." He put a firm hand on her arm, patting gently to make her stay as if she really had energy to rush to get up.

Her body ached in more ways than she wanted to think about. The car accident jolted parts of her that she knew by morning would feel ten times worse because of the physical trauma. Yet, Evan's presence created a dulling breathlessness in her chest. Heartache hurt as much as being in an accident.

Crystal watched him hurry around the front of the car. The thick dark beard hid the dimples in his cheeks. The handsome, strong masculine lines of his jaw and chin were gone. Things changed, she understood that, but the worst was the disappearance of his always-ready smile. He used to be a perpetually happy young man and his depressed appearance aged him and saddened her.

Evan opened her door. He took her arm with his firm grasp and helped her up. Muscles, already stiffening, worked against her moving from the seat. She wobbled for real.

“I got you.” He pulled her closer.

Unfortunately, he let go the instant she steadied.

Snow continued to fall. Her cheeks felt flushed and the snowflakes felt as if they sizzled against them. It was hard not to think of Evan in a sexual way. He had a charismatic nature that drew girls to him in school. She had been privileged to be his one and only, and she should have never taken advantage of his love. But the one thing she needed most, he couldn't do. He refused to move to the city with her.

“It looks cozy.” She began the walk up the snow-shoveled path to the porch.

He surprised her by circling his arm around her back. Ever the gentlemen, she resisted the urge to put her arm around him and hang on as if her life depended on it.

They went under a tree limb and the greenery caught her eye.

“Mistletoe.” She smiled, gazing up. “Did you plan for it to grow right where everyone walks?”

His head lowered and her heart gave a hard thump. In the car, the silent ride left her little choice except to imagine what it would feel like to kiss him again. Her lungs burned with anticipation. Moving her lips to a pucker didn't happen, as her smile remained frozen in place.

“No,” he replied.

His hand let go and he went up the porch steps first.

Crystal swallowed the hurt. Ten years apart had left them strangers. It didn't make her feel well to know he wasn't married and she had a life headed in a direction further away from him.

She followed him up the split-log steps to the plank porch. A large stack of oak firewood sat at one end and an old chair sat at the other. Quaint and cozy should have been her thought, but lonely was the first sensation she felt.

Evan opened the door and waited for her to enter the cabin. A faint glow from the fireplace led her toward the only source of light. A minute later, an oil lamp glowed from behind her and she turned to face him.

"You live here?"

"Yeah, it's peaceful away from Winterland." He went around and lit three more lamps.

She saw the one-room cabin and witnessed how Evan's life turned out. Everything had a place and a purpose.

He took off his jacket and hung it up on a peg by the door.

With a mechanical approach to the fireplace, he went through a routine of stoking the embers, then adding wood. The room still had a chill, but she took off her coat anyway, hastening to feel at home.

Evan rushed up to her and she stepped back in surprise. He made her nervous.

"You're cut." He pulled her coat away.

His fingers traced an outline of the area.

Until he had said something, she didn't take much notice of the sting on her collarbone. She didn't identify the tenderness beyond his stroke either.

Crystal leaned toward him. The sight, actually, the mere thought of blood made her woozy and her knees weakened. Apparently, Evan remembered, because he put an arm around her back and pulled her close.

"It's just a scratch," he whispered.

The heat of his breath teased the rim of her ear. Glorious sensations urged her toward encouraging his kindness. She pulled her head back and looked up at him. His mouth came closer. She didn't want to wish for his kiss. It would complicate her quick trip. Nevertheless, her body sought the comfort he surrounded her with and she leaned on him. Closing her eyes, she left the choice of kissing up to him.

"I've missed you," his voice came harsh and low near her face.

Ready to accept his mouth and take a moment of pure happiness for herself, she shut out all thoughts of the consequences.

He stunned her by backing away.

As if diseased, or worse, Evan left her standing in the middle of the room and went to the kitchen area.

He pumped a handle of an old-fashioned pump sitting on a small wood counter, water poured out into a modern stainless steel sink. When he came back, he carried a wet cloth.

"This might sting." He dabbed the cool-dampened rag on her cut.

Time elapsed between his saying that he missed her and in the anticipation of him saying more. Her moment to respond vanished.

“That should heal up without a scar.” He walked back to the sink. “Why don’t you sit down just in case you feel faint?”

Crystal gazed at the room—the chair by the fireplace, the table with one chair, and the twin-size bed. She couldn’t pick a place to sit.

“Evan, how long have you lived here?”

His broad shoulders stiffened and his posture straightened. “I guess about seven years.”

“And your business? Is it doing well?”

“I gave it up to live here.”

At eighteen, out of school, and her parents dead from a car accident, Crystal had a need to get away from the small mountain community. She wanted Evan to go with her, but he said he couldn’t give up his family, his friends, or the logging business he started with his brother. It seemed strange that he gave everything up after all. Things weren’t better for her either. She left to become a newspaper reporter and discovered it wasn’t as glamorous as she thought it would be.

“Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve and you don’t have a tree. You always loved Christmas and the trimmings, just like I did.” She tried changing the subject to something cheery.

“Yeah, well things change.” The resentful tone remained fastened to every word he spoke. “I loved someone and I thought she loved me too.”

He went to the door and a cold rush of wind entered when he swung it open. It didn't help dry the tears forming in her eyes.

"I have to get more firewood," he said leaving the cabin.

The pop of sap on a log in the fireplace grabbed her attention and she turned her head. The log rack was full. When Evan didn't return right away with an armload of wood from the porch, she went to the door and eased it open. Outside, he leaned on a post.

"Evan, come back in the cabin. Avoiding me isn't going to work. I'm here for the night and we might as well talk." She had a lot to tell him and some of which she didn't know how to start.

His long strides put him in front of her.

"How about a cup of hot chocolate?" His gaze darted around her face.

She thought she nodded, but once his hand went to her cheek the sequence of the next events were a blur.

He pushed her into the cabin and she gripped his sides. She hadn't realized she was crying until he brushed the tears from her cheeks.

"Evan, kiss me." The desperate words broke from her in a sob.

Chapter Three

Not a single thing could outdo the speed in which Evan's mouth claimed hers. His hot breath rushed into her lungs. The roughness of his moustache and beard chafed her mouth. Framing her face with his hands, he tilted her head and continued attacking her with a passionate kiss.

Crystal whimpered. The delight that she anticipated but hadn't expected to experience, exceeded the bounds of her limiting thoughts. His aggression eased. Maybe he thought she'd stop him, maybe he thought he'd stop himself. She didn't know and didn't care.

His gentler actions caused the bristly hair around his mouth to tickle her face delightfully. His tongue slid alongside hers and whipped around from one side to the other. Her insistent response soon had her dragged in tighter. His hands and hers alike, clawed hungrily for the best hold.

"I can't believe you're here." His breathless words caressed her lips. "It's been so long."

Crystal pushed him back to arm's length. None of what she was doing was right. With a ten-year separation, their lives had taken different paths and she couldn't go back.

"Tomorrow after your house closing, don't return to the city, stay here with me." He surprised her with the statement.

"I-I can't." She didn't want to say it, but had to and she did everything to come up with reasons for not rushing to accept. "I'd like to say yes, but then we would come to find out we have nothing in common."

"And the kiss?"

"I'm sorry. I guess the accident has me confused and thankful." She wandered away from him and sat on the chair by the fireplace.

"We could give it a try." He turned on a small radio and Christmas music played softly.

She wondered, could they go back to what they once had? Could she throw away the life she had in the city for Evan? She didn't know what to say to him. In a heated moment, neither of them should make promises for a future. They really didn't know each other any longer.

"I think we should get you to bed for the night." He took her hand and pulled her up from the chair.

She stood and her whole body slid up against his solid frame. Nothing had ever fit her better than Evan. His hard length always had accommodated her as if the two of them were matching pieces of a puzzle.

"Don't ask me to make a life-long commitment tonight." She needed time to think.

She laid her head on his chest and he comforted her with a gentle hug—the kind that gave her goose bumps. In his arms, she felt at home.

“Come to bed with me?” She twisted her fingers, gripping his shirt and anchoring her hold on him, afraid he might refuse.

“You were just in a car accident.”

She inched the navy blue t-shirt up his back. “And I’m fine.” She tugged the cotton between them. “I’ll be sore tomorrow and for weeks to come. Tonight, I want you.”

She wanted him with an urgent spontaneity she feared would fade if they talked more. Things would look different in the morning and she wanted to grab a dream for one night.

Evan’s hands roamed over her back, up into her hair. He kissed her forehead, her temple, and then her nose. Gentle touches of his lips missed nothing on her face. The steady oscillating course neared her mouth and she twisted her head, dragging her lips onto his.

Tears were a waterfall of emotions spilling from her eyes. The turbulent event on the road only helped to remind her of what living was like.

Evan backed her toward the bed, hardly taking a breath from their continuing kiss. She worked the t-shirt up over his smooth muscled torso. It interrupted their locked gaze for a second as he took over and jerked the shirt off over his head.

She kissed him again. Moving in a familiar pattern, she closed her eyes and bowed her head, kissing his chest. She blindly licked over his soft, taut skin and hit one of his hard nipples.

“Crystal,” he groaned.

Her lips quivered as she neared tears once again at the sound of her name spoken in his low, excited voice. He took her mouth with a firm inhalation of his breath. His hands gripped her and he pushed her down toward the mattress. They fell together, with his arms at her sides, keeping most of his weight from her.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Crystal?” He kissed her in tender pecks between words.

“Yes.” She raked her fingers down the back of his head. “Yes. I’ve missed you so much.”

She plunged her tongue into his warm mouth, lapping up the enthusiasm he offered. The years apart seemed more like minutes.

His nimble fingers skillfully unclothed her. Blouse, jeans, and under garments disappeared under the barrage of his eager kisses. Her flesh tingled from head to toe.

He stopped and sat at the edge of the bed. She heard his boots hit the floor as well as the jingle of change or keys in his pants pockets when they too, fell into a heap. Leaning on an elbow, she stared at the lines of rippling muscle. When he turned to resume his hold on her, she stopped him with a hand to his chest. She hadn’t noticed the tattoo when she kissed his rippling torso.

“Evan?” Her voice squeaked with overwhelming emotion.

He glanced down at her name swirled in black lettering and then his gaze lifted back to her. “You’ve always been close to my heart.” He smiled.

She slid her finger over his smooth skin. His love bore a visual permanence, the kind that made her cry.

“When did you do this?” She steadily stroked the spot over his heart.

“A very long time ago.” He lowered her onto the pillow.

“Before I left Winterland?”

“After.”

Crystal bit the inside of her lip. She loved him and left him to think that she’d return. Her name inked on his flesh seemed a symbol of her betrayal and she closed her eyes.

“Don’t think of the past.” He kissed her.

She heard forgiveness in his statement.

They lay together for the longest time, not talking. Kissing had its very own beautiful language. His breath moved over her face as she laid a hand against the soft bristles of his beard, petting his jaw line, debating whether or not she should back out on having sex with him.

Before the words worked to the surface to stop the madness that apparently had invaded the sensible side of her brain, she slid her hand down his abdomen and rubbed over his silk-textured cock. Soft on the outside, hard on the inside, he moaned at her touch. She made a similar sound and accepted his hand on the inside of her thigh.

He parted her legs with a knee and his hand brushed between the folds of her sex. His finger glided over her clit.

“Evan,” she moaned.

An orgasm surfaced by his swirling touch on that one sensitive point and she could hardly concentrate on kissing him. In the end, his mouth did all the work while she twisted beneath his rocking body.

He guided his erection against her entrance. He lowered, pushing his cock into her a little and withdrawing. Several times, he repeated the process until he sank deeply into her wet center. His awakening groan energized her worn muscles. She held his head to devour his sensuous mouth. The taste of his lips excited her and she moaned with the desires long ago locked in her heart.

Crystal met each of his thrusts with one of her own. His weight kept her pinned and his passion enervated her thoughts.

“Harder, Evan, please, harder.” She held him tight, using his shoulder blades as a point of control with her grip.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’ve never hurt me.” She whispered in his ear. “And I’m so sorry for causing you the sadness I did years ago.”

His hands went to places she hadn’t had touched in a long time. Men didn’t seem to have the same desires or similar agendas she did during sex. They often rushed through the intimacies in marathon time, leaving her unfulfilled.

Evan gave no indication of hurrying. His hand cupped her breast and teased her with delights she thought she had forgotten. Pulling her nipple, he twisted and pinched until the ache intensified. He kneaded and shaped, and then set her soul on fire with the placement of his mouth over the teased tip.

“Don’t stop,” she begged when he lifted his head.

“Just give me a minute.”

Crystal’s nipples puckered to the cool breeze over the wet points. Evan’s cock withdrew from her, and she watched him get off the bed.

“Where are you going?” She rolled to her side and watched him rummage through drawers in a dresser. “What are you doing?”

“Damn,” he swore softly.

“What’s wrong?”

He turned around and gripped the top of the dresser as he leaned on it. She got teary-eyed seeing her name emblazoned on his chest like a badge of love.

“I can’t find any condoms, babe.”

She smiled at the endearment and took in the sight of him. As if carved from stone, a generous portion of his hardness pointed in her direction.

“Evan, come back to bed.” She licked over her lips, giving him a seductive bat of her eyelashes. “We’ll improvise.”

His brow furrowed. “What I want can’t be had in any other way than one.”

She watched his shapely bottom while he turned and hunted in other drawers and cabinets. Glimpses of his arousal made her wet.

“Evan, please, we don’t need it.” Anxious, impatient, and fraught with the looming complications that would come with the morning, she focused on all that was perfect—Evan wanted her.

He finally closed a cabinet and walked back to the bed. A slash of white teeth showed his triumphant smile through the black whiskers. His fingers waved the small packet.

The erotic moves of him sheathing his beautiful cock in the condom pushed her into having another small orgasm.

“There.” He leaned over her. “Now we can finish.”

She grasped his buttocks and clenched the solid flesh in her fingers. He lowered and when she pulled him quicker than he intended his whole body fell on her.

“Easy, babe, I don’t want to squish you.” He pressed up on his palms.

“You were taking too long.” She slid her hands up the solid planes of his back.

“Well I’m back.”

“Yes, I know.” She wiggled her hips to draw him into her further. “You’re a perfect fit, too.”

His hips rolled against hers and she massaged his back with persuading fingers dancing up and down his muscles.

His kisses splashed over her face, her neck and her shoulder. She twisted her face away, loving the move of his lips across her skin. He nibbled at her earlobe and panted heated words of adoration while thrusting. She arched against the impact of his deep penetration. His groans increased in pitch.

A glorious orgasm took control of her arching limbs and she moaned with encouragement.

“Harder,” she breathlessly requested.

Her hips suffered from the crushing impacts and her arms hurt from the way she bound them tightly around Evan.

“Yes, harder.” She demanded.

He complied and the orgasm intensified.

Crystal twisted against his solid frame. Each flex of his body, pushed her down into the mattress. His low grunts were met with her long whimpering cries of elation. Tremors and spasms jerked her in his embrace.

Evan slowed his moves.

“Evan, don’t stop,” she whispered her plea.

“Oh God, babe, you feel so good.”

He dropped his head on her shoulder and groaned for one long, strained minute. His skin quivered under her fingertips. His cock fit her tight, and the heated friction bonded them. Her body claimed him in pulsing contractions, trapping him inside. He shuddered several times, rattling her frame with his spasms. They finished their short but exhilarating climax together with the sounds, not words of undying love.

Crystal didn’t know how to respond to the outpouring of his affection.

“Evan, don’t let me go.” She snaked her arms under his and rolled with him to their sides.

“Who’s letting go? I’m hanging onto you as tight as I can without breaking you.” ...*all through the night*, came from the radio.

His kisses rushed over her face. The room had enough coolness that soon she shivered with the stir of air over her damp body.

When he released her and sat up, she whimpered, “Evan”.

“This will just take a second.”

He took care of everything. Put wood on the fire, more blankets on the bed and climbed back under the covers, pulling her to him.

“See, I was just a second.”

She snuggled into the warmth of him and closed her eyes. The idea of what she’d have to say in the morning tired her out and she welcomed sleep to forget that Evan needed to hear the truth about why she couldn’t stay with him.

Chapter Four

Crystal woke in a panic. The accident pushed her through what seemed to be a thousand nightmares. Christmas music playing softly in the background of her thoughts made her think she was still sitting in the wrecked car.

“Hey, beautiful, time to get up.” Evan’s soft lips pressed hers briefly.

“I’m alive,” she gasped.

“Very much so.” His voice was as comforting as a warm bath on tired muscles.

The scent of coffee and bacon drew her nose up. Her body tried to follow. The stiffness kept her down. She figured a little longer lying there might help and then she’d try to rise.

“I need five more minutes,” she groaned, blindly putting a hand to his cheek.

Her eyes opened immediately when it settled in her mind that she didn’t feel whiskers.

“You’ve shaved.” She touched his smooth face.

“It seemed best if you’re going to survive me kissing you.” He rubbed her lips. “I’ve given you a rash.”

She never felt more at home, anywhere, than right that minute in Evan’s bed.

“Whoops, almost forgot about the bacon.” He jumped up from the side of the mattress and went to the kitchen area. “I put your bag there on the end of the bed.”

He looked over his shoulder and smiled. His obvious excitement made it hard for her to breathe. No one should have such an overwhelming hold on a person’s well-being. She

forced herself upright in the hopes to tell him everything about herself before they got too far into an affair.

In the far corner of the room sat a small Christmas tree. Decorated with pinecones and holly branches, it had a simple beauty. The mantle also had boughs of holly. The night before there hadn’t been a sign of Christmas in the cabin and the magical appearance pushed her mouth into a big smile.

“You’ve been up for a while.” She crooked her finger at him.

He sat the frying pan aside and came back to the bed where she pulled him down onto her.

“Breakfast will get cold.” He warned.

“I don’t need food.” She hungrily sucked on his mouth. “You’re enough.”

...good tidings from Christmas...

Crystal indulged herself with one more episode of the happy fantasy she created the night before. Too soon, she would have to end it.

Evan gathered her up close and she moaned at the way her body fought the movement. Stiff and in pain, she hugged him, hiding her tears in his collar.

“The morning after can be brutal,” he whispered. “Hold on.”

She kept her arms wrapped around his neck as he pushed the sheet away. The coarseness of his clothes against her naked skin distracted her from the aches in her body. He gently scooped her up and walked to the kitchen area of the cabin.

Where the table was the night before, there now sat a large cast iron tub filled with steamy water.

“A bath?” Excitement bubbled in her at his thoughtfulness.

“It’ll help.” He lowered her legs and stood her in the tub.

Each brush of his hand sent a sexual shiver through her. He held onto her as she slowly sat down in the water and all she could think of was making love with him again.

“You know this is very distressing.”

“What is, babe?”

“You, standing there with all your clothes on, while I, naked as the day I was born, sit vulnerably exposed to your inspection.” She grinned. “This tub does appear to be able to accommodate two.”

Her smile widened when he started unbuttoning his red flannel shirt. He opened it and tugged it from his wide shoulders. For having thick wavy hair on his head, he didn’t have a lot of hair elsewhere. But there, covering his broad, muscular chest, he did have a sparse fan of short black fibers funneling to his navel.

She reached up and looped her fingers over his belt. Tugging him right up against the tub, she unfastened the buckle.

“Never the patient one, were you?”

She popped the snap on the denims and pinched the zipper tab.

“I’m patient when I need to be.” Yanking the zipper down, she reached into his open pants. “Right now, I don’t see a reason to endure your slow strip-show.”

...and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing...

Chapter Five

Once they were on the road to town, Crystal seriously gave her life the consideration it deserved. She dissected her impending speech like a mad-scientist. Plotting each statement with a theory on how Evan would react. She didn't think she took so long.

"Here we are." Evan pulled up in front of the lawyer's office.

From the center of the town, Winterland hadn't appeared too different after ten years. She watched Evan get out of the car and come around toward her side. But her door opened before he got there.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Crystal looked up at John Breen. He was the last person she expected to see that day. He took her arm and practically hauled her from the car in one tug.

"Hey," Evan came forward. "Let her go. She's just been in a car accident."

"An accident? Are you all right, sweetheart?" John asked. "I knew it had to be something serious when you didn't call last night. Then this morning when I came looking for you, the motel said you hadn't checked in."

Crystal's gaze went to Evan's pained stare. He took several steps back and his glare turned icy cold.

"Evan, I can explain."

He turned away from her. "We should get inside," he replied and opened the door to the office.

"Someone explain something to me!" John demanded. "How were you in an accident, Crystal?"

John walked her through the door that Evan held open.

"John, this is Evan Montgomery." She started. "He's an old...friend. He happened to find me when my car went off the road last night."

"Were you at the hospital? You're here, so you must be all right. You are all right, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm fine. A little bruised, but nothing I won't live through. The roads were too bad to drive the rest of the way to town last night. Evan had me stay at his place." She patted John's arm with an obsessive need to smooth over his confused look. "If he hadn't come along, I would have frozen to death."

"Thank you." John held his hand out to Evan. "Crystal means a lot to me and I'm grateful for your help."

"Sure." Evan shook his hand and then walked away.

Evan sat in the waiting area of the lawyer's office in the only chair away from her and John. A headache began nagging her with reminders of the accident. She didn't know what to do about her uninhibited night of passion. Hurting John with the truth was just as bad as the pained expression in Evan's eyes.

“Sort of a strange guy, isn’t he?” John whispered to Crystal. “You say he’s a friend from when you lived here?”

Crystal didn’t answer. Mr. Greenbrier, the lawyer handling the closing on her house joined them.

“Evan, good to see you.” Mr. Greenbrier shook his hand. “You know the way. Crystal, it’s so nice to see you again. If you’ll come with me, we’ll make this as painless a transaction as possible.”

“Wait here, please.” She told John.

The music piped in through the office rooms. ...*O come all ye faithful*...added a hopeful thought that she could explain to Evan what she wanted to tell him.

“Hello, Mr. Greenbrier.”

She went in the room with Evan. He had yet to look at her. Already sitting at the small conference table, he stared out the window.

“I’ll go get the deed and be right back.” Mr. Greenbrier closed them in the room.

“I don’t understand.” Crystal lowered onto the chair.

“Makes us even, huh?” He fiddled with the pen and pad on the table. “Were you going to tell me about him? Or were you just going to leave like the last time?”

“The accident—I wasn’t thinking right yesterday.”

“And this morning, when we made love—before, and after breakfast?”

“I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Pity sex?”

“No!”

“Hmmm, could have fooled me.” He made a noise that sounded sort of like a snorted laugh. “Wait, you did fool me. Idiot I am, I fell in love with the same woman twice and got kicked in the gut for it both times.”

“Evan, please. I want to explain.”

He drummed his fingers on the table and looked around, still avoiding her.

The office door whooshed open, stopping her from even starting her long story.

“Here we go. These are the papers needing your signature.” Mr. Greenbrier sat them in front of her.

Crystal looked at the documents. Dozens of words blurred when her eyes went teary.

“I was born in this house,” she commented.

“I didn’t know that.” Mr. Greenbrier voiced.

“I lived my entire life there until I was grown.” She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes.

“Are you selling the house or not.” Evan’s cold tone cut through her.

“Should I give you two a minute?” Mr. Greenbrier asked. His expression showed confusion.

“No.” She picked up the pen. “I need to get on with my life. I’m getting married on New Year’s Day, this was one of the resolutions I made and I wanted this settled before then.”

Crystal scribbled her name on every page and every line the lawyer pointed out to her.

“Well, that’s everything, except for the money.” Mr. Greenbrier said.

Evan stood up and pulled out his wallet. He dropped a cashier’s check on the table in front of her.

“Here is your copy of the papers.” Mr. Greenbrier handed them to Evan.

“Thanks.” He walked around the table, opened the door, and left.

Crystal watched him walk out of her life without even a goodbye. She blindly accepted the papers the lawyer handed her and left the room.

“All taken care of, sweetheart?” John partially blocked her from running out of the building.

She pushed him aside and rushed out to the sidewalk. While the door hung open, the Christmas music followed her.

To the tune of ...*dashing through the snow*... Evan’s Dodge Charger pulled away from the curb. The tires spun on the ice as he drove away fast.

“Looking to get himself killed or what?” John took her elbow.

She let him lead her to his car, the plain, dark blue sedan—a comfortable car with all the extras. It was nothing like the Charger. She never even tried to push the seat back in Evan’s car to see if the lever still stuck. Evan managed to make it work just fine when they parked at night on Lookout Mountain.

Crystal didn’t really notice getting in the car or John driving until she looked out the window and saw her house.

“Stop the car!”

The vehicle jolted.

“Geez Crystal, you want to get us killed.”

She hopped out and ran down the snow-covered sidewalk. All her sore muscles protested the rush, but she kept going until she was right up close to the two-story building. She tripped and fell to her knees before her old house. Too stunned to move, she let the icy chill numb her legs.

In the window sat a Christmas tree—her tree with all the familiar decorations. She had put them in storage with all her furnishings and no one had a right to use them, especially renters she didn’t know.

She forced her aching joints to work and got to her feet.

“Crystal, are you all right? Where are you going?”

John trailed her to the porch. She rang the bell, but no one answered. The lawyer told her on the phone the buyer would handle getting rid of the renters and having her attic-stored furnishings delivered to her by a moving company. Yet, as she peered in the window, she didn’t think that would happen. Everything she stared at through the window belonged to her. The whole trip to Winterland seemed plagued by the unusual.

She fished through the junk in her purse and took out her set of keys.

“Now what are you doing?”

John’s impatience irritated her.

“I’m going in my house.”

“It’s not your house anymore.”

“I don’t care.”

“Crystal, just let it go. Whatever has you stirred up, forget about it and let’s go home.”

“No. I have to see the inside one last time.”

“If we leave now, we can get back to the city before dark.”

She ignored him and opened the door.

“Hello?” Pushing the door further, Crystal stepped over the threshold. “Is anyone home?”

“Crystal.” John grabbed her arm. “We could go to jail.”

She jerked free and went beyond the foyer into the living room on the left.

“It’s my house.”

“No, it’s that Montgomery fellow’s house.”

“No, I mean this is my furniture and it’s set up just as it was when I lived here.” She moved around the room and touched the knickknacks.

“I thought you said the stuff was packed away in the attic?”

“That’s where I left it when I moved. Apparently, the renters considered it theirs for the taking.”

Crystal walked to the Christmas tree and lifted an ornament. The odd crystal clear ball was the kind that you could open and fill with whatever you wanted. She turned it over and in the palm of her hand she stared at for answers as if she looked into a real crystal ball.

“I’m ready to go, John.” She let the ornament dangle again.

“Good, I didn’t look forward to spending Christmas Eve in the hoosegow. I can’t believe you came from this little hick town.”

Chapter Six

Crystal paced the living room all day waiting to see Evan park his bright red car in the driveway of his new house. She had lied to John, telling him there were people she wanted to visit and she wanted to do it alone. He told her that he hadn't anticipated staying the day and had phone calls to make about work, anyways.

When Evan arrived at dusk, he unknowingly made her wait. He sat out in his car and stared at the front window. She saw him when she peeked out from her hiding place behind the drapery. An automatic timer snapped the Christmas tree lights on and it startled her, but she remained out of sight. They gave her the reason for his delay.

She backed away into the far corner of the room. Evan came in and went straight to the tree. He stopped in the same place she did and lifted the same ornament.

"What are you doing here?" he asked without turning around.

"How did you know I was here?" She walked to the chair by the fireplace and sat down, wishing she had started a fire to take the chill off the room.

"Your perfume."

She moved on to her real question.

“You bought my house, why?”

“So I’d have a place in town.”

“But why my house?”

“Why not, it’s a nice house.” He turned around and placed his hands on his hips. “What do you want to hear, Crystal? I rented this house to have a way to hold onto the best times of my life. I was informed you wanted to sell it, so I took a chance. Too bad, so sad for me.”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes got watery. He had no hesitancy. She wished she had left the radio off when the faint song reminded her of her emotions.

You better watch out, you better not cry...

“But what’s love got to do with anything?” Evan threw his arms up in obvious exasperation. “All it’s gotten me is a half-miserable life.”

“Evan, I asked you to move to the city with me.”

“I don’t even like staying in Winterland, but I was willing to compromise on this for you. Now it’s just for me.”

“I didn’t mean for things to turn out this way. I planned on coming back years ago.

“You didn’t.”

“That’s not fair. You got married. A year after I left, you married someone else and that was the last time I gave any thought to coming back here.”

“I told you that was an accident.”

“How would I know that?”

”You could have called and asked.”

“Oh right. I’m going to call, what, every couple of months and say hey, are you still married?”

“I meant call someone else, like my brother.”

“Marriage is supposed to be forever. Besides, do you really think I’d torture myself by calling to see how happy you were, while I wasn’t?”

She walked over to him and put a hand on his cheek. The stubble of whiskers, starting a new growth, prickled her palm. He turned his head and taking hold of her hand, he kissed her skin.

“Where’s Breen?”

“I made him stay at the motel.”

“You’re still going to marry him?”

“I don’t know.” She knew that answer wouldn’t get her any sympathy for the problems surrounding her.

He dropped her hand and turned away. It left her looking at the tree. The presents beneath had her wondering all day if they were real and if they were for her.

“I see you have presents. You went to a lot of trouble for pretend.”

“They’re real gifts.”

“For who?” She gulped. “Me?”

“No.”

It was a silly thought and she felt embarrassed to have asked.

The doorbell rang and Crystal didn’t see any evidence that Evan was surprised by it. He went and opened the door.

Crystal didn't see who was there, but she had no trouble learning quickly.

"Daddy!" a girl's voice squealed.

"Hey there, sprout," he replied.

Crystal moved into viewing range in time to see Evan lean forward and kiss the woman who came with the child.

"You've shaved." The woman stroked Evan's cheek. "I like it."

Crystal felt crushed. She barely gave a thought to the fact he had kept having a daughter a secret from her. Not when the woman Evan appeared to greet fondly upset all her plans of giving up the city and her impending marriage for him.

"Who's the lady?" the little girl asked.

Evan glanced back. "That's Crystal."

"She's pretty. Is she the Christmas angel you said I'd meet?"

Crystal watched Evan's gaze shift swiftly away from her to the woman.

"Amanda, this is Crystal Crenshaw."

"It's nice to meet you, Crystal." She kissed Evan on the cheek.

"Sorry I can't stay, Mother is keeping the car warm and we're off to the church service."

Crystal didn't get to say anything before Amanda was out the door.

"Crystal, this is Julie...my daughter." Evan stood behind his daughter and rested his hands on her shoulders.

“I figured that part out.” Crystal looked at the little girl and saw traces of Evan in her face, but not as much as she saw the other woman’s features. “She looks like Amanda, very pretty.”

Evan smiled. “Yeah, she does.”

“I should go.” Crystal went to the chair where she left her purse and coat. “I only came by because I wondered why you had my stuff. I saw the tree earlier today in the window and... Never mind. It doesn’t matter. John will be wondering what’s taking me so long.”

“Julie, go pick out the present you want to open tonight.” Evan told the girl, sending her away from them. “Pick it out, but don’t open it until I get there.”

“All right, Daddy.”

The Christmas song on the radio was a repeat of one not very long ago. *You better watch out, you better not cry...* Crystal didn’t need reminders at how badly she wanted to burst into tears and not stop until she drowned.

Evan had a child and the appearance of a good relationship with Julie’s mother. The last thing Crystal wanted to do was interfere with a little girl’s happiness or Evan’s.

He touched her arm as she went passed him for the exit.

“I know I should have told you about Julie and I was... I would have, but all I had on my mind was you last night.” He followed her to the door.

She stared at him unsure what it was he wanted from her and doubly unsure what she wanted for herself. Crystal turned her head

toward the wafting music and the song the little girl sang happily along with, sadly fit Crystal's life.

The fire is slowly dying, and my dear, we're still good-bye-ing...

Ten years and she hadn't let go of him in her heart. She had seen him and his life, and now it was time to let go. Maybe the reason that she really sold the house was to have the excuse to come home and see how his life turned out.

"Crystal, stay."

"I can't." She took another glance at Julie. "You have a beautiful daughter."

"Julie is the other reason why I rented your house and also why I bought it. I stay here when she visits. Once summer comes around, she'll be moving in here with me."

"Good-bye, Evan. It was nice seeing you again." She stretch up on her toes and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "You'll always have a special place in my heart."

Rushing from the house, Crystal tromped through the snow, down the walk. She didn't slow until she was a block away. The light flurries of snow dusted the town with a fresh whiteness that cooled her warm face.

Tears flowed freely.

She gave a lot of consideration to how her life was and how she wanted it to be. When she reached the motel several blocks away, she made her decision.

Chapter Seven

Crystal couldn't look at John as they drove away from the motel. She didn't look at anything in Winterland either. She sat numbly in the car with a blank mind.

"I don't know why we can't just postpone the wedding instead of calling it off altogether," he said.

"John, I love you, but not the way I should. The idea of not marrying you makes me feel no different than marrying you. Do you understand what I mean?"

"No."

"I should be excited at the prospect of becoming your wife."

"And you're not?"

"I tried pretending I was." She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

If she had the energy, she would have reached forward and turned the radio off. But as it was, the holiday music seemed fitting. She cheated on John and she didn't deserve him.

He knows if you've been bad or good...so be good for heaven's sake.

"It's Evan Montgomery, isn't it?"

“He was my high school sweetheart. I loved him very much and I left him for no good reason.”

“Then why aren’t you back there with him now?”

“I suppose I could be, but I’ve disappointed him in so many ways. I think its best not to change things. He has a beautiful daughter who needs him.”

John pulled into a gas station.

“I’m going to get a coffee, do you want one?” she asked.

“No, I’m good.”

He pumped the gas and Crystal walked to small store.

“Crystal!” a child’s voice called to her.

Crystal turned and looked at Julie running from the car toward her.

“Where’s your Daddy?”

“I don’t know, he took me to church last night and left me with Aunt Amanda.”

“Aunt?” Crystal had thought the woman his ex-wife.

“He said he wasn’t feeling well and kept looking at your picture on the Christmas tree. Maybe he had to go to the hospital like my mother. She died.”

“I’m sorry, honey. And I’m positive he’ll be all right. Maybe it was a tummy ache.”

“Or heartache.” a woman said from behind her.

Crystal spun around and looked at Amanda holding a bag from the store.

Are you going back to the city to get away from him?" Julie asked. "Daddy said you were."

Crystal was speechless by the statement.

"Julie, go back to the car." Amanda instructed. "Take this with you. I need to talk to Crystal for a minute."

Crystal looked over at John's approach to the store to pay for the gas. She felt trapped by lies, half-truths and she didn't know why, it seemed obvious everyone knew everything about her botched up life.

"Evan showed up at the church with Julie last night, asking me to take her for a couple days. He said you were going back to the city. I'm afraid Julie picks up on his moods very quickly and she asked him why." Amanda explained.

Crystal nodded her understanding.

"He wouldn't say why you were leaving and I could tell he was upset. I guess things didn't work out as he hoped. He said you were getting married."

"Not anymore she isn't." John startled her with his quiet stance behind her. "She's in love with Evan."

"Then why are you leaving him again?" Amanda stared at her.

"He told you about before?"

"My sister did. She worked for Evan at the logging company in the office. I'm sorry to say, she took advantage of him. He went out drinking a lot and she had it in her mind to make him forget about you. She set out to get him to marry her and the only way that was possible was to get pregnant. He didn't want to get married at first. But she threatened to have his baby and go live in the city so he'd never see his child."

Crystal took an immediate dislike to Evan's ex-wife and even though she was dead, she couldn't be sympathetic. Evan didn't need to suffer another emotional battle.

"He said they married and divorced the same year."

"Their marriage was a disaster. She had the baby and Evan refused to have anything to do with her. He said it was one mistake that wasn't going to be repeated. Don't get me wrong, he loves Julie very much. He just didn't want to take a chance of my sister getting her hooks into him deeper."

"How did he finally get a divorce?"

"She started sleeping around on him and he had a private detective get the evidence so no court would give her custody of Julie. He gave her money, let her keep Julie, and went to live in a cabin up the mountain. The only time he came down to Winterland was to spend time with his daughter."

"Is that when he gave up his business? When he got divorced?"

"He stopped working there, but he's still partners with his brother."

Silence engulfed them until the door of the store opened.

I'll have a blue Christmas without you; I'll be so blue thinking about you.

"You still haven't said why you're leaving if you love him. There isn't a person in this town that doesn't know he's still in love with you." Amanda looked from her up to John. "I'm sorry. This probably isn't something you wanted to hear."

Crystal glanced over at the car with Julie's sad face propped on the open window edge. Julie was miserable because of her father. Evan was miserable because of her. And she was miserable for a list of reasons she didn't want to think about anymore.

"Amanda, could you give me a ride back to town? I think Julie and Evan should be together today. It's Christmas and she has presents under the tree."

"He put the presents in my trunk."

"Well he should be the one seeing her open them." Crystal turned to John. "I'm sorry."

He cupped her chin. "Be happy, Crystal. If he's the one who'll make you excited to get married then I wish you all the best."

"Oh, don't make me cry John. I don't want to upset Julie anymore than she already is."

He brushed her cheek with a kiss. "I'll get your suitcase from the trunk."

Crystal hurried to Amanda's car and opened the back door.

"Do you have room for me?" she asked Julie.

"Are you coming with me to Aunt Amanda's house?"

"No, you're coming with me to your Daddy's. He needs a present and I think you, and hopefully me, will be a great big surprise."

John put her bag in the trunk of Amanda's car and waved as they pulled away. He didn't seem all that sad and she wondered if maybe he wasn't as in love with her as he thought. It seemed a nice idea to believe, rather than him feeling as hurt as Evan apparently had felt through the last ten years.

When Amanda pulled into the empty driveway, Crystal knew right away that Evan went to his cabin.

“He’s gone.” Crystal opened the car door and stared at the front window. “The Christmas tree is missing.”

She ran up to the door and got her keys out. Rushing inside she looked at the empty place in front of the big picture window; a little tinsel on the floor, some pine needles, but nothing else. All the Christmas decorations were gone and the room was a mess of left over packing.

Crystal went to the note lying on the coffee table.

“He’s called movers and they’re coming some time this week to pack up everything in the house and have it shipped to me.”

“Oh my.” Amanda’s astonishment was as great as hers. “Well, where’s the Christmas stuff?”

Crystal didn’t have an answer. She went from room to room and finally the attic. There she found the boxes neatly tucked in the corner.

“Amanda, where can I rent a car?”

“Take mine. Mother can come pick me up here.” She went outside with Crystal. “Take Julie with you, all the presents are in the trunk.”

“Maybe I should go alone?”

“No, your original idea is best. You and Julie are what he needs most. Oh, unless you’d rather—”

“I’d very much like Julie to go with me. I just thought, well you don’t know me, Julie doesn’t know me, and Evan might get upset you let her come with me.”

“Oh, who cares what Evan thinks. He’s been a moody bastard for ten years and apparently has decided to go back on his word to take Julie.”

“He said she was going to live with him.”

“He’s told me that before and then comes up with some excuse. After my sister died, he said he didn’t want to change Julie’s life right away. Then Thanksgiving came and he said wait until the holidays. Now he’s not giving an excuse, he’s just crawling back to his cabin to sulk.”

Chapter Eight

Crystal didn't have experience with children. On the drive to Evan's cabin, she tried to absorb everything she hadn't considered. Staying with Evan meant helping raise his daughter. She didn't concern herself with whether she was ready or not. Wondering if she was capable of it had a bigger grip on her nerves.

"Julie, I'm not sure how much you will understand, but I think I should tell you, I love your Daddy."

"I love Daddy, too."

"And I bet that makes him very happy."

"I don't like when he's sad."

"We're going to make sure he isn't, together. Okay?"

"Okay."

Crystal pulled the car to a stop in the graveled area near the cabin. She got out of the car and saw the cabin door open. Evan came out and stood on the porch. Julie ran up to him and he bent to kiss her head. His gaze, however, never drifted from Crystal.

"If you can find the canister of hot chocolate, I'll make you a big mug of cocoa with lots of marshmallows," Evan told Julie.

Crystal watched the girl disappear inside the cabin.

“Where’s Amanda?” He came off the porch and walked toward her.

“Home I suppose. I hope you don’t mind, she let me bring Julie up here. It’s Christmas and we both think Julie should spend it with her father.”

“And what happened to your fiancé?”

“John’s heading back to the city.”

“Why aren’t you with him?”

“Things change.”

His brow cocked.

“I’m not marrying him.”

Suddenly music poured out of the cabin. She assumed Julie turned on a radio. The Christmas tune helped to push her in the right direction.

And so I’m offering the simple phrase...

“Evan, I love you. I don’t want you to come to the city. I want to come home to you.” She lifted her hand near his face. “Last night, when I asked you to never let me go, I meant forever.”

“Forever is a long time. What if things change again?”

“Then they can only be for the better.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and picked her up, swinging her around and kissing her.

“Really Evan, don’t let me go.” She hugged him. “I have a lot of catching up to do with hugs and kisses.

“I love you, Crystal.”

“Don’t ever let that change.”

“It never has.” His mouth covered hers.

She sighed with an overwhelming contentment and glanced up at the mistletoe dangling from the tree branch overhead. Evan looked up as well and smiled.

“I have something for you.” He stood her back on her feet, took her hand, and excitedly led her in the cabin.

He guided her to the small Christmas tree that he put up just for her the day before and picked up the ornament she had admired at her old house.

“I’ve already seen it.” She took the ornament with their picture in it. “It reminded me of a crystal ball.”

“Me too, and that’s the future I saw.” He tapped the picture of them together. “Open it.”

“But the picture will fall out.”

He took it back and twisted it open. Inside was the crumpled silver gray tissue paper, but what the picture hid was the diamond engagement ring nestled in the middle.

Evan took her hand. “Will you marry me?”

The problem with being too excited was it rendered her mute. She opened her mouth and nothing came out. This was how she wanted to feel when John asked her to marry him.

“Crystal?”

She nodded her head with an enthusiastic yes. Her hand shook when she held it out for him to put the ring on her.

“Evan,” her voice trembled.

His eyes were as watery as hers. Instead of saying anything, she kissed him. For a long time she kissed him and let the spirit of Christmas warm her with the prospect of a very bright future.

“I love you,” he murmured repeatedly against her lips.

“I found the hot chocolate!” Julie sang.

For the rest of the day, they sat just as any family did and enjoyed Christmas. Crystal made them a simple dinner, Julie’s choice—peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, followed by a dessert of candy from her Christmas stocking and marshmallows that they toasted on a stick in the fireplace.

Eventually, they put Julie to bed and they sat on the floor in front of the fireplace.

“Happy?” he asked.

“I couldn’t be happier.” she nuzzled her face under his chin and looked over at Julie still asleep in the only bed in the cabin. “I think you’ll need to build an addition for us to have some privacy.”

“We have our house in town.”

“Will I need a job or can you support me?”

“I can support you, why?”

“Then I think I’d like to live here.”

“Julie has school.”

“There’s such a thing called home-schooling. Maybe for the first year of our marriage, I could teach her and we could all get to know each other better?”

“I guess if there is going to be any intimacy I should get started right away on a private bedroom for us.”

“And one for Julie.” She kissed his jaw. “It wouldn’t be right for her not to have her own room. She’s as new to living with you as I am. I don’t want her feeling like a guest.”

“It’s Christmas, so my present for you is the promise to build you all the rooms you want.”

“No, this Christmas all I want is you.” She took his hand and tugged him to get up from the floor. “The heater still works in your car, right?”

“Oh yeah!”

Crystal smiled as the music floated outside with them.

...And have yourself a merry little Christmas now.

The End

The Christmas Card

Diane Charles Linford

Okay now this might sound a bit strange, but the events surrounding the sweetest, most beautiful Christmas card I ever received actually began right after Halloween. In fact, deer hunting season was officially underway. The whole beginning to this grand conundrum reflected events directly concerning my work-a-day job with Bock and Porter Brewing Company.

Let me back up and tell you a little bit about me. My name is Sienna Rose Sorrel. I'm thirty-seven years old, divorced and live in a north side apartment with my big tawny Norwegian Forest Cat, Fafhrd. During the day I work at both the reception station and as one of the online customer communications specialists for Bock and Porter.

Bet you didn't realize people's questions about beer could go beyond "How do I get the can open and pour it down my throat?" Nevertheless, we get tons of curious daily questions—everything from suggested ways to pour from a spout of a bottle versus the hole of a can

(see the website's FAQ/Frequently Asked Questions) to amateur brewers requesting the recipe for our Special Holiday Ale? (Sorry, that's a corporate secret.)

Anyway, one afternoon we got a question at my work station from an online consumer, screen-named *Russet Umber* about reconstituting biscuit mix out in the field with beer instead of water. Apparently, this guy had taken his lap top with him on a hunting trip so he could continue to work. The old joke among so many of us raised in areas where our fathers, brothers, or husbands hunted essentially had to do with images of a lot of guys hanging out in rustic lodges, cabins or even glorified shacks who were pretty much there for the beer drinking instead of the actual hunting. Nevertheless, this question at least had some intelligence behind it.

So besides the puzzle of where this guy could possibly find a place to get Internet service in the wilderness, his beer question certainly sounded legitimate.

Since recipes were a specialty of mine, I procured an answer for him right away.

Beer frequently has been used as a seasoning in cooking. The fact is if you wanted to substitute anywhere from ten percent to one hundred percent beer for the required water in a biscuit or bread recipe, you could do so safely and effectively. Often such liquid replacement truly enhanced the overall flavor.

Once I submitted my answer to him, I figured that would be the end of my online communication with this *Russet Umber*. Turns out, I was wrong.

I got a chat message the next day: [Hey, Ms. Helpful #043! Thanks a lot for your answer yesterday. You were a big help.]

Okay, I decided to type in a quick informal reply. Nothing special: [You're welcome. That's why we're here.]

[Well, you got me out of a helluva scrape with the guys and I appreciate it. Bet your husband takes full advantage of all your knowledge about beer...LOL]

Now I don't know what made me type in this message, but I pressed *send* before I realized what I did: [Not any more. I'm divorced.]

Jeez, talk about unprofessional! But there the message sat on my screen for the whole world to see. *Aww, what did I just do?*

[Obviously, that's his loss. Anyway thanks again, sweetie. Take care.] Then he signed off.

Whew. All might not be lost, after all.

I came in a touch later for my shift than the other communications people so my duties covered the downstairs reception desk when Margery, our normal receptionist, went off on her lunch hour.

"Hey, Miz Sorrel! How are you doing?"

I looked up to see the familiar face and figure of the regular package delivery driver, Brichester "Brick" Brown. Brick delivered national and international packages daily to the Bock and Porter Brewing Company via National Quick Service. You know those really hunky guys who wore the khaki matched shirt and shorts in the summertime that women drooled over? Well, Brick fit the image totally. He had the stocky, muscular frame obviously enhanced from working out.

“Brick” once mentioned he got his nickname growing up in a neighborhood where a name like Brichester would get a kid beaten up. In fact, he obviously had a broken nose at one time which had never properly healed. Except for his disjointed nose, the ruddy skinned, muscular, and twenty-something Brick Brown looked exactly like the poster delivery guy that unattached female office workers daydreamed about in our unfocused, on-the-job hours.

I always thought I was fortunate to be stationed on reception desk duty during his regular delivery schedule. Over the weeks, we’d struck up a cordial acquaintanceship. He beamed when he saw me. I figured his reaction centered mostly on my not giving him a hard time like some of those uppity bitches elsewhere did whenever he dropped off packages. What’s the point of treating a decent guy like crap when he’s merely doing his job?

We had a sort of cultural and physical attraction between us as well. Not the kind that would go anywhere, but at least we could tease each other. I pretty much fit the description of a Big Beautiful Woman when I felt really good about myself. Otherwise, I’d sink into the trap of thinking of myself as the pathetic chubby girl whose husband ran off with a skinny little tart after I lost control of my weight.

Six years of Gordon’s snorting pig noises over a trough whenever I sat down to eat finally took their toll. I couldn’t eat when my husband was around so I binged whenever he was gone. As a result, I gained more weight and he became more verbally abusive.

Raised in his inner city neighborhood culture, Brick apparently appreciated a little heft to his women. He had a way of making me feel

good about my appearance. How could you not like a man like that?

“So Miz Sorrel how’s life on the beer hotline?” He plopped several packages on top of the reception desk.

“More like the lukewarm line today, Brick. How’s traffic out there?”

“Just miserable, thanks for asking.” He presented his LED board for my signature. Seems no matter how much you practice your signature on these contraptions, it always makes you look illiterate. “All right, Sienna, when can I ask you out?”

“I don’t know, Brick. When are you gonna get us reservations at Cloud Buster’s Supper Club?” Since dinner atop the skyscraper restaurant at the downtown Cloud Buster club pretty much cost more than each of our weekly salaries put together, this was our standard pie-in-the-sky banter.

“I’m working on it. I’m thinking of taking a second part time job.”

“Silly man, if you do that you won’t have time for our date.”

“Damn! Hadn’t thought of that.”

The switchboard lit up. I glanced down at the multitude of lights signaling incoming calls. “Shoot, gotta get back to work. You take care out there, Brick.”

“I always do.”

* * * *

Later that afternoon this message popped up on the company’s chat line: [Hey, Ms. Helpful #043, how are you today?]

I glanced at the signature line of the text message--*Russet Umber*.

[Hi, Mr. Umber what can I do for you this afternoon?] I entered my response.

[Well, I was wondering, who is the local distributor up here in where I'm hunting? I am at area code...] He typed in his approximate location.

That task seemed simple enough, I merely directed him to one of our area distributors' web site. I figured that was all he'd need.

[All right, then. What's the correct way to pour beer from a bottle into a glass?]

[That's on the FAQ, Mr. Umber. But you already knew that, didn't you?] I typed back.

[Yes. I just wanted to chat with you again.]

[Sir, this chat line is for company business only.]

[Well, why don't you start by telling me your name?]

Oh no, you don't. [Sorry. Definitely against company policy.]

The little text screen lit up. [Oh come on, at least give me an email address where you can be reached.]

[Mr. Umber, these messages are supervised and read by middle management. I could lose my job!]

[Okay do you have a personal IM carrier at home? I am...] His message listed all of his screen names on the various instant messenger services—MSN, AIM/AOL, Yahoo, and so forth. They were all variations on the screen name *Russet Umber*—some with a number after the name.

Some terrible defect in my brain caused me to write down the

names he sent me on a memo pad. I tore off the top sheet, folded up the note paper and tucked it into my purse.

[You have a great afternoon, Mr. Umber.] Hah! Let him sweat for a while.

That night I logged onto all three of my IM accounts and added *Russet Umber's* name to my pending list of buddies. I can't explain why I did it—total caprice mixed with natural curiosity, I suppose.

Suddenly, the little box popped up stating that I had a message from *Russet Umber*. Did I wish to give permission to add to buddy list? I checked “add buddy,” and thus my life changed.

[So Ms Helpful #043 who are you really?]

[As you can see, my screen name is Sienna Rose. Why don't we just stick with that for now?] I typed in reply.

[All right, Sienna Rose, nice to meet you.]

[Likewise.]

[You still dressed in your work clothes?]

[Is that your sneaky way of asking me what am I wearing?]

[Hah! You caught me. So I know you're divorced, do you live with anyone at the moment?]

[Sort of...]

[A man?]

[Absolutely. He's all male.]

[I don't understand.]

[He's a Norwegian forest breed cat I named Fafhrd. Do you know the reference?]

[:) No, I don't but I'm really glad the male in your life is a cat.

<grin>]

[I used to have a British shorthair I called The Gray Mouser, but he passed away from cat leukemia—you still don't get the reference?]

[Sorry, I don't.]

[<Sigh> How old are you?]

[I'm twenty-five.]

This time I sighed for real. [Uhh...I hate to burst your bubble, but I'm thirty-seven. Still interested?]

[Don't be silly. Of course, I'm still interested. Look, I know we've just met online, but after reading your responses to my questions, do you mind if I ask whether you have a profile addy or any place where I could see your pic online? Or maybe you have a photo you're willing to email?]

I paused before I answered. [Maybe.]

I knew my profile picture was four or five years out of date, but it looked rather glamorous. My hair-style might have been a touch *nineteen-nineties* maybe, but men don't usually notice that sort of thing. Maybe I should give him the URL of my profile to let him check me out.

[Just to be fair, Russ, we'd have to trade shots.]

[Guess that's reasonable. Please, don't be coy. I really want to see.]

I sent him the URL of my profile picture.

[All right, I'm going over to check your profile pic. Here, let me give you my email address...]

After a moment's hesitation, I wrote his email address down. It was a free email from one of the major services and naturally, it went

directly to the account of *Russet Umber*.

[Do you have other pictures, too?]

I knew I had a few scans of photos taken more recently as well as some digital cam shots various folks took at work and eventually emailed to me.

[I'll look and see what else I've got.] I added noncommittally.

Did I really want to do this? I think one or two of the scans could be classified as portrait shots so he wouldn't be subjected to my size right off the bat. At least, my facial features looked even.

[I'd appreciate it.]

There was a slight pause.

[Oh man! Sienna, you're a real babe! Are you sure you're thirty-seven? Are you seeing someone now? I don't understand why some lucky man hasn't scooped you up for himself and strapped you down to his bed.]

[*You are so full of sh*t...LOL!*]

However, for my own sake, I decided to end it for the night.

[Look I hate to cut this short, Russ, but I've got dinner on. What do you say we talk tomorrow? Here's my email...]

I gave him my private Sienna Rose email.

[Thanks a lot, gorgeous. You have a great night.]

[You too. Take care of yourself, Russ.]

* * * *

Up and at 'em in time for work the next morning, I took a little

more care with my appearance than usual—clothes, hair, and make-up. Should I go out and get new fingernails pretty soon? I decided against that. Rent and bills came before fingernails.

As always, Margery, the company's twenty-something trophy blond receptionist, who fit in a size four dress, naturally commented first. "Hey Sienna, hot date tonight?"

"No, but I thought the office needed a little holiday cheer. So I decided to start with me."

"Well, aren't you in a great mood today?" She followed me back to the coat room.

"Let's hope nothing happens to spoil it." I peeled off my wrap.

Then, she promptly pulled a classic Margo—which is the name we called her in private whenever Margery decides to be a prize bitch. "That outfit's very flattering as well. Makes you look slimmer."

She just had to say that, didn't she? Well, ignore her, I told myself. Inwardly, I knew I couldn't forget her words, but this morning I felt so good, I placed Margo in the category of the puppy who forgot where he was supposed to go pee. "Anyway, today looks to be a good day."

She continued to hover over my shoulder. "This rainy weather's kind of dreary."

"November does that if you remember correctly, Margery. That's why God invented raincoats."

I went back into the communications section and sat at my station. Not much went on at our work that our section supervisor couldn't spot either directly over our shoulders or through online

surveillance. Such was life in the corporate world. That must have been why the boss was paid the big bucks and not me.

I opened my corporate emails. Four incoming emails. ***Change in B & P policy 28B/81.4 and .5!*** An exciting read if I ever saw one. ***B & P Holiday Gift Exchange Ideas. Current Delinquencies B & P Flower Fund. Russet Umber.***

What another Russ Umber email this morning? The man was nothing, if not persistent.

I looked around to see if my boss stood anywhere close. When I didn't see him, I opened the email.

Hello Helpful #043,

Thanks for all your assistance over the last two days. You made our hunting trip that much more delightful.

Sincerely,

Russ Umber

Okay, at least this message was work safe.

I knew that company policy dictated a brief polite reply, and I sent one off in a matter of moments. My mind skipped to last night's instant message conversation between Russ and me. Some of his questions yesterday pushed the line of good taste, but I felt good about responding just treading the mark between being cordial, yet a little bit on the naughty side.

Like I said, it made all the difference in how I viewed the day today. I was revved up and rarin' to go, as they say. Fact of the matter was my mind raced impulsively. For longer than I could remember, I knew part of the emotional hazard of being me had to do with my bi-

polar tendencies and manic-depressive reactions to the big things in my life.

My morning dragged by until the time arrived for me to relieve Margery at the reception desk. Like clockwork, Brick Brown appeared with his daily stack of package deliveries.

“So Brick, what’s on your schedule for this evening?” I queried.

“Oh you know, same-ole...same-ole. Just me and the gym equipment for a couple hours after I do my route.” He had such a lovely smile for a man. “I work out to compensate for my short man’s syndrome.”

Brick looked to be approximately the same height as me—five foot eight.

“I would never have thought of you as having that problem, Brick.” I caught his black eyes with my hazel ones. “You always seemed totally comfortable with your masculinity to me.”

“Well, when you’re tall and have mismatched facial features people think you’re rugged. When you’re short and have that problem most folks just figure you’re ugly.”

“Oh Brick, c’mon!” I shook my head. “You are far from ugly. And you are so well-built most of us fat ladies know you’re way out of our league.”

“Stop it, Miz Sorrel. You’re a *bee-bee dubya* and a big beautiful woman is never fat.”

“Oh, I could listen to you lie all day.”

“It’s the truth.” He glanced up at the clock over the reception desk. “Well, I gotta get moving. The holiday rush is piling up early this

year. See you tomorrow.”

Before I left the reception desk that afternoon, I looked outside to see that we got our first snow of the year. Big flakes floated lazily down just to melt when they impacted on the still warm sidewalk and street. All the wonderful atmosphere of the season without all the bother that accumulation would bring later in the winter.

Margo came back from lunch sporting both a wet cap of fluffy white on the top of her head and a huge frown across her face. “I just got my hair done, too. Now it’s totally ruined.”

So much for jolly greetings of the seasons. “Go back into the powder room and see what you can do about it, Margery. I’ll hang on here until you get back.”

“Thanks Sienna, I won’t be long.”

When she disappeared, I decided to take a quick look outside to feel the brisk weather surround my skin. I propped the door open for minute in case the phones rang, as I suddenly developed an irresistible urge. Quickly, I turned my head to see who was watching. Nobody seemed to be looking, so I opened my mouth, stuck my tongue out and tried to catch a snowflake on the very tip.

“Where is your coat, young lady?”

Eek! Caught!

I glanced to my left to see Brick Brown smiling at me. Since I was wearing flat heels, we saw eye to eye at the moment. Our whole confrontation reminded me that though we were close to the same height, I stood about an inch taller than him. This time, Brick had returned to Bock and Porter with a single large flat package. “Who’s

Helpful number zero-four-three at Bock and Porter headquarters?”

“What?”

“C’mon, get inside before you catch your death of cold.” He pushed me through the open door. “Besides, you have to sign for this.”

Since he continued to hold the door for me, I preceded Brick back into the lobby.

“Hopefully you’ll be able to locate this mysterious person without having to call in the FBI’s trace squad.”

“Actually I know exactly who this person is. She works in the comm section.”

“Well, that makes it convenient.” He handed me the LED signature board. “Looks like I lucked out after all. I didn’t want to have to do all the paperwork if this thing was returned undeliverable.”

I signed for it just as Margo came out of the ladies room. “Oh! Brick, is that you? Are you running late today?”

“Extra delivery this afternoon.” He retrieved his LED pad. “See you both later, ladies.”

“Bye, Brick! Thanks.”

“Good bye.” Fake smile and all, Margo waved. Then she sighed. “My God, he is such a homely man.”

I seethed inside, as I always did when she displayed signs of acute *foot-in-mouth disease*. “Time for me to get back to the comm room.” I took the package with me as I started to leave the reception desk.

“Sienna, isn’t that supposed to be routed to the mailroom first?”

“Well, it’s for me.”

She raised her eyebrows and looked askance at me.

Don't piss the bitch off now. "You're right. Rules are rules. I can wait." *No, I can't!* However, I handed her the package.

With a look of triumph on her face, Margo took the parcel. "I'll make sure they know it's yours and expedite it right back to you." She flashed that wretched phony smile again.

"I appreciate that, Margery. Thank you."

I suffered through a genuine Margo *expedited promise*. She turned the package in at one-oh-eight in the afternoon. Naturally, I finally received my package around four-thirty. But I was excited to open it anyway.

As I carefully peeled away the wrapping, I slowly uncovered the most fascinating item I'd ever seen. My package contained a stand-up Christmas card. Well, no that was an understatement. I should say it appeared to be more of an extra large Christmas sculpture made from sturdy cardboard overlaid with gold and silver leaf. The thin package enveloped a delicately embossed and sculptured Christmas card which bloomed out to look like a miniature gothic cathedral with tiny wreaths and miniature garland draping the spires. Electronic buttons behind the imprinted the tiny working gothic style bells tolled out a beautiful carillon carol.

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" Willa, one of the other women from the communications section, asked.

I shook my head. "Never!"

"This must have cost a small fortune! Is there a price tag on it? What does the bar code say?"

The mention of a small fortune soon brought in a curious Margo.

“Oh my lord! I’ve seen these for sale at the gift boutiques. Do you know what they charge for these?”

We all glanced up at her.

“Seventy or eighty dollars easily.” Then she smirked in my direction. “Sienna, did you break your budget by purchasing this for yourself?”

I could see Willa shooting daggers out of her eyes at the back of Margo’s head. “Is there some way we can see who it’s from, Sienna?”

I shrugged. I already knew who it was from. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, silly!” Margo reached for the front arched doorway. “Open these!” She pulled the cardboard flap doors apart.

“Gently, Margery,” I cautioned, but she pried them open to show us. Imprinted on a black background in white ink read:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:

"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,

With peace on earth, good will to men."

Below that written carefully in white ink: “*May the Season of Love ring for you and yours forever like the Bells on Christmas Day, Your Secret Santa--Russet Umber.*”

“It’s beautiful, Sienna.” Willa pushed one of the computerized buttons and a carillon Christmas carol began to play.

“Wow!” Margo pushed a different button and a second totally different tune began to play setting up an annoying cacophony.

“Whoever this secret Santa is you’d better hang onto him. This sounds like someone I’d want to keep to myself.”

I stared at the inscription on the card. “He’s almost a total mystery to me. Just somebody I met online over the last couple of days.”

Margo’s mouth dropped open. “You’re not serious!”

Even Willa looked askance. “Sienna, are you certain about this?”

“Am I sure? Absolutely not! I had no idea he’d respond to me this way.” So much of this was too much for my mind to process at the moment. But I also had no idea I’d be so curiously excited about my mystery man.

* * * *

That evening I sent Russet Umber some recent digital photos taken of me at the office. You know how friends and co-workers will sometimes snap candid portraits of you and give you copies? Well, some of those more candid shots came out looking pretty decent. I took the chance to include a picture I had taken in a sexy and flattering party dress. I knew I had a pretty good looking neck and shoulders.

Besides, since he’d spent so much money on that Christmas card, I felt obligated to give into such a tiny request.

Lonely for some company, my cat, Fafhrd, climbed up on my lap. Part of the time, he purred and at other times he swiped at my hands as they clicked on the keys of the keyboard. “You miss the Gray Mouser, don’t you buddy?”

Dear Russ,

Well, here they are. I told you my profile pic was a couple of years

older and several pounds lighter. Is this really the kind of woman you'd like to get to know?

Thank you for the Christmas card, btw. The entire office has stopped by from time to time to admire it. That even includes the big bosses themselves. It's been a very special gift and very well received at work.

Please get back to me,

Sienna Rose

(attachment enclosed)

His IM window popped up on my monitor screen in a matter of a minutes.

[Oh my goodness! The reality of your pictures trumps any fantasy I may have envisioned! Sienna, you are gorgeous! I can imagine myself massaging your creamy shoulders now...my bulge pressing against the small of your back...my lips nuzzling your neck and ears...as you sigh, I take that as permission to explore your sexy body further...

Throbbing pleasantly at your beauty...]

Yikes! This kind of response was totally unexpected. I felt the color rise up into my cheeks as I read his message over and over again. What could I say? Finally, I typed a reply.

[I don't know whether to accuse you of being full of sh*t, or to thank you for letting an anxious old lady feel attractive and wanted again.]

His reply came back quickly. [Stop that! You're not old. Now, you're not to mention this age thing again, you hear?]

[Forgive me...I can't help it. We all get caught up in our

emotional baggage.]

[Look, I know what you're saying about the whole age thing, but to me it's not really an issue. Yes, if we got together, people might assume certain things as our relationship grew, but if you and I could learn to be happy overall, if we knew how to constantly keep the fires of our love alive, we could get each other going in so many ways. So why worry about the "what ifs"?]

I stared at the screen genuinely taken aback by his forwardness.

[Except, of course, the big "what if" of when we had children...☺]

This time I sat there in shock.

After a second, he posted: [What's the matter--cat got your tongue?]

Subconsciously, I pushed Fafhrd off my lap. My cat mewed in disgust and walked away from me. I knew Faf would make me pay dearly for my unseemly behavior toward him later.

[What did you just say? Children...me?]

His response came back quickly. [Sienna, seeing your pic posted in your profile and looking over these luscious new photos of you, I don't understand why you didn't have children. Is it that you couldn't or wouldn't?]

My mind told me to fudge. [That's not a very gentlemanly question.]

[But it's a question that deserves an answer, M'lady.]

Where did I begin? How could I tell him that six years with Gordon meant seventy-two months of Hell finally climaxed by his affair with that pseudo super-model look-alike who dumped him once his

money ran out?

[Gordon and I never had any children. We finally decided it wasn't in the cards.]

[See! If you'd have stopped playing cards and started making love all that might have changed...LOL]

[Grrrr! <snarls>]

[Sorry, I've never been accused of having any taste. Seriously, if you would ever consider carrying a love child let me know. I would love to fill your fertile womb with my seed. We would make a gorgeous baby together.]

What the hell? This conversation had moved from crazy to insane.

[Russ--WTF!!! Good grief! Where did that come from?]

[Is having a baby something you would be open minded about or consider if the right man came along? Could you ever dream of being with a younger man?]

Oh, no he didn't. This wasn't something I could answer glibly on instant messenger.

[Russ, I'm going to sign off for now and try to put my feelings down in an email. I really need some thinking time to decide just how far I want to progress with this "relationship," okay?]

[Okay. I'll be here for you when you need me.]

Oh my God! What was going on in my life? Did I really have some young man "cyber-stalking" me or were his feelings all on the up and up? I began to dig through my own emotions to try to tell him exactly what I felt inside.

Dear Russ,

First off, I really do not mind opening up emotionally to you or writing to you on any matter concerning love and sex, but I get the feeling that I may be one of the first mature women who has spoken to you candidly and openly about sex for the sake of joy. I must admit I was taken aback by your talk of sex for procreation.

Maybe I'm assuming too much, but you have to realize that I am on the cusp of what some consider being the downward slide into the change of life for most females.

*Over the age of thirty-five, we women are less likely to get pregnant and bear children. Of course, as a result of that, we women **may** become more open to lovemaking for the pure joy of sex. But the hormones that dictate this sensual joy also indicate that our bodies may just as easily swing the other way.*

I guess I don't really understand where all this talk of children came from. Bearing a child would be a crapshoot for us. Believe me I am flattered that you have asked me. However, keeping the fire aflame in a long term relationship is a difficult process that goes well beyond what either of us may have the energy for.

Tell me something, have you ever been married before? Do you have a great deal of experience with sex?

Russ, I want you to continue writing to me and sharing your dreams and desires, but right now, I don't know if I'm the woman for you. However, I'm certainly not forbidding you to keep pursuing me. I honestly don't know how I feel about this change in my life.

Besides, how are your friends and family going to feel about you dating, let alone marrying a woman who may look as old as your

mother? Or is marriage totally out of the question?

Damn! I hoped to answer some of the questions between us, but I think I've opened up more than I've answered.

Write back, luv,

Sienna Rose

I needed to sleep. The act of concentrating on this new problem had drained me of every ounce of strength I had. Anyway, I hope I got my point across. This cyber love affair was as exhausting as it was exhilarating. Yeah, the bedroom beckoned. When I walked in, I discovered I'd have to move Fafhrd over from my pillow and lay down for a while.

Good idea...

Just for a while...

I woke up around two-twenty in the morning and I hadn't bothered to change into my nightgown yet. I'd left the computer running and when the screensaver disappeared, I saw that I had a brand new email from Russet Umber.

Dear Sienna,

The thought of being deep inside you, making love to you, knowing that way down inside, your womb is aching to be fertilized, that you want to become pregnant in the very deepest recess's of your mind rouses me. When I conjure up visions of you spreading your thighs apart to accept the fact that you are going to be bred, those flights of fancy just amaze me. I love the idea of us trying to accomplish something together so intimate and erotic as creating life, and our age difference just amplifies that even more.

Love,

Russ

Oh, for God's sake! What was happening here?

* * **

Interlude

He signed off the computer and initiated shut down. Super-Russ stood bold, fearless, and not the least bit afraid of the tough questions! However, Super-Russ didn't exist. Russet Umber confided in Sienna all about his feelings and plans for the future. He came right out and told the woman that his agenda included spending a lifetime with her and fucking her—including something he could never have asked her in person—the prospect of her carrying his child. In a Cyrano de Bergerac turn of events, Russ told her easily how she affected him both romantically and sexually—what her pictures did to him and how excited he felt about acquiring them.

Now that she'd accepted the advances of his secret identity as her Secret Santa, Sienna had fallen under the influence of the bogus entity he created named Russet Umber. This should have been a good thing! However, the resulting emotions made him more sullen. How does Clark Kent compete with Superman?

Could he be jealous of himself?

What were the words to that carol he'd borrowed for that expensive Christmas card?

And in despair I bow'd my head:

"There is no peace on earth," I said,

"For hate is strong, and mocks the song

Of peace on earth, good will to men."

He let a long sigh slip out. Damn Russ Umber anyway!

* * * *

"So, Sienna..." Brick strolled into the lobby holding his usual passel of parcels for delivery. "What was in that special package I dropped off yesterday afternoon?"

"Oh! You want to see?" I beamed. Anxious to show off the cathedral, I scurried back toward the communications room, yelling on the fly. "Hang on a sec! I'll run back and get it."

"I'll have to wait, anyway." Brick placed the packages down the reception desk, and I heard the words. "Somebody still needs to sign for these."

My moderate heels clicked on the floor as I rushed back into lobby bearing the two and a half foot tall cathedral. "What do you think?"

"I think you should wear that outfit when we finally go to Cloud Busters for dinner."

"Funny man! I mean what do you think of the cathedral?"

"Well, it's certainly stunning. What is this material?" He took it carefully out of my hands. "Is that gold card stock?"

"You know, I honestly don't know for sure, Brick." I pointed to some of the detail imprinted on one of the various gold and bronze

leafed segments. “I think there might be a special lithograph ink and color process involved, but I’m guessing.”

“Well, it’s wonderfully done.” Brick opened up the front doors and read the inscription, while I signed for the packages. “Who’s Russ Umber? I suppose he’s someone I should be jealous of, huh?”

I scrutinized Brick’s face to see if he was kidding. Damn, I really couldn’t tell. “I hate to say it, but he’s someone I met online.”

“Online!” Brick’s features contorted as he said the word. “Sienna, you know how untrustworthy that sort of relationship can be. This guy might even be dangerous—a psychopath or something.”

“I don’t think it means anything that dramatic, Brick.” I handed him his LED signature board.

“But you don’t know for sure, either.”

I recognized the sweet signs of his concern—or could they be indications of jealousy. *Bless his heart*. “What if I promise to be careful?”

“You better be more than just careful, Miz Sorrel.” His face softened. “You need to stay safe.”

I looked into his dark eyes and saw genuine regard for my welfare. “I’ll try.”

He looked as if he wanted to say more, but his eyes strayed to the clock above the reception desk. “Damn. Now I’m behind schedule. I’ll catch up with you tomorrow. You be careful.”

At that moment, Margo came back from lunch. “Oh, hi Brick. Package deliveries today?”

“Hi Margery. Yeah, I’ll be keepin’ your mailroom jumping this

afternoon. See you, ladies.”

“Bye, Brick.” I kept my eyes on his face.

“You just remember what I said, Miz Sorrel.”

I nodded. “I will.”

“What’s going on between you and Brichester Brown?” Margo didn’t have a diplomatic bone in her body. “And what’s your Christmas cathedral doing out here?”

It’s none of your business! I wanted to shout. However, I responded diplomatically. “I brought it out to show him. He’s upset that I met Russ on line. Says I don’t know anything about the man.”

“Sounds more like jealousy to me.” She started to walk back into the cloak room. “Of course, for the first time in my life, I have to agree with Brick.”

I followed her with my eyes. If only I had retractable claws like Fafhrd.

Let’s face it, Margo probably does have retractable feline claws, I told myself. God knows she’s had plenty of practice in cat fights.

* * * *

When I returned home, I jumped on my computer. [Russ, when are you going to send a picture back to me?]

[Whoops! I’ll try to find a decent shot overnight.]

Was he stalling for some reason? All I could think about were Brick’s words: “*You better be more than just careful, Miz Sorrel. You need to stay safe. This guy might even be dangerous—a psychopath or*

something.”

I typed. [I guess I don't understand your hesitation.]

[I apologize. It's not hesitation. I'm trying to factor in the time.]

What kind of answer was that? [Well, I'd really appreciate a photo, Russ.]

[We can skip the pics if you decide you'd rather meet.]

I hadn't thought of that. [Really?]

[I think we should get together this week. We both know deep down we have work to do. Are you ready to get started? Have you been thinking about things quite a bit? Do you get wet thinking about giving yourself to me?]

How does he stay two steps ahead of me like this?

[Are you serious?]

[Yes, I certainly am. Give me an answer.]

[Absolutely not!]

[You mean, you don't get wet thinking about me?]

Damn him!

[I mean, I won't give you an answer.]

[Then tell me this. Will you think about me when you go to bed tonight?]

Well I knew the answer to that.

[Yes.]

[Tell me more.]

Was I up to his challenge? Go for it.

[Gonna try to get some sleep pretty soon. But, if you really want to know, I'm going to think about some of the things we discussed

tonight and let my fingers do the walking along some sensitive tissues under my nightgown first.]

[What color's your nightgown?]

[That question is so you. My nightie is white with large purple flowers.]

[Tell me more about what you want to do with your fingers.☺]

[In all honesty, I wish they were your fingers, Russ. At least, until you got me primed enough to replace your fingers with something else-- something a bit more suited for the job.]

[That's my girl. I love the fact that my words, my thoughts have turned you and your body on a great deal. I would love to send my seed deep into your womb, into the same canal that our love child would eventually come out into this world.]

I growled at the screen.

[What did you just say?]

[It may not happen. Hell, it may not be possible, but I would try my hardest to put a baby in you, let you show the world that special creation that came from inside you.]

[Stop it, right now! I don't intend to let the conversation go that way tonight. Now act your age!]

[Excuse me? I'm just twenty-five, dear. Hey did I mention I live in Gilmore Township. I'll bet you don't live very far away from me at all, do you?]

[Well, I guess twelve years difference isn't too bad. Of course, people really will think I'm old enough to be your...older sister...ROFL! Still as long as you're comfortable with the thought of an older woman.]

[I love dreaming about the woman in those pictures.]

I sighed again.

[Anyway, since I live in Jackson County, I don't live very far from you at all. We could split the difference and meet in the city, don't you think? One thing about an eager young man, he'll work very hard and drive great lengths when he's certain it's going to mean great sex.]

[Are you going to guarantee great sex, Sienna?]

This young man sure had a one track mind.

[That's something you'll have to decide for yourself.]

[Fair enough. I'd sure love to find out...☺!]

[Whoa, slow down, big boy. I combed through our correspondence and noted that you asked me from your opening salvo on Tuesday evening if I would ever consider having a baby if the right man came along. Then you asked me if I would consider submitting to a younger man. Finally, somewhere in that flurry of instant messages, you pointed out to me that you were the right younger man--and that was that!]

[LOL...that sounds about right.]

[You've got to back off a bit, Russ, and give me room to take a breath. I don't know you--not really.]

Fafhrd jumped up onto my desk from the floor and started to stroll across my keyboard. He put his face in mine demanding attention. I grabbed him and clutched him against my chest, and he settled into a content feline purr.

[I believe we need to meet each other, Sienna, so we can learn more about each other. Nevertheless, I suspect that when we finally

meet, we're liable to take that giant leap physically--probably the same evening.]

[**Russ!**] I tried to type with a single hand, while Fafhrd squirmed in my grasp. [Who are you, really? How were you so certain that you could turn my head and twist my feelings around like that?]

[Was I wrong?]

I let go of the cat to drop both hands to the keys, but Fafhrd dug his claws into my blouse while I typed. [Russ, you continually turned on your charms to remind me that in spite of our age differences we had so much in common. I will be the first person to admit that you swept me right off my not so round heels, but you're moving awfully fast for me. My life is still filled with complications which won't just go away--even though I'd like to give myself to you and wholeheartedly. After all, it's only been since last Tuesday!]

[What I've always wanted is to be with the woman that wants it to happen, likes the thought of creating life as much as myself. If it didn't happen, then it's not meant to be.]

[I told you to stop!]

I put both hands on my kitty again and placed him on the floor next to me.

[Frankly, I only know a few things about you. I certainly know what you want--you've been crystal clear about your intentions and in informing me that we should move forward. However, I really don't know Russ Umber, and well...I don't think you know me, either.]

[Don't you want that to change?]

[Sweetheart, I don't mean to be blunt, but why do I think all this

talk about a baby is everything to you and I'm just a convenient means to accomplishing it.]

[That's not true.]

[The hell it isn't! Russ, my ex-husband nearly turned me off to men for quite a while. In my heart, I know you are different from my ex. Yet, I fear you because you are an unknown quantity. As I said before, there are things I need to clear up emotionally before I take that step. Because once I take that step toward you, sweetheart, you're stuck with me for a long time.]

[Sienna, I understand. I want you to be sure of everything before taking such a big step. I am a good guy, a guy that will bend over backwards to give you everything and anything that you have ever wanted. Hmmm...☺]

[I don't know what to say.]

[Simple! Say yes.]

[Damn it, Russ! Just when I think I have you pegged as a control freak, you charm your way right back into my heart (and potentially my pants). I can't deny that I'm fascinated by you, but every time I convince myself that you are Mr. Wrong for me, you go and do something absolutely right...Damn you! Damn you! Love you, damn you!]

[Is that the same as a yes?]

[<Throwing my arms around your neck> Yes! ☺]

[Good. I think we need to set up a time and place to meet.]

[Soon. Let me get my head together tonight and try to catch my breath. And send me that picture!]

* * * *

Work took forever the next day. I took the usual beer questions, and then dragged myself up to the reception station. I don't know if I missed Brick's stop-off, or if he'd called in sick or what, but he never showed up either. So I went back to tackle beverage queries once again until it was time to go home.

At home, I sat down to write Russet Umber an email.

Good Evening, Russ!

I imagine you're home from work now so I'll hope to hear from you soon—at least once you've gotten home and taken a decent break from your work day. The only one looking over my shoulder now is my cat and I don't think Fafhrd will mind if I type a quick greeting.

I had a nice relaxing sleep last night. Well, as relaxing as it could be with the myriad of dreams I had.

As the sunlight streamed through my curtains this morning to wake me, I imagined that I had an even more arousing awakening. In that twilight state between just waking up and still dreaming, I envisioned that I'd fallen asleep somewhere else, with someone else.

As I lay on a strange bed topless and nude, I noticed my panties had been wadded up and left on the floor. A nice set of warm lips slowly nuzzled and sucked on my nipple while a handsome young man rolled partly over my naked body. His tongue carefully sloshed around my nipple and areola sending tiny warm tremors through my breast and from there zinging the nerves of my entire body. The sensations made

me close my eyes and softly moan.

Suddenly a couple of careful, cautious fingers slid down my abdomen and tangled themselves in my pubic hair for an agonizing moment. I knew where those fingers were heading so, momentarily torn about whether I should allow them to drop further down, I gasped. Nevertheless, my mind wanted them to dip down more and examine the soft tissues of my pussy lips for just a second or two.

Two of his fingers probed in between the vital opening and I arched my hips and back, partially in surprise and partially to encourage him to press his fingers even deeper. I moaned something incoherent. Naturally the fingers didn't stop, they just slipped deeper inside as if they had an important mission. We stayed like that for several minutes. His fingers coming out covered in my juices and taking a minute to diddle at my clit just to torment me a tiny bit more.

"You feel awfully wet this morning," his quiet voice murmured.

"It's nothing compared to the wetness I felt last night," I replied in a whisper. "You must have dumped a full quart of raw sperm into my system by the time we were finished."

"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, and this man wanted to do a little lovemaking."

"Mmmm..." I opened my eyes to look up into his satisfied face. "What does that mean to his woman?"

"Somebody has to play the part of the other lover, doesn't she?" Finally, his soft voice added, "Hey! Would you like something else to take the place of these fingers before we get up and get ready for work?"

I grinned and told him: "Yes, if you wouldn't mind."

"It would be my duty and my pleasure."

Oh yeah! Mine too,

Sienna Rose

* * * *

I literally melted when I got an email from **Russet Umber** at my work station at Bock and Porter HQ the next morning.

Dear Helpful #043,

Can you tell me if they serve B & P's Special Holiday Ale at Marlowe's Joint downtown on River Street? I thought I'd stop in for dinner and imbibe in an ale or two on Wednesday night around seven o'clock. I especially had a taste for something distinctly B & P in mind! But I need you to let me know whether Marlowe's carries SHA in case I have to change my plans for tomorrow.

Thanks for your help,

Russ Umber

Bingo! There it glowed on my monitor screen. Dinner at seven at Marlowe's. I shivered with anticipation all day at the office. I quickly typed a nice innocent reply about the ready availability of Bock and Porter's Special Holiday Ale at Marlowe's Joint. Tomorrow night! Yes!

Since Margo had a doctor's appointment, I had to cover the receptionist desk for a full three hours on Monday.

"You're smiling like the proverbial Cheshire cat that ate the Cheshire canary." A voice interrupted my thoughts.

I looked up to see Brichester Brown with his usual armload of

packages. "I didn't know there was a Cheshire canary."

"That's 'cause you're not up on your canary mythology." He placed the parcels on the desk so he could extract his LED clipboard.

"I guess not." I looked up into his dark eyes and smiled.

"Well, the little yellow canary sits in his cage and waits for the Cheshire cat to come along so he can say 'I taught I taw a Thethire tat.'"

"Where have I heard this story before?"

"Just keeping you updated on national canary news." He smiled. "Sign here, please."

I scribbled my signature.

"So what's new with Russ Umber?"

Was this a serious question, or just another reason to cross examine me? "Things are fine, I suppose." That sounded noncommittal, I hoped.

"Have you met him yet?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Sorry if I'm prying. I'm just..." He let the rest of the sentence lull into silence.

I tried to read his eyes. "Worried?"

"Yeah."

"Don't be. I'm a big girl."

"A big beautiful girl." He corrected. "With the prettiest face I've ever seen."

"Why thank you, Brick. You're very sweet for a man who's obviously *blind*."

"Hah!" He snorted and shook his head. "You are impossible,

Sienna. Anyway, don't tell NQS about your suspicions. If they find out I can't see, I'll lose my delivery job."

His smile shown as pretty as his nose looked crooked. "Your secret's safe with me."

"All right, you take care." Brick started to walk out of the lobby, and then he turned. "But don't trust this guy, okay?"

* * * *

I balanced uncomfortably on a bar stool while waiting for Russet Umber to show. The picture he'd sent the night before baffled me more than not sending any picture at all. The smart ass emailed me a jpeg of four men standing together in a bar: from left to right an Asian man, a black man, a Hispanic man, and a white man. Plus, he'd enclosed no hint as to which man he might be. Ah well, I'd printed off a hard copy of the photo so if any of those men entered Marlowe's, I knew I'd recognize him.

I hated sitting at the bar nursing a drink like some sort of stereotypical symbol of date bait desperation. Another thing, how come places like this never had clocks on the wall? I found myself constantly glancing up at the television screen which thankfully showed a cable news channel, so I could tell the time by checking the tiny clock shown at the right hand corner of the screen.

A couple of guys bought me drinks. I thanked them, but had to explain that I was marking time waiting for my escort. I doubt that either of them believed me, but they left me alone.

I re-checked the clock on the TV screen. Seven-thirty had come and gone. Wait! I noticed a well-built Asian man standing with his back to me. Could this be one of the potential *Russ Umbers* from the photo? I tried to be as stealthy as my alcohol fogged mind would allow, and I sneaked up on him from the rear and tapped him on the shoulder. When he turned around, I felt like a prize idiot.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! I thought you were someone else.” I know my face must have turned bright red.

Great! I’d been stood up by a man I met from the Internet. How much more humiliated could one woman get? I stumbled back to my seat and continued to scan the front door hoping for some sign that my date would show up. Then I saw a familiar figure.

Brick Brown, still dressed in his uniform and carrying a gym bag, pushed through the entrance doorway.

Without thinking I called out to him. “Brick?”

He walked up to where I was sitting, and a puzzled smile crossed his face. “Miz Sorrel, what are you doing here?”

“Waiting for...someone. What about you?”

“Marlin’s gym is right up the block.” He raised his thumb and gestured behind him. “I usually work out on Wednesday nights. I thought I’d stop in and grab a glass of water before I went home to make myself dinner.”

I nodded. He scrutinized my face for a second, and then pointed at my drink glass. “How many of those have you had?”

I shrugged. “A few...”

“How many is a few?”

I didn't want to answer, but I think the alcohol answered for me.
"Six."

"Oh for Christ's sake." He signaled the bartender. "Hey, Jake!"
Apparently, the bartender recognized him. "Hi, Brick. How's tricks?"

"Bring me my usual, funny man, and set two large glasses of water in front of the lady. I'll pay for her tab."

I gently slapped his arm. "Brick, I can pay for my own drinks."

"You don't need drinks, Sienna. You need water. From the looks of it, you'll have to drink at least thirty-two ounces to counteract the alcohol you've already had." He stared into my eyes for a second.
"Have you had dinner?"

I shook my head.

"Well, we should pop out of here to get you some decent food."

"I can't, Brick! I'm expecting company."

"Company," he echoed. "Russ Umber? Were you supposed to meet Russ Umber?"

My shoulders slumped and I dropped my eyes down to the bar.

"Aww, Sienna." When the bartender came back with the waters, Brick asked for two menus. "If you insist on staying here, we gotta get something in your stomach."

"Oh, Brick, I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about. However, I'm not leaving you alone until he arrives. You got that?"

I nodded.

"Check out the menu and order something safe on your stomach."

“God! The prices are so expensive.”

“That’s all right. At least they’re not Cloud Buster’s prices.”

I tittered. “I’ll order cheap.”

He grinned. “I’ve seen these menus before. Nothing’s cheap.”

Brick took my hand and lead me to an empty table.

My head didn’t handle the sudden change of position well. I felt dizzy for a moment and placed my hand to my temple.

“You don’t really drink, do you?”

I shook my head. Another mistake! I thought my brain would never stop spinning. I moaned, but the sound didn’t reflect the joyous excitement that Russ and I had taunted each other with night after night.

There was no joy in Mud-brain tonight...mighty Sienna has struck out!

Suddenly, I put my hand up to my mouth and gagged.

Brick’s eyes flashed. “Restroom. Now!”

He helped me out of my seat and steered me quickly toward the ladies room, grabbing a returning waitress on the way and telling her to march me into a stall quickly.

In a way, it was good that I hadn’t eaten dinner yet, as I only had a light lunch come back to revisit my taste buds on its return journey.

Stupid! Don’t you know anything? You’re supposed to binge before you purge?

I got up from my rather indelicate position over the commode and stumbled out of the stall. The waitress asked me if I was okay so I smiled weakly and thanked her for her kindness. I went over to sink

and cupped my hands under the faucet to try to rinse the disgusting taste out of my mouth.

Trying to maintain a touch of dignity, I left the restroom. Everybody stared at the fat lady who'd just upchucked in the ladies room. Hoped they enjoyed the show. Time to throw myself out into the snow so I could freeze to death.

Brick waited by the ladies room. "I've taken care of the tab. I want to get you out of here."

I nodded absentmindedly. Leaving would be good. "Wait, what about Russ?"

Brick glanced at his watch. "It's after eight o'clock, Sienna. He's not gonna show."

"Oh shit!" I clapped my hand over my mouth. "Whoops, sorry."

"We really need to get you out of here to sober you up."

"Fine." I leaned against Brick for a moment to steady myself.

"Give me my purse. My car keys are inside."

He held onto me with both hands. "Sienna, you cannot drive home in this condition."

"Oh, my place isn't all that far. I-I'll be all right."

"That's not it, and you know it. You can hardly walk! As your friend, I won't let you drive drunk. You'll be a danger to yourself and to everyone else on the road."

He escorted me over to the foyer. "Now wait here until I bring my car around. It's a red Ford Fusion, okay?"

"Okay." I watched him dash across the street toward the parking garage. *What the hell is a Ford Fusion?*

After a minute or two, I decided to step outside to let the cold invigorate me. When that didn't happen, I appreciated the fact that at least my hasty actions hadn't triggered another nausea attack. Soon a mid-sized red car pulled up in front of where I stood.

"Sienna, get in!" a familiar voice demanded opening the passenger side door from the driver's seat.

"Okay," I replied mechanically.

I climbed into his car and sighed. "Looks like I missed him."

"Pardon me." He put the car in gear and merged into traffic. "But from where I stand, it looks more like he stood you up."

"Ohhh..." I whined. "I was stood up." Tears well up in my eyes and the words left my throat before I realized what I was about to say. "I'm not even good enough to date."

"You stop that, young lady! That's not true and you know it." He looked over to me. "By the way, where are we headed?"

"Huh? Oh...Jackson County. Miller Street at 117th."

"Easy to find for an experienced delivery driver. You lay back and relax for a bit."

I groaned. "I'm hungry. I threw up everything I had in my belly."

"Do you have any folates at home?"

I perked up. "Any what?"

"Leafy greens like spinach, kale, even lettuce? Or oranges, cantaloupe, papaya, dried beans, anything with folates or folic acid in them?"

"I-I have no idea. Besides, even if I do, I don't know if any of them are still fresh."

“What about breakfast cereals?”

“I have some generic rice squares cereal and shredded wheat.”

“That’ll work.” He zipped into the center lane to move into the ingress for the interstate ramp. “Do you have any orange juice?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“We’ll get you back into shape in no time. Not to mention we need to pour several more glasses of water down your throat.”

When we got back to my place, Brick told me to rinse my mouth a few times and then to drink a full twelve ounces of water while I waited for him to assemble my special folate/folic acid dinner.

In the meantime, Fafhrd formally introduced himself by spreading tawny cat hairs all over the cuffs of Brichester’s uniform pants.

“Well, hi. Who are you?”

I spat out a mouthful of oral antiseptic. “Oh, that’s the man of the house.”

Believe it or not, Brick soon found the makings of a decent spinach salad by adding a few well washed celery leaves, a couple of grape tomatoes, a drained can of mandarin orange slices, some fresh cranberries with a generous sprinkle of crushed up shredded wheat peppered over the dish giving it some crunch and texture. He allowed me to put a tiny amount dressing on top of it as long as the mixture didn’t contain too much oil.

Faf jumped up into my lap and stuck his nose into my plate.

“Ahht! It’s salad! You won’t like it.” I let my cat sniff a spinach leaf. He snuffed on my plate. “Told you.”

Brick Brown urged me to eat slowly and sparingly. However, my

rescuer encouraged me to finish the entire plate. At the same time, he fixed himself a light ham and cheese on rye sandwich—heavy on the vegetables. Tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, literally whatever I had handy.

“You should buy yourself some tortilla wraps, Sienna.”

“What?”

“Multi-grain, spinach, or sun-dried tomato flavor wraps are the best. Tasty too.” He sliced a rye roll for the sandwich. “Probably easier on your digestive system than all this bread.”

“Oh. That’s good to know.”

“Spoken like a lady who’s probably going to do no such thing?”

“Stop teasing me, Brick. I’m hanging on every word you’re saying.”

After an hour or so, I actually felt better, more refreshed. In the meantime, Fafhrd strolled back and forth along the back of the couch checking out Brick’s hair, neck and shoulders.

“I going to put our dishes in the dishwasher and start it up.”

“Let me help.”

“Absolutely not, you’ve done plenty. I realize I’d have never gotten home without you tonight. At the very least you saved me from sleeping on some makeshift cot in the B & P building overnight.” I hesitated before continuing. “At the worst, you saved me from taking out my car, myself, or God forbid someone else’s life tonight.”

“You’re welcome.” However, he stood up, walked over to the table, piled up a few plates and carried them over to me. “Look, Sienna, I know you’re feeling better now, but you still need to drink a couple more

tumblers of water and rest up. I want you to call in sick tomorrow.”

I let slip a long sigh. “Can’t. We’re short handed as it is.”

“Well, I guess I’d better get home so I can get back here in time to pick you up and drag you into work.”

“Wait, don’t go.”

“Excuse me?”

“Not tonight. Brick, please don’t leave. I got stood up, humiliated in front of a room full of people and as far as I can tell, half of them are still laughing at me.”

“Sweetheart, believe me, no one is laughing at you.”

“Some drunken fat lady puking her guts out in the ladies’ room; this is the material sitcoms are made from.”

“Stop it, Sienna, that’s not true.”

“Of course it’s true! You don’t know.”

“What do you mean I don’t know? I see the way people look at this busted nose of mine when they first meet me. Do you know how many times I’ve thought about buying an ‘elephant man’ burlap bag? Coyote ugly isn’t just a joke to me. It’s a reality.”

I shook my head as I kept my eyes riveted on his. “Oh, Brick. I didn’t realize you felt that way. I’ll tell you a secret.” I raised my hand and held my thumb and forefinger close together. “I came this close to bitch-slapping Margery after she slipped into her Margo mode and said something disparate about your appearance.”

He cocked his head. “Really?”

I nodded.

He looked down for a second and then raised his head back up to

gaze into my eyes.

“Thank you.”

I shook my head. “Don’t thank me. Let me thank you, instead. Stay here with me tonight. In fact, take off your clothes.”

His mouth dropped open. “Take off my clothes?”

I grinned. “I’ll wash and dry your uniform, while I thank you personally.”

* * * *

We stood naked in front of each other, not touching just staring. Carefully, his eyes examined me from my bare breasts down my rounded belly and abdomen, finally his eyes fixating on my carefully trimmed pubic hair and the pussy underneath.

I couldn’t help myself. “Are you disappointed by how I look?”

He smiled and gestured down toward his erecting cock. “Does it look like I’m disappointed?”

“Well, you know...men can have sex with anybody pretty much, and—”

“Shhh, woman. Come and lay down on the bed.”

I felt completely compliant when Brick ordered me prone onto the bed. “Now turn on your left side.”

“Huh?” I shifted to my left side. “Why?”

“Just do it, Sienna. You’ll see.”

He laid down on the bed, slipping behind me, pressing his warm skin to mine. Then leaning over my right side, Brick made me turn my

head toward him so we could kiss once more. "Mmm..."

"You taste good," I murmured sniffing Brick's natural odor; musk, sweat, and that unknown essence that is a man's pheromones. I think men understand that their naked bodies could lie to us outright and we'll buy anything their bodies tell us as if it's gospel truth.

His hand slid under my body. Then as it came up and around, it went straight to my nipple where he lightly squeezed and tweaked my pink and brown areola until my nipple jutted out like a little soldier standing at attention.

I moaned softly. "Are my nipples everything you hoped they'd be?"

"Shhh..." Brick's other hand dropped down to part the lips of my cunt. "Of course they are."

As soon as he touched the delicate tissues of my pussy, my mouth shaped into a perfect "O." My voice echoed the feeling in the core of my body. "Oohh!"

God, his fingers felt wonderful. So I dropped my hands carefully toward my ass where his erected dick nestled in between my butt cheeks. I wanted to feel just how far his masculinity jutted out using my fingertips.

"Lift up your top leg, sweetmeat."

"Hmm?" I had so many different sensations happening at once I almost didn't understand what Brick meant. "My leg?"

His hand abandoned my cunt and he pulled my top leg up away from the other one allowing him more access. "Hold it in place, Sienna."

I did as he asked. Suddenly I felt the pressure of Brick's fingers and something else. Something bulbous and fleshy pushed at the

delicate lips between my parted thighs. The sensation was incredible--overwhelming even.

Brick pushed his body forward and something thick and meaty pressed deeper into the moist and pliant tissues of my cunt. Then with his second thrust and his next and more, I felt a monumental fleshy fullness insinuate itself into the confines of my loins. Wider now than my pussy had been stretched ever, his bulky penis packed deeply into the moist ingress that allowed his penetration.

One of his hands tormented my clit while the other worked my nipple. The wide girth and strength of his cock lodged deeper and deeper into my underbelly with every new determined thrust. God, I'd thought, rather I'd hoped, fitting his dick inside me would be a cinch. Now I wasn't so sure. Yet, Brick prodded deep inside me. These new sensations were more than I'd ever handled with a single man. How could this be?

For long minutes on end, we moved together, our tongues intertwined, his hands on my nipples and clit, his dick pumping time and again in and up the welcoming clasp of my pussy.

Once again he clamped his mouth down onto mine, sticking his tongue between my lips to probe deeply into my throat. How could he keep up the pace of doing all these things at once?

I started to listen to the sound of somebody panting in the room. Huffing and puffing like they'd just run a marathon, but I didn't think it came from Brick.

Came from Brick? No, the panting and puffing came from me! Oh, Christ it sounded just like somebody racing toward an orgasm or

somebody about to climax. Cum, climax, orgasm. Me...me? Me!

With a gut wrenching shudder, my body imploded. A wave of tremors gripped me that started just behind my belly button and spread outward and upward to a red heat that gripped my breasts, neck and face.

I trembled in his clutches and down deep where my vital tissues clasped his cock deep inside of me, my loins sprayed a warm wet gush of fluid to bathe his penis with the essence of my sticky sex.

"Ahh that's nice," a masculine voice chuckled in my ear. "Very nice."

Exhausted, I dropped my top leg down.

Brick grabbed it with his hand and held it up in place. "Just a minute, you! My turn."

This time he jammed faster and faster thrusting his thick penis time and again into my poor used pussy. I squealed half in delight and half from the terrible sensations that overwhelmed me once again.

"Cum, baby, cum!" I began to whisper. Repeating the words over and over, I begged. "Brick, you've got to cum..."

"You want me to cum inside of you, Sienna? Is that it?"

I sounded like a real slut at that second! But could I deny my feelings? I didn't think so. "Yes..."

"Then say the words." His body continued to pulse time after time and his motions had left me totally out of control...totally dependent on his rhythm and control, his mastery, his domination. The friction between us went from overheating to pure unadulterated fire.

"Please, cum inside me Brick! I want you more than anything!"

"Ahhhddt..." he grunted, and suddenly his body began to hose me down in order to put out my internal fires. Heated spurts of semen spewed into my open pussy splashing and pooling all over the delicate tissues which had just now been re-lubricated by Brick's naturally thick and creamy cum.

I smiled. This was it. Whatever happened in the future, the two of us had pair bonded now. This younger man had marked me as his in the most intimate way a man and woman knew.

I sighed and concentrated on the throbbing rhythms that I felt quavering deep inside me.

Suddenly I felt spent. Then it occurred to me even as tired as I felt, it was Brick who was drained. I snickered and backed up to snuggle against him. However, Fafhrd jumped up on the bed and tried to worm his way between our bodies. I moaned at the cat. "What is your furry little problem?"

Jesus, did I need to sleep.

* * * *

It was four in the morning. I rolled over to my left and nuzzled my warm naked body up next to my equally warm and equally naked companion. He murmured sleepily and started to roll over away from me.

"Hey!" I put my hand on his chest and shook him. "Are you still asleep?"

"Yes," he muttered.

“That’s too bad,” I replied. “Cause if you were awake, I thought you might like to fuck me again.”

That seemed to wake him. His eyes flicked open, and he looked over at me. “Let me think about that one.”

“Can you make you mind up while I’m in the bathroom?”

“I think so.”

“Don’t take too long.” I climbed out of bed. I wonder how much of my body was illuminated at this time of night. Now that he was satiated and I’d sobered up, would Brick figure I was merely some convenient piece of ass for the night?

Oh, God! If that were true, how could we face each other in public tomorrow?

However, when I walked past my computer on the way to the bathroom, I absentmindedly hit the power switch. Sitting on the toilet and allowing my bladder to relax, I had to wonder what had prompted me to do such a foolish thing.

When I went back toward the computer, I quickly signed in on my email.

No emails--nothing! I sighed. What did I expect?

A masculine voice startled me as he spoke directly behind me. “Okay, I’m done.”

“What?” I turned around and saw the unbelievably masculine figure of Brick Brown standing naked next to me.

“I’ve made up my mind. Let me go to the bathroom and I’ll join you in that bed.”

I perked up. “Oh! How nice. I’ll make sure there are only two of

us.”

Were we an accident? Probably. Brick was in his mid-twenties, while I was thirty-seven years old. I’d been looking for Mr. Right for so long that I’d almost given up, finally disillusioned by life’s nasty little quirks. This time I’d gone ahead and settled for *Mr. Pretty-Damn-Good-For-a Dozen-Years-Younger*.

We met back at the entrance to my bedroom. We didn’t speak but I capitulated to his kiss. *Ooo! Morning breath, I thought.*

Two things had gone on between the man in my bed and me. One, bless his heart, turned out Brick really loved my tits. As we lay close together, his fingers and mouth tasted and tantalized my breasts, areole and nipples time and again. Two, I discovered I was crazy about his physique.

To be honest, I found myself fascinated with his dick. It had been a long time since I’d had a cock of any sort pushing between my thighs, let alone a top quality, large economy size product like his probing and exploring my insides.

That was why I only let him sleep for a couple hours between 12:30 AM when I’d hung up his uniform after my dryer alarm went off and four AM.

Everything else happened quickly. He was up on top of me and carefully positioning himself when he exhaled. Nonetheless, I decided not to say anything to him about his breath. I didn’t want to break his concentration. I moaned softly as our bodies fell into a quiet thrusting motion. No, if he was going to make me feel this good, I definitely didn’t want to disturb his concentration.

I moaned again, only this time louder. His voice rattled a little gratified chuckle. Nothing works better for a man's ego than a little sensual cheerleading. Besides, I'd gone wet enough by now that he felt pretty damn good.

"Are you sorry your date didn't show?" he asked.

"Not any more," I giggled. "I suspect I got the best man after all."

He grunted. I could tell that together we'd stimulated a lot more moisture to lubricate things between us. He took one free hand and caressed my nipple with his thumb and two fingers.

I squealed with delight.

"What's with you?"

I kissed him hard, pushing my tongue deep into his mouth. "You are so good!" I panted. "Where have you been all my life?"

"Uhh...sweetheart, for the first twelve years of your life, I didn't exist."

"Shut up," I teased. "I figure I'm still young enough to enjoy this without you reminding me. Besides it's not like I'm robbing the cradle."

"Good point." Then he panted ecstatically. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Ohh, God!" I purred. "Am I ever?"

"If I stop by the office again today, will that make you happy?"

"Yes, of course."

"Happy enough to kiss me in public right there in the lobby of Bock and Porter Company, Incorporated, in front of everyone?"

I groaned, of course part of my groan was purely, sublimely tactile enjoyment. "Is-is that what you really want?"

“Yes.” He kissed the nape of my neck and then nuzzled his nose into my ear.

I thought about that for a few seconds. “Okay, I guess. It’s a deal.”

“If I do, everyone will think we’re a couple,” he added.

I giggled again. “I suppose they will.”

“Are we?”

I paused and then my body shimmied so that it snuggled against his. “Yeah. But now you have to do something for me.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ve gotta cum for me again.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Hah! If I do, I’m gonna cum in you again,” he said.

I giggled. “I know.”

He laughed out loud, at first, and then as I reached down to give his scrotum a gentle squeeze, he made a guttural noise like an animal. Within minutes, we both went wet—fabulously, breathtakingly, spectacularly drenched. As he spurted flooding deep inside my vagina, I shuddered with a wicked and wondrous climax.

We worked out a mutual agreement. He wanted a moist warm place to keep his dick, and I wanted to be told that I was a beautiful lover.

I’d moved into an up cycle. No, I’d better be honest; I’d hit a manic cycle. A few hours of sleep and we’d be ready for most of the day. Nevertheless, one more look at his impressive dick, and I wanted him

back inside me. Happily, Brick seemed content with that part of the agreement.

Young men almost always were.

* * * *

First things first, I had to retrieve my car from the parking garage across from Marlowe's Joint. Then I hightailed it for work.

All of the girls in the secretarial pool waited for me as I walked into the lobby a few minutes late. They all knew that that being late wasn't like me at all. I was a fanatic for arriving early. I knew I'd take a turn at the reception desk this morning, so I dumped most of my stuff behind the reception desk.

"So Sienna," Margo stage whispered her question so everybody could hear her. "Did you meet your secret admirer last night?"

What do I say? The truth I suppose... "He didn't show."

Her eyes popped wide open. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry."

I shrugged. "It wasn't a total loss. I actually had a pretty good night, eventually. Oh well, maybe he'll apologize online today. Not like it'll do him any good."

I brought up the computer and clicked on my company email. There sat a morning message from "**Russet Umber.**"

His cryptic email read: *"I saw you with that other man last night. So I didn't want to stir up any trouble by coming over and introducing myself. I left after you ran into the ladies room. My next message will come via courier. Russ."*

“What the fuck?” I muttered. “I thought he never even showed his face.”

* * * *

The phone on my computer station rang before ten that morning. I recognized the haughty expression in Margo’s voice. ”Sienna, Brick Brown is out in the lobby. He’s not delivering packages or anything. He just says to tell you he’s here and wants to see you. Do you know anything about this?”

I smiled into the phone. “I’ve been expecting him, Margery. Be right out.”

There he stood in the lobby of Bock and Porter, Incorporated just as he promised. All five feet eight inches of him looked very muscular, lean and hard-edged. Wearing a newly cleaned and home-pressed delivery uniform, plus his leather bomber jacket, he looked out of place for an upscale, affluent building like this.

My God! What was the matter with me? I’d never made judgment calls like that before. Sure, Brick displayed some very tough streetwise features; yet, I for one didn’t think he appeared to be the least bit threatening.

Apparently, I was the only one who thought so today. His arrival without packages coupled with his specific request to see me disturbed the daily routine out in the lobby.

As I crossed the bank of elevators into the main lobby, Jerome, one of the security guards, sidled up to me and whispered: “If you need us to get rid of him, Sienna? Just say the word.”

What? Don't be silly! However, I smiled. “Don't worry, Jerome. It's fine. I was expecting Mr. Brown.”

Brick's face brightened up when he saw me. His voice carried all the way across the lobby. “I'm getting a promotion to supervisor!”

“What?” I beamed back. “Good for you!”

“The firm just got a brand new major contract with this new factory. They need to ship out a shit-load—Oops! Sorry 'bout the language—they need to disperse their entire holiday product line—yesterday. So they've placed me in charge.”

“Aww, Brick, that's great.” I beamed.

“The only problem is that it'll be ten hour days six and seven days a week for starters, but I'm entitled to overtime after forty hours.” He grinned. “You know what that means.”

“What?”

“We can afford Cloud Buster's restaurant right after the first of the year.”

I walked into his grasp, and he threw his arms around me in a big hug. He brought his lips to my mouth, but at the very last second I turned away and let him kiss my cheek.

“Come back over here into one of the reception cubicles.” I gestured toward a far corner. “We can talk there.”

His face tensed up as he followed me into the cubicle. “What just happened out there?”

“What do you mean?”

“I distinctly remember you promising me last night that when we met in the Bock and Porter lobby, you’d kiss me like we were a real couple.”

“We are a real couple.” Then I dropped my voice. “I made that promise to you in the wee hours during the throes of our love-making, didn’t I?”

“Oh, sure.” The anguish etched into his face reflected the pain in his voice. “I’m good enough for you alone in the dark, but not out here in your daytime business world.”

“Brick, no! I-I didn’t mean it that way.” Hastily, I threw my arms around his shoulders and kissed him square on the lips. “Does that make things better?”

“I don’t know. Do you think it does?”

“Look, I’m sorry. This...this is all so new.” I could feel my face flush. “I’m trying my best.”

“Are you?”

I choked back a gulp. “H-how much does it pay?”

“What?”

“Your promotion...”

“What difference does it make?” His face hardened. “Oh, by the way, I dropped off an envelope for you. Margery already signed for it.”

Brick looked like he wanted to say something else which I suspected both of us would regret if he spoke the words. However, at the last moment he turned away from me and strode out of the cubicle toward the lobby doors.

My eyes misted up as I watched him cross the marble floor headed for the double doors.

“Don’t go.” My plea was barely audible. I crept out of the reception cubicle rather timidly chasing him. “Please?”

“What’s the point? I can’t talk to you here, can I?” Then he moved off. Shooting me an injured glance over his shoulder once he reached the exit doors, Brick raised his voice for everyone else in the lobby to hear. “You have a nice day, Miz Sorrel.”

I nodded and answered not quite as loudly. “See you.”

I wanted to cry. At first, I couldn’t tell which was worse, the awkward silence of my co-workers as I struggled to get through the rest of my day, or the gut-wrenching feeling deep inside that I’d let Brick down by pushing him away unintentionally like that.

I knew I should take off early and go home.

I wanted to go back, get on the phone and straighten everything out with Brick. I wanted to apologize, hear all about his promotion and celebrate this momentous occasion by taking him to bed. I wanted to do all those things and more. But I was worried about taking any more time off from work during the busy holiday season.

No, I should stay here at work and let things cool down a bit. After all, I was afraid to confront him. What if he didn’t forgive me? What if he rejected me?

Rejected? Part of me lashed out in retaliation. Was I worried about being rejected by a twenty-five year old delivery truck driver? No! Was I worried about being rejected by a man who comforted me last night when my date didn’t show up? Yes. But I knew I’d have to

finish out the day. After all, none of what I'd just delineated sounded very logical.

Then why didn't logic make me feel better?

The mailroom forwarded my delivery envelope to me in the middle of the afternoon. They dropped it in my inbox when I was covering the front desk.

Sienna--

I'll meet you at Dugan's Neighborhood Grill tonight at 7:30 pm, if that's all right with you.

Russ

I stayed at work, puttering away at holiday hotline beer tips all the while having no idea what my various suggestions really represented. Was it okay to serve miniature beer brats steeped in beer for a Christmas party? *Why are you asking a beer hotline a question like that, moron?* Of course, we're going to say yes!

My computer screen saver showed a loving couple ice-skating under a generic Season's Greetings banner. The two people on the screen looked to be approximately the same height. If she was chubbier and he had a much darker complexion, it could be me and Brick.

I hit the command to print out the screen page. When I got a black and white copy of the company's Christmas greeting off the printer, my eyes flashed down to examine the happy couple. I took my pencil and began to shade in his skin tones. After all, this would only work if his skin color was duskier. Then I tried to make the skinny little model look fuller figured, but to no avail. I wadded the paper up and threw it in the trash.

Suddenly struck by end of the day non-verbal noises, my ears picked up the noises of the people around me, as they began to pack up to head out for the evening.

Time to leave!

Good. I wanted to go home. I wanted to get ready for tonight's date with Russ Umber. No, I wanted to call Brick and tell him how sorry I was. I'd kiss him for real this time and tell how much I missed him, how much I loved him. Then, I'd show him just how much I loved him. Which reminded me, I really needed to stop off at the pharmacy and pick up some condoms.

But, I was in a hurry to get home and dress for my evening out on the town. I punched the tuner button on my radio. This one had been set on one of those non-stop Christmas music stations that pop up this time of year, and an up-tempo version of an old Christmas carol done symphonic rock style blared out through my speakers.

*I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play
And mild and sweet the words repeat,
Of peace on earth, good will to men.
I thought how as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had roll'd along th' unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

My subconscious led me out of the parking garage at Bock and Porter Ink, and the next thing I knew, I was pulling into my parking space at my apartment. I didn't even remember the drive home.

* * * *

As I entered my apartment a high pitched tone pinged. I glanced over to see the red flash of my answering machine's message light blink. I walked over to the machine and pressed the playback button.

"Sienna, please call me. I'm not so much angry with you as I was hurt. Can we talk?" Brichester Brown left his cell phone number at the end of his message.

Fafhrd apparently cat-napping somewhere else in the apartment strolled into the living room and yawned.

"Aww, did I walk you up?"

He meowed something that sounded a whole lot like a demand for a formal complaint to the International Red Cross and a multi-national inspection of his food dish as he rubbed up against my leg. Meanwhile I pressed playback again and listened to Brick's whole message again.

"I'm not so much angry with you as I was hurt."

Last night I spilled my heart to Brick. What could I tell him about tonight? I needed to admit that I was afraid that when Russ saw me, he didn't come to me because the man thought I looked too ugly or too fat or whatever. However, Brick told me that no man in his right mind would suggest that. He called me beautiful. Brick said I had a winning smile, a marvelous face and anyway a lot of men love a woman with a little meat on their bones.

Last night I continued to pour out my soul to a man with an unappealing exterior, a deviant feature in the center of his face, but a

resplendent interior. In an unprecedented move on my part I offered Brick an ardent invitation into my heart, my soul...and especially my body. Could I deny my feelings and state that the encounter should never have happened?

I picked up the phone and dialed his number.

It rang on the other end some five or six times before his voice mail cut in. Damn!

"Brick? It's me. I'll be home for a while. I'm thinking of going to do a few errands tonight, but call me anyway, will you?"

My decision to visit Dugan's Neighborhood Grill and keep my dinner date shouldn't have been so difficult. Maybe if Brick called me back soon, I wouldn't have to decide at all. In the meantime, I decided to jump in the shower for a quick soak and rinse just in case. I dragged the cordless phone into the bathroom with me if he called back.

As the water streamed across my body, I recalled our morning shower together this morning when both Brick and I clung together naked in the shower.

We stood facing each other under the gushing jets of water cascading down upon us in the shower. I'd been oh so gently scrubbing his skin with my hand and a warm wash cloth. As I moved my soapy hands up and down the length of his body, I decided it was probably a good thing I wasn't hand washing a certain firm piece of flesh.

I suspected I'd have found increasingly more flesh to wash. Whoops, too late! "My goodness, I think something's causing you to grow."

"Yeah, I wonder what that could be doing that?" Brick muttered

while his hands soaped my breasts.

"Mmm. Maybe I should go down there and take a good look."

"Do you think it would help?"

"Nothing wrong with a first hand inspection, as far as I can tell." I carefully squatted balancing myself so that my eye line matched his groin. "Oh yes, something has definitely caused you to get bigger, Brick. Something especially disconcerting now that we're all clean, don't you think?"

"Yeah, Sienna, but clean for how long?" He laughed.

"Let's get out of the tub and dry each other off." I stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. He followed right behind.

"Does that mean you're planning to put off getting dressed again?"

I shook my head. "I wish we'd been given other options."

He smiled that luscious smile of his. "Yeah, me too."

The rest became history.

When I stepped out of the shower this time, I glanced at the cordless phone on the counter near the sink and sighed. Still no sign of his call.

Damn it! Call me, Brick! Stop me from going on this date and complicating my life even further.

I picked up the towel and the telephone and dragged it with me into my bedroom. Faf sprawled out up next to my pillow in a covetous territorial posture. Cleaning his fur, my cat's eyes watched me as I dried off completely and tried to assemble my outfit for the night.

What should I wear? The dress I wore last night happened to be my best new garment. Not so much slinky, but it really showed off my

neck and shoulders. Not to mention that the neckline accentuated my cleavage. Guess I always did okay in that department. I mean, last night Brick spent a lot of time paying attention to...

Damn it, Brick! Call me right now!

I hit the redial button on the handset and waited while the other end rang through some eight or nine times. Hmm, his voice mail didn't pick up either. Could Brick be talking to somebody else? I clicked off and hit redial once again. This time I got his voice mail.

"Brick, it's..." I looked at the luminous dial on my alarm clock. "Around six-thirty-five...please call me!"

I grabbed a hanger draped with a dark blue two piece outfit from my closet. Okay, this ensemble might be a little too lightweight for a snowy evening like tonight. On the other hand, if I remain indoors, the material wouldn't matter too much.

What the hell did I think I was doing? Most people called this *cheating* and not the kind of cheating where I stuck my head in a gourmet chocolate shop on the mall to indulge in half a pound of expensive artisanal chocolate bon-bons. Why couldn't I stop myself? Why wouldn't Brick call to stop me?

"Fafhrd!" My shout startled him from grooming himself. "Tell me to stay home!"

My cat scrutinized me curiously for a moment and then went back to licking himself.

"You're no help."

He gave me the eye as if to say: *You got yourself into this hole, Mom. You're gonna have to dig yourself out.*

“I know. I know.” I grumbled at him. “At least you could have been more diplomatic.”

Faf stood up, padded to edge of my bed and mewed at me.

I patted him on the head. “Let me get dressed.”

He meowed once again, shook his body furiously and jumped down to the floor. Was that a no?

“Now that’s more like it. Thank you for offering your opinion.”

Sticking his tail into the air, Fafhrd left my bedroom.

I looked at the blue outfit on the hanger. Let’s be logical! Last night we had sex. That fact didn’t mean Brick and I had some sort of long term connection, did it? I’d been an acquaintance of Brick for well over a year. I did the math in my head; sixteen months to be exact. I mean we just had sex. Great, mind-boggling, wondrous sex! An episode I truly desired to repeat as soon as possible. Okay, maybe that did answer my question. Brick and I actually needed to have a long term relationship.

I decided to call his cell once again.

When his voice mail kicked in this time, I took a deep breath and left the following message:

“Brick dear, I’m meeting Russ Umber at Dugan’s Neighborhood Grill tonight at seven-thirty or so. Actually, I plan to be tardy, since he was so late showing up the last time. The reason I’m calling you to tell you this is to alert you to the fact that I’m going to tell Russ that it’s all over between us. Not like there was ever anything real in the first place. The email teasing, the IMs, the letters, etcetera, meant nothing to me!

“Last night with you turned out to be the most wonderful night of

my life, and I apologize for the shabby way I treated you today. You deserved much better from me. I spent the entire day considering what I'd done, and how I fucked up.

"Anyway call me later and I'll tell you how it turned out.

"I don't think I've ever told you that I love you.

"I love you."

After I got dressed, I called out to Fafhrd and scratched his neck under his collar like he loved. "Thanks for your advice, buddy. I finally made up my mind. Hey, did you like Brick Brown when he stuck around here last night?"

Fafhrd purred. I couldn't tell if my petting initiated that response, or whether he attempted to answer my question. Didn't matter. As far as I was concerned, Fafhrd had just given Brick his blessing.

"I think we should keep him, don't you?"

Faf arched his back in a luxurious stretch and purred once more.

* * * *

If anything Dugan's Neighborhood Grill gave off the atmosphere of a sports and trivia establishment. I looked at the menu, delighted to see it looked far more affordable than Marlowe's had been the night before. My waiter came by and quickly dipped his head down toward me. "Get you anything from the bar, ma'am?"

Naturally, my first inclination was to order a drink. Nevertheless, the combination of Brick's cautionary warning coupled with the remembrance of last night's drunken foray made me change my mind. I asked for an ice water with a slice of lemon.

"Suit yourself." The waiter shrugged. "Look over the appetizers and salad menu if you'd like."

Salad menu? I suppose I should have expected that. *Stop it!* Suddenly, I realized I reacted awfully thin-skinned for somebody wearing a size eighteen dress. I should be used to it by now. Bah! *Should* is the most useless word in the English language the therapist for my weight loss group once said. *Don't let anybody should all over you!*

I gazed around the restaurant trying to locate one of the faces from the jpeg photograph Russ sent me. So far no luck. I even arrived late to counteract his tactless apparent no-show from last night's fiasco.

Why didn't I stay at home wait for Brick's call? No, that would have been the smart thing to do and I certainly couldn't stand to have somebody accuse me of being smart.

A gentleman sent another drink over to my table for all the good it would do him. Well, at least when I over imbibed on several over-priced glasses of water, all I'd have to do is relieve my bladder pressure as opposed to emptying my guts.

Should I try to contact Brick one more time? I'd give Russ until eight o'clock. The clock on the trivia board read 7:53. Tonight looked like a repeat of last night after all. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, and I don't even have the luxury of counting on Brichester Brown to rescue me.

I thought about grabbing a computerized trivia game controller from the bartender to ease the painful wait, but as soon as I got into the rhythm of the game, I'd miss my opportunity to spot Russ.

You're an idiot. Get up and leave now. This whole idea sucked with north wind proportions. No, I told myself I'd wait until eight. I'd hang on 'til then.

At precisely one minute after eight o'clock the entrance to Dugan's opened and my eyes danced across his lithe, muscular figure as he pushed through the revolving door at the very front of the restaurant. I'd recognize that face anywhere! I lifted up my arms and waved him over to my table.

"It's about damn time!" As he came up to me, I grabbed his tie and pulled his face down close to mine so I could reach his lips. "I prayed that you'd show."

Brichester Brown kissed me. "I'd never considered walking into a bar as a religious event before."

"I'm just thrilled it's you and not that cyber-ass, Russ Umber."

"In that case so am I." Brick pulled up a chair and sat down with me. "Thank you for calling me and telling me your plans for the

evening. So did you break up with him?”

“No! The asshole didn’t show again.” I fixed my eyes on his. “I much prefer present company to some non-existent cyber-phantom.”

“I cannot tell you how glad I am to hear you say those words.” He sniffed my water glass and smiled. “Water! Good for you. Don’t you feel much better?”

“Well, I don’t feel sick.”

“You’re catching on.” He looked around for a waiter. “Did you eat yet?”

“Not yet. Don’t you want to leave now?”

“You need to get some food inside you, m’dear.”

“We don’t have to spend the money—”

“Excuse me?” His face broke into a big smile. “I distinctly remember telling you one of us got a big promotion today.”

“Omigosh! That’s right!” I leaned over and kissed him again. “Congratulations! Tell me all about it.”

“After we order.” The waiter finally came around to take our food order.

“And where have you been all evening? I tried calling and calling!”

“I know, I know! I got every single one of your messages. That’s why I’m here.”

I put my hand on top of his. “I’m glad of that.”

“Sorry I didn’t get back to you. Actually, I got called over to the new shipping facility Tanner International installed in their local plant. A bunch of NQS execs and Tanner people showed up to celebrate, so the

whole thing turned into a mandatory formation for us peon types.”

“Oh Brick, I’m sorry.”

“I’m not! This guarantees the second Christmas bonus I get this year.”

“Really? What was your first one?”

He put his hands over mine. “I’m looking at her.”

I couldn’t help it. As his gaze held mine, my panties went wet.

“Oh. Now we really have to celebrate.”

He grinned. “I like the way you think.”

“You know, as hungry as I am, I don’t want to stay.” I looked around the restaurant once more. “Besides, I don’t want Russ to blow in and ruin our moment.”

Brick shrugged. “He won’t show.”

I looked at him askance. “Why do you say that?”

“Because he told you this morning,” Brick added as he looked around for a waiter. “He saw us together last night and didn’t want to interrupt.”

I scrutinized his face. “How did you know that?”

Our waiter and an assistant carried out our dinners.

Brick touched the platter with his hand. “Whoa! Hot!”

“Careful, sir.”

“I’m usually not this impulsive.”

We held off on our conversation while the wait staff finished serving us. “I think it came up when we talked in the lobby.”

I waited until they moved away from our table. “No, it didn’t.”

“Huh? I could’ve sworn we talked about it.” He dug into his

dinner.

“Brick, I remember every word I said to you this morning when I unintentionally hurt your feelings.” I sighed over my dinner plate. “Every freakin’ stupid word.”

“I know you do, sweetheart, and I appreciate your apology. You know, I think you might’ve mentioned it on one of your voice mail messages.”

I didn’t think that was true either, but I kept quiet and pursued my entree.

About ten minutes later, I made a bold suggestion. “Brick. Would it be okay if we went to your place tonight?”

“You want to come to my place?”

“If it’s all right with you.”

“Sure, why not?” He smiled. “Should we drive separately?”

“I suppose we should. However, I have to feed Fafhrd first.”

“You know, you never did tell me how Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser got their names.”

I took a few moments to explain how Fritz Lieber junior’s classic sword and sorcery characters influenced the naming of my cats.

Brick grinned. “Why don’t I just follow you home? Then you can ride with me.”

“Good idea, I’ll need to pick up an outfit for work tomorrow, anyway.”

As we left the restaurant holding hands, the background music of the external speakers swirled over our heads atmospherically intermixed with the newly falling snowflakes.

*'Til ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
Of peace on earth, good will to men!*

The drive home took a lot longer than either of us expected.

The late snowfall gained intensity until the streets turned into a treacherous slick trail of pristine white on top covering pure ice underneath. Brick's SUV skated across the pavement in a series of controlled slides. Being far more careful, I crept home in my little sedan.

I hit the radio button for the Christmas carol station again hoping that the music might soothe my frazzled nerves. Nothing frightened me more than the thought of losing control of my vehicle on icy streets, and I'd tensed up clenching the steering wheel in an effort retain some sense of control.

Soon further accumulation on the road improved the traction by putting a layer of packed snow between my tires and the ice. I recognized that particular sound. The crunch reverberated, a signal of safety to my ears. I increased my speed ever so slightly, but the big difference had to do with the calmness of my nerves.

We made it back alive, safe and sound, in one piece. I smiled, thankful for every single cliché I could think of at the moment.

He stood at the entrance to my place. "I don't think you should follow me home tonight after all."

When I reached my front door I offered my arms in an embrace. "Would you like to stay here with me instead?"

“Yes.” Brick pulled me tightly against him. “We’ll have to set an alarm tonight so I can leave and pick up my uniform in time for work tomorrow.”

I kissed him. His warm lips dispelled the snowflakes which landed close to my mouth. Then I broke free to unlock the door. “Come in out of the cold.”

“I’m glad we both made it back here safely.” He followed me inside and helped me off with my coat. “I don’t mind the extra drive, but I could tell you had a difficult time out there.”

“I’d always been told that my car did okay in the snow, but you sure couldn’t prove it by my driving experiences.”

He removed his own coat and hung it up in the closet by the front entrance. “That’s okay. If we go anywhere together in the snow I’ll drive. I don’t mind winter driving.”

“One nice thing about having an eager young man around,” I said as I kicked off my shoes. “He’ll go to considerable lengths when he’s certain it’s going to mean great sex.”

Brick laughed. “Are you going to guarantee great sex, Sienna?”

My eyes darted to his face. *Did he just say what I thought he said?* “Brick, what do you think about the differences in our age?”

“The age thing?” He turned to confront me and put his hands firmly on my upper arms. “To me it’s not really an issue.”

“But...what if...?” I purposefully stopped talking after uttering that phrase in order to gauge his response.

“Why worry about *what ifs*?” Brick bent down to pet Faf who came strolling in as if we’d awakened him. “I already know you and I could

learn to be happy overall, as long as we know precisely how to keep the fires of our love going. Don't you think?"

I knew exactly where I'd seen those words before. How would I approach this? Suddenly, my mind told me to appeal to his basest, most masculine nature. I pulled my low cut top over the top of my head, and then I unfastened the little clip holding my skirt closed. My bra and panties followed quickly.

I watched him continue to undress. When he finished, I walked over and carefully put my arms around his neck, before I forced myself to ask him the question. "How did you do it?"

My naked companion stepped back from me. "Do what?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Brick. How did you manage to send those messages from 'Russ Umber' during the workday?"

Brick looked down at the floor, but remained silent.

"I know how you managed to impersonate him at night." I reached out and took both of his hands in mine. "But how did you manage to send those messages during the workday? And where did you find that picture of those four hunks?"

Brick bit his lower lip for a moment and then chuckled. "Actually a friend of mine steered me toward a gay site. You've got to admit those guys were awfully pretty."

I smiled and nodded. "Mm-hmm and the workday messages you sent?"

"I know most of the internet cafes and coffee shops in the downtown area with wireless routers. I made it a habit to drag my laptop into work and stash it on my truck."

He moved in closer to my naked body, after he realized I wasn't too upset with him. "I'd take my breaks or get lunch wherever I could get free internet access; took my laptop in and *viola!*"

"That's so simple!" I shook my head. "You went to all that trouble for me?" I clasped his body close to mine once again.

"No trouble! It was worth every second." He kissed my cheek. "How did you guess, Sienna?"

"Lots of little things; mostly your words. Topics you'd bring up or certain phrasings, you know."

"Are you..." He stopped and inhaled a deep breath. "...angry with me?"

"No. Yes!" I growled in the back of my throat. "Maybe..."

He smiled. "I'm glad we got that settled."

I gazed into his dark eyes. "Brick, what did you mean when you wrote all that stuff about...?" I couldn't complete the question, so I looked away.

He kissed me very chastely on the forehead. "Babies?"

I nodded. "Yeah!"

"I meant every single word of it." He kissed me again, only this time much deeper and far more possessively. "Is the thought of having children with me something you could learn to live with?"

When I didn't answer right away, he kissed me again.

Our lips parted, and I shrugged. "Well, I sort of forget to buy a box of condoms like I'd planned."

"Want me to run out and get some?"

I glanced down at his exposed figure. "You gonna go like that?"

“Good point! I’d better put on some boots.”

Exasperated, I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the bedroom. “Never mind, you! Come with me.”

“My gracious! What an invitation. I’d love to cum with you!”

I squinched up my face and groaned. “You’re incorrigible.”

“It’s in my job description.”

In the next few minutes, as per Brick’s instructions, I slowly settled on all fours on my bed. I quickly glanced back to see his dark naked body approach me from behind. Since I exposed myself to him as well, I took a deep breath, arched my back in a stretch, and waited. Unable to hold himself back any longer, Brichester Brown clambered up behind me on the bed and positioned himself directly at the captivating furrow I offered up for his deep plowing.

As he nestled the tip of his penis gently in my pubic hair to aim his initial thrust forward into the inviting openness of my vagina, I relented to his gentle, sure plunges. Brick pushed the sensitive glans of his long cock entirely into my moist clasping heat. At that moment, with his strong, warm hands holding me snug against his hard muscular hips and thighs, his body crushing against me from behind, I experienced the cocky blunt strength of the young man driving into me.

He moaned. Then apparently composing himself, he murmured. “I have a question for you.”

I encouraged the gasping and panting from my lungs and throat to subside. “All right.”

“How does the name Sienna Rose Brown sound to you?”

This time I really shuddered through a gasp. “Are-are you

serious?”

“Does the idea of marriage appeal to you?”

Suddenly, I yielded my mind and body to envelop Brick’s dark, potentially potent presence within my system. Maybe I couldn’t see what went on behind me, but what I perceived felt unbelievable.

“Omigod! Is that a proposal? Do you have any idea what you just did to me?”

“Yes, I asked you to marry me.”

“No! Not that way! Not like this.” I reached back and pushed at his hip. “Besides, that’s no way to propose.”

“What?”

“We should be facing each other, don’t you think?” I moaned. “Lay me down on my back.”

In moments we’d changed positions. First we kissed—locked together at our mouths and at the very center of our being. He clasped me against him intimately, while I held his body fused close to mine.

“Will you marry me, Sienna?”

“Is that your fantasy, Brichester Brown?”

His body shuddered as he pressed forward again and again.

“You’re my fantasy.”

“Then maybe...probably...I mean, yes, I’ll marry you. Provided you work with me on my fantasy as well...”

He snickered. “I’ll do my best.”

I smiled. “Oh, I know you will. After all, it’s such an easy request.”

“Well, out with it! What’s your fantasy?”

I grinned and grabbed his head on either side holding him up, so we could look into each other's eyes. "Same as yours, Brick."

"Huh? Now I'm confused." His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I want a shotgun wedding."

Brichester Brown and I giggled hysterically in each other's arms. The sound of our laughter so annoyed Fafhrd that he came running in to check on what could possibly be wrong.

Later on, after we both settled down, Brick passed a million or more of his warmest, flowing season's greetings into me. I repaid his gift with a long wracking. Afterwards, I nuzzled against Brick's neck, shoulders, and head.

He kissed the nape of my neck. "Merry Christmas, sweetheart."

"Thank you, Mr. Brown. Merry Christmas to you, too." Then my eyes brightened. "Hey, I've got an idea!"

"What's that?"

"Want to schedule another gift exchange for tomorrow night? Just the two of us..."

"Sounds like a plan. But I'd better bring something along for Fafhrd to keep him occupied."

At the sound of his name, Fafhrd meowed.

"What do you say, Faf?" I reached out and petted the cat's ears. "Should we keep this one?"

He meowed once again.

The End

Boytoys

J.M. Snyder

A month after Chad and I broke up, my friend Barry called to check on me. “Just making sure you’re still alive,” he said with a laugh that was anything but funny. “Chad’s moved on, why haven’t you?”

“You called to ask me that?” I countered. I stood at the French doors that opened onto my apartment’s tiny balcony and fiddled with the vertical blinds as I listened to Barry breathe in my ear. I shouldn’t have answered the phone. Chad and I were together for almost a full year, my longest relationship to date—I couldn’t understand why everyone thought I should get over him that easily. “I’m hanging up.”

“Wait!”

I frowned at the blinds and waited. Just when I thought Barry didn’t have anything else to say, he said, “I’m sort of having this party.”

I rolled my eyes. “A Christmas party?”

Like I needed another reminder that I'd spend the holiday alone this year. With only a week until Christmas Eve, I didn't even have a tree up yet and the few cards I had received lay unopened on top of the TV. "Count me out."

Barry hurried to explain. "It's not *really* a Christmas party. It's just a few guys getting together, you know? Some food, some music, what do you say?"

"I think I just said no."

But Barry wouldn't hear it. "Jason, listen. I need you to come, please? For me?"

Suspicious, I asked, "Why?"

Silence. I knew it—Barry had something up his sleeve, something he thought I wouldn't like so he only wanted to tell me enough to entice me to come, then he'd drop the bomb when I arrived. Like the time he said he had a pair of front-row tickets for an off-Broadway production...and it wasn't until we pulled up to a local high school that I realized just how far off Broadway we were. "What kind of party is this?" I wanted to know.

"Boytoys," Barry said, talking fast so I couldn't interrupt. "It's really couples only but Greg's cousin Marty wants to come—"

"Okay, stop." Greg was Barry's on-again, off-again boyfriend and by the sound of things, they were currently on. I wasn't ready to mingle with couples again, not when I was flying solo. Plus, I reminded my friend, "There's a reason Marty's still single."

"He's not that bad," Barry started.

I shook my head, a futile gesture he couldn't see. "You don't see

me chasing him down,” I pointed out. “I am *not* that desperate.” Then, if only for my own benefit, I added, “Chad just needed some space, you know? He might still come back—”

“Uh-huh,” Barry said. “You keep telling yourself that. In the meantime, forget him and come to this party.”

Pissed, I asked, “As Marty’s date? No thank you.”

Barry’s voice rose shrilly. “I’m not asking you to fuck him!”

I waited for his breathing to even out before I asked, “What kind of party is this again? Boytoys, what the hell’s that?”

“Come see for yourself,” Barry told me. “Next Saturday, my place, seven-thirty. If you find your own date by then, bring him along and I’ll kick Marty to the curb. You don’t have to buy anything...”

Now I got it. “This is a sex toy party, isn’t it?” I asked. When Barry didn’t answer immediately, I knew I’d guessed right. “Oh no. That’s not my scene, Barry, and you know it.” The only sex toy I owned was a gag gift Barry gave me years ago, a dildo shaped like a gigantic cock. It would take a bucket of lard to get that rubber dick inside a man’s ass...it was a good ten inches in diameter, no lie. Just looking at it gave me hemorrhoids.

Chad had been the one into toys. He used to like bullet vibrators—he carried one in his pocket at all times, it looked like a small silver pill case but when he turned it on, it hummed with a tinny sound that made me wonder why no one else heard it. With one hand in his pocket, he used to thumb on the vibrator and press it against the front of his underwear, usually while waiting in line at the store, or driving, or watching TV.

I always knew when he was using it—the sound gave him away, and he'd get a dreamy look on his face with his hand shoved deep in his pocket. Just thinking of his silly grin made my heart ache. I couldn't imagine sitting in a room full of gay couples giggling over similar toys. To Barry, I said again, "No way."

With a dramatic sigh, Barry told me, "Think about it. You show up for a half hour or so, laugh it up with the guys, then slip away when the product host arrives. You don't have to stay. But word gets around that you were there and the next thing you know, Chad's on the phone wondering when you got so damn kinky. He'll *beg* you to take him back, am I right?"

Sad thing about it, he *was* right. Chad was always into trying something new in the bedroom—for me, exotic meant doing it doggie style, a position I didn't much like. I wanted to look into his eyes when we made love, to feel his arms around me as I felt him move within.

A sex toy party would be the *last* place he'd ever expect me to go and knowing Barry's friends, those damn gossipy queens would be on the phone spreading the word the moment I walked through the door. "Fine," I muttered.

"What?" Barry said, his smile evident in his voice. "What was that?"

"I said fine. I'll be there."

Before he could crow about it, I hung up.

* * * *

I changed my mind a hundred times about actually going to the party. I told myself I said I'd go just to shut Barry up and that was more than half true. Then I'd think about the incredulous look on Chad's face when someone told him they saw me at a Boytoys party and that alone would make the whole evening worthwhile.

But I wouldn't buy anything, God no...I wouldn't even enjoy myself if everyone there was paired up with Mr. Perfect and I had to settle for Greg's cousin Marty.

By Saturday morning, I was still undecided, though I did have an outfit picked out—a tight black sweater that hugged my flat stomach and jeans so low, an inch of skin showed between the waistband and the sweater whenever I moved. When I sat down, the jeans puckered away from my lower back, the sweater pulled up nicely and some lucky guy would be sorely tempted to trace the curve of my spine down to the promise hidden in my pants. When I put the outfit on and studied myself in the mirror, the dark close-cropped curls across my scalp complimented the sweater and the jeans brought out the deep blue of my eyes.

I looked irresistible, if I did say so myself. I almost hoped Chad would show up, too, do a double take when he saw me and realize what a fool he'd been to call it quits. I wasn't sure if I'd make him beg or just throw myself at him, but I wanted the chance to find out.

I waited until twenty after seven before I left for the party, determined not to show up first. There was nothing like being fashionably late to make a great entrance.

Trouble was, Barry lived downtown and I couldn't find a place to

park anywhere near his townhouse. I ended up in a church lot down the street—as I hiked the three blocks back to Barry’s, I hoped the car would still be waiting for me when I came back. If someone had it towed...

By the time I climbed the few steps to Barry’s front door, I was sheathed in sweat despite the chilly temperature and in a bad mood. My original goal of staying for a half hour was now down to fifteen minutes and shrinking fast. When Barry finally opened the door, I shoved past him, rubbing my arms to keep warm. “Damn, it’s cold out there.”

“Should’ve worn a coat.” Barry held out a bottle of Corona, which I took just for something to hold onto. “Thanks for coming, Jason. Most everyone’s here—oh look,” he said with a nod, trying to sound surprised and failing miserably.

I thought he was pointing out Marty, but his gaze was heavenward and too late, I noticed the sprig of greenery nailed to the ceiling. “Mistletoe. Pucker up.”

“Kiss me and die,” I threatened. Barry leaned closer, the alcohol on his breath licking along my cheek like the flames of a dragon, but I took a sip of the Corona and narrowly missed his lips, which only brushed my shoulder and left a long, damp smear in their wake. Following the sound of laughter into the living room, I raised my voice to be heard over the music. “Where’s my date?”

Behind me, Barry tried for another kiss, this time getting the back of my neck. I swatted him away like an annoying mosquito and surveyed the room. A half dozen men posed and preened along one wall,

far enough away from the food so no one thought that was the only reason they came. Two more guys canoodled on the sofa, giggling as they necked, hands slipping beneath shirts to pluck and tease before darting away.

New couple, I thought, disgusted. *Get a room...* then I realized one of those guys was Marty and I whirled on Barry. "What the fuck..."

"Jason," Barry started.

When I pointed at the couple on the couch, he grabbed my wrist and pulled me after him into the kitchen where Greg leaned over a large keg of beer, trying to tap it. He saw me and nodded, but I headed past him for the back door.

Barry caught my arm to stop me. "Wait."

I spun around and pointed back into the living room with the hand that held my beer. "That was *my* date," I reminded him.

"You said you weren't interested—"

"So?" I took a swig of my beer, furious. If I turned Marty down, that was one thing—but he wasn't supposed to bail out on *me*.

"You know what?" I asked Barry. He shook his head, so I told him, "I'm not staying. You have a nice little Fuckerware party here and I'm going to go on home. I don't need any of your *toys* to entertain myself."

Barry sidled around me to block the door. "Jason, please. Calm down. You don't even *like* Marty. I told him the same thing I told you. If you found a date—"

"I didn't expect him to!" I downed the rest of the Corona and dropped the empty bottle into the sink. I didn't care that Marty found someone—good for him, took him long enough—but it meant that I was

the only single guy at the party, the only one without another to flirt with or kiss or hold. Hell, I'd get my ass kicked just looking at anyone else.

Barry tried a different approach. "Just stay for a little while," he told me. "Just until the product host gets here, how's that sound? Nigel's already on his way."

I narrowed my eyes, giving Barry my most distrustful glare. "No one really names their kid *Nigel*, do they?"

"He'll be here a little after eight," Barry said, skirting the question. "Eat something, will you? I spent a fortune on that table out there and no one's touched a thing. The pasta in the salad's shaped like little dicks—come see."

Grudgingly, I let Barry drag me back into the living room. I still wasn't sold on the party, and there was no way in hell I was going to stay, but as long as I was the center of attention, if only for the moment, I would milk it for what it was worth. Marty and his newfound friend were still on the couch but I didn't look their way. Instead, I stood beside Barry at the food table as he pointed out what was what. "Look at this confetti," he said, running a hand across the little shiny snips of glitter strewn over the tablecloth. They were supposed to look like mini cocks, an exaggerated head at one end and two perfectly round balls at the other. Barry laughed as he picked up a handful and let them slip through his fingers. "Who thinks up this stuff? You like 'em?"

I shrugged, not yet willing to concede the fight. From here, I had a beeline to the front door—I could make a dash for it...*and never live it*

down, I thought with a look around at the other guests. Few met my gaze, which told me they'd been talking about me while I was in the kitchen.

What was it about us that wanted to see others disgraced? Squaring my shoulders, I glanced at the clock to see it was only quarter to eight. Another fifteen minutes or so until Nigel showed up...I could make it that long.

"Look, see?" Barry asked, holding out a spoonful of pasta to show me the noodles. They were tri-colored and slimy, with black specks of pepper clinging to them like dirt, and looked like the confetti.

Next he pointed out a few candles—more dicks, the caterer must've thought this was a bachelorette party or something. There were trays of round fruit, strawberries and cherries and grapes, along with a creamy dip that looked like jism; bananas waiting to be peeled and eaten, cups filled with ice shaped like—yeah. I grabbed another bottle of beer from the end of the table and drank down half before coming up for air. When I leaned back for another swallow, I caught sight of netting tacked to the ceiling, flesh-colored balloons suspended above the crowd. Pointing up at them, I asked, "They're not..."

"Yep," Barry confirmed. "Trojan's finest. It took forever to blow them all up. First time I ever bought unlubricated, can you believe it?"

I didn't want to ask what they were for, but Barry told me anyway. "Little game later on," he said. "There's a number in each one. Just pull the netting down, let go the balloons, and stand back as everyone scrambles to catch as many as they can without popping them. Then we call out numbers and whoever has that condom wins a prize."

I grunted, noncommittal, and took another sip of my beer before he could ask me to elaborate. The clock read ten 'til now and I eyed the front door like a prisoner gauging the distance to his cell door. I took a step in that direction, ready to start saying my goodbyes, when Barry clapped his hands and, raising his voice to be heard over his guests, called out, "Everyone having a good time?"

Yeah, right. The response was half-hearted at best, but Barry grinned as if we had raised the roof. "How about a little game before our guest of honor arrives?" he wanted to know.

Some groans this time, but at least he had everyone's attention. I glanced at the ballooned condoms above but Barry was on his knees, digging out a bowl from beneath the food table. Standing, he held the bowl out to me and said, "Pick a color, Jason. Any color."

Inside the bowl were coin-shaped condoms, still wrapped in their foil shells. There were four different metallic colors, and as I reached for a blue one, Barry whispered, "Holiday colors, get it? Red and green for Christmas, blue and silver for Hanukkah. Marty's Jewish, right?"

I took a green one instead. Barry moved onto the next guest and I palmed the condom. "Simple game," he said, passing the bowl around. "Don't worry what your boyfriend picks, just take your favorite color. Once everyone has one—"

A heavy knock on the front door made everyone jump. Someone muttered, "Fuck!" Someone else giggled. Over his shoulder, Barry asked, "Can you get that for me, Jason? Must be Nigel. Shit, he's early."

Seizing the opportunity to escape, I set my empty bottle on the table and ducked out into the hall. Absently I pocketed the condom. As I

reached for the door knob, I caught sight of myself in a mirror on the wall and took a moment to check my appearance. A second knock came, this one louder than the first, more insistent, but I smoothed a hand over the top of my hair before I bothered with the door. Opening it, I asked, “Yes?”

Standing on Barry’s stoop was only *the* sexiest man I’d ever seen in real life.

Sure, there were brighter stars in Hollywood, but I never met any of them, and not one had ever looked at me the way this demigod did.

“Hey,” he purred, his voice intimate in the cold night. A good head taller than me, with a shock of wavy blonde hair that looked pale against his pale skin, he filled the doorway with his bulky coat and twin valises. He looked like a traveling salesman, carrying those bags, and whatever he was selling, I wanted to buy. When he smiled his teeth were straight, even, and white; his dark eyes danced in the porch light.. “I’m Nigel,” he told me, juggling his cases to offer me one gloved hand. I took it in mine, my fingers limp and numb in his firm grip. “And you are?”

I couldn’t find my voice. “Jesus,” I breathed.

Nigel laughed, a heavenly sound that made me catch my breath. “I never thought the Messiah would look so fine.”

“What?” I asked, confused. His smile made it hard to think, and it was only with considerable effort that I managed to stop staring at him long enough to let him into the townhouse.

“No, I’m—my name is...I—” Nigel laughed again and I shook my

head as if to untie my tongue. "I'm actually leaving."

"So soon?" Nigel set his bags on the floor and turned that million-watt smile my way again. "The minute I come, you walk out? So much for the afterglow."

My face warmed and suddenly the room was too hot, whatever chill that had followed Nigel in dissipated at his suggestive words. "This really isn't my thing."

Behind me, Barry's voice boomed over the music. "You must be Nigel!" he said, then laughed. I turned to find him pointing up at that damn mistletoe. "Look where you guys are standing."

"Barry—" I began.

Cool lips kissed the corner of my mouth and silenced me. When I looked at Nigel, he leaned in again and I thought he was going for a full-on kiss this time, but he had his arms behind him caught in his coat. "Give me a hand with this, please?" he asked, indicating the coat.

I helped him slip out of it. As I folded it over my arm, he asked, "Barry?" At Barry's nod, Nigel raised an eyebrow and appraised me. "Jesus, right?"

"Jason," I corrected, my cheeks flushed. I held out his coat, but he didn't take it. "Who is leaving. Nice to meet you."

"What are you running off for?" Nigel wanted to know. "The fun's just about to start."

Before I could answer, Barry informed him, "He's here alone."

"Thanks, asshole," I growled beneath my breath. Barry gave me a clueless shrug and I shoved Nigel's coat onto him. "I'm out of here."

Nigel caught my arm. "C'mon, Jason. Stay. I don't have a partner

either.”

Something in the way he said it made me think he didn’t just mean for tonight’s party. Still, I didn’t want to be won over so quickly. The hand on my arm found its way across my shoulders and Nigel pulled me close. “How about you be my Vanna White this evening?” he asked.

“I don’t think she sold sex toys,” I answered, but that arm fit comfortably and the smile below those chocolate eyes made it hard to say no. “I don’t have to demonstrate how to use them or anything, do I?”

“No!” Nigel said with a laugh. “No demonstrations, I promise. At least, not in front of the others.”

There was that suggestive tone again and the frank look he gave me seemed a challenge to call him on the meaning beneath his words. As if he wanted me to say something, anything, just to find out how serious he was.

But when Barry reached down for Nigel’s bags, the moment was gone. Nigel released me to help carry his things into the living room and I trailed along behind them, unsure whether or not I wanted to do this.

Sex toys, me? Hell no. But it had been a long time since another man looked at me the way Nigel did—Chad was never openly flirtatious, especially around others. I wondered just how far things could go this evening. After the past month I spent recuperating from a lengthy relationship that had soured, it surprised me that I even wanted to find out.

* * * *

I helped Nigel set up, feeling perversely pleased when I kicked Marty and his friend off the couch. Nigel unpacked his bags, spreading flyers and booklets across the coffee table as Barry brought in extra chairs from the dining room. There were four couples in all, none of whom I cared enough about to remember their names once they introduced themselves.

I sat on the couch with Nigel, flipping through the latest copy of *Freshmen* magazine and trying not to get aroused looking at the hard, naked boys spread inside. When Nigel asked, I got up to cut off the stereo. In the sudden silence, the guests stopped talking and shuffled instead, rattling the flyers and looking around nervously.

“Relax,” Nigel told them. He ran a hand through his hair, which fell back into perfect waves to frame his face. “This isn’t the first time for any of us.”

A laugh rippled through the guests and several of them glanced at Marty. “What?” he protested, sparking another round of laughter.

Nigel held a hand up to quiet everyone. “I’m Nigel, your Boytoys consultant. Tonight we’ll all get a good look at our product line, but please keep in mind you’re under no obligation to buy anything. Unless, of course, you sneak off to the bathroom to try it out. If it goes into either you or your partner, you have to pay for it.”

More laughter. Nigel signaled for me to rejoin him. When I did, that arm came up around my shoulders again to hug me close. “Jason here will be my lovely assistant tonight. For his help, he’ll get a special gift at the end of the evening.”

“I don’t really need—” I started.

Nigel waved my protest away. “Nonsense. ‘Tis the season.” When he gave me his winning grin and winked, I went from mildly intrigued to full-blown interested with that quick, secretive gesture.

Winked. At me.

One second my heart beat in my chest and the next, it was thudding in the front of my jeans. *Oh my.*

“Here’s what tonight’s schedule looks like,” Nigel continued.

I pulled my mind out of my pants and tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but I found myself falling into the cadence of his voice and the words themselves seemed meaningless.

“First we’ll sample a few of our wares—Boytoys has a full line of lubricants, oils, and rubs that you’ll get a chance to smell, touch, and even taste, if you want to. Jason will pass around applicators—” He pointed to an unopened bag of cotton balls on the couch and a box of tongue depressors beside it.

For a moment I stood there looking at them stupidly, but a nudge from Nigel sent me scurrying to hand them out.

“After we’re done with the small stuff, we’ll take a little break to snack or grab another brew or just stretch our legs before we get to the *real* reason you’re all here tonight.”

“Woo!” Barry cried out as someone let out an impressive wolf whistle.

Having made my way around the half-circle of chairs, I was squeezing past Nigel to get back to my end of the couch when Barry offered, “You should see the size of the dong Jason has at home. When’d

I get it for you?"

"Shut up."

Nigel's hands were on my hips, guiding me between him and the coffee table. "How big is it?" he asked, his breath hot against the back of my neck.

I wanted to die. "It's not—"

"Half a foot wide." Barry circled his hands to show him just how big. "Jason, what's it like?"

"I'll shove it up your ass, then you tell me."

"Hey," Nigel warned. "Play nice." Then he pulled me back against him and murmured in my ear, "Hope it hasn't jaded you to a more natural size."

"I haven't used it," I admitted.

His breath curled into me as he whispered, "Good. I'd hate to disappoint."

* * * *

I helped distribute the products as Nigel brought them out. He had a dozen different lubes...I never imagined there were so many alternatives to KY Jelly out on the market. There was even one called *Like A Virgin*, a tightening cream whose bottle proclaimed, *Make each time feel like the first!* Nigel had more flavors than Baskin Robbins; the standbys like strawberry and chocolate and vanilla as well as exotic ones like passion fruit, kiwi, and pomegranate. There were scented lubricants, ones that chilled the skin and others that heated it up.

We tested them all, passing the bottles around as we sniffed or tasted the product, rubbed it on our hands, marveled at the feel of it on our skin. Nigel explained each tube—its best use, popularity with customers, the cost. There were plenty of giggles over the *Virgin* cream, especially when Nigel said it was number one on their sales chart.

Next there were lotions, some that rubbed into the skin to soften it, some that spread a patina of color that could be licked away. One came in a spray can and dispensed a lightly scented foam that looked like whipped cream and tasted like spun sugar. As Nigel listed off the different flavors available, I tried to squirt a little dab of the lotion on my finger and found myself with a fist full of yellow foam. “Shit.” I tried to shake some of the excess away.

Nigel caught my wrist. “Banana,” he said with a grin.

I watched, fascinated, as he raised my hand to his lips and began to lick the lotion off my skin. His eyes never left my face, but I couldn’t meet his gaze—I stared at that pink tongue as it traced the lines on my palm and lapped up the cream. Then he took my fingers into his mouth, one by one, starting with the pinky, his lips soft on my skin, his tongue ticklish and greedy. He sucked on each tip, watching me, pleasure evident in his eyes. When he reached my thumb, I touched his face, my fingers gentle as they glanced over his nose and cheek. My hand felt sticky from the lotion and his saliva but I didn’t want to wipe it away. As he let my thumb slip free, he breathed, “My favorite flavor.”

“Get a room!” Barry yelled, and the other guests burst into laughter.

I ducked my head, embarrassed, and sat down before anyone could

get a good look at the bulge in the front of my jeans. I should've worn looser clothing. My pants chafed with a sudden erection and I didn't know how I'd make it through the rest of the evening without busting a nut for this guy. The way he smiled at me was enough to get me off.

During the break, I'd slip into the bathroom and jerk off, I promised myself. Only when Nigel told us to take a few minutes, he placed a hand on my knee to keep me next to him.

"You're a real sport," he said as I helped stow the bottles and tubes away in one of his bags. "Thanks for being here tonight. I hate having to work alone and usually no one wants to help out because then their partner feels slighted."

"Hey, no problem," I replied, trying to keep my voice light. "I broke up with my boyfriend for this."

Nigel's smile turned sad. "You want to talk about it?"

"No." I didn't want to think of Chad right now, not with that warm hand on my knee and Nigel's hip snug against mine. Flippant, I said, "His loss."

Nigel gave my knee a squeeze, then let his hand fall between my legs to rub up along my inner thigh. "I hope you don't think me too forward," he started.

I shook my head quickly, no. I needed this attention, his touch, something to tell me I was still desirable after all this time. Something to tell me Chad was wrong to leave. "I didn't want to come tonight," I admitted. "Barry sort of bullied me into being here."

"Well," Nigel said, his hand high up on my thigh now, his fingers mere inches from the hardness shoved down the front of my jeans, "I'm

glad you're here." He leaned closer and his fingers brushed against my erection, sending slivers of delight spiraling through me. "Let me know if you see anything you like," he told me, tracing the zipper of my jeans as his fingers probed the outline of my dick. "Once I take everyone's order, I want to thank you personally for all your help."

"I'm not doing much," I sighed, but his hand on my crotch said otherwise.

* * * *

After the break, Nigel opened his other bag. Inside were a variety of sex toys: dildos and vibrators, cock rings, penis pumps, masturbators, anal plugs, bondage play items. I didn't even know what most of the stuff was for—it all looked painful to me.

"I'm going to pass these around," Nigel said, raising his voice to be heard over the catcalls and whistles. "Touch them, turn them on, whatever you like but keep them outside your clothing and out of your mouth, got that? If you want to go down on it, use a condom. You're not the first guys to play with my toys—" The group laughed, and Nigel waited for relative quiet before continuing, "And you won't be the last. So keep them clean is all I ask."

He handed me the first item, a dildo shaped like a realistic cock with a suction cup beneath the rubber balls. "For hands-free play," Nigel explained. I didn't want to take it, didn't want to hold it, and barely even *looked* at it before passing it to the next guest. The closeted Christian in me felt offended by the toys, each one larger or longer or

somehow more *obscene* than the last. Did they have to make the veins so damn noticeable? Or the bulbous heads so flared?

A few of the guys reached for the condoms scattered across the coffee table, laughing as they rolled the rubbers down over the plastic dildos or held the vibrators to the fronts of their pants. Quite a number of the guests had already unzipped their flies, their strained briefs barely hiding thick erections. The mood had relaxed, there were more beer bottles on the table now, and some of guest had their shirts open or off completely.

I felt uncomfortable in my sweater, my jeans a size too small...even my shoes seemed too tight. I fanned myself with one of the flyers just to cool off a bit. Was I sweating? I didn't know, didn't *think* so, but God, it was hot in here. Every time I looked at Nigel, he held another dildo out to me and I wanted to yank on the fake dick to pull him closer—I wanted him beside me on the couch again, or spread out above me as he pressed me back against the cushions. The faint scent of bananas that lingered in the air was nauseating.

Somehow I survived the dildos and vibrators, and I made it through the masturbators without flinching, but when Nigel announced that he wanted to teach us how to properly put on a cock ring, I just couldn't sit there any longer. I was all too aware of the fact that I was probably the only one in the whole room who hadn't had sex recently. Each time someone turned toward his partner to giggle over one of the toys, the sound stabbed through me, twisting and turning and tearing me up inside. I thought of my empty bed at home, my empty apartment, my cold car down the street.

With disgust, I just passed whatever toy Nigel handed me to the next guy without even bothering to look it over. Then he mentioned the cock rings and I stood up, knocking into the coffee table in my haste to get away. “Sorry,” I muttered, stepping over the flyers that had scattered at my feet.

“It’s okay,” Nigel told me. He started to pick up the flyers but when he saw where I was headed, he stopped and followed. “Hey, wait. Jason, where—”

“I can’t,” I said quietly. In the hall I hugged my arms tight around my body and stared up at the mistletoe above me so I wouldn’t cry. When Nigel’s hand found my back, I took a shuddery breath and sighed. “I just can’t sit there and pretend it’s all fun and games, you know? I’m coming down off a bad breakup and I just don’t have it in me to act like it doesn’t hurt when it does. It does.”

Nigel rubbed my back, a soothing gesture that just made me feel worse. “Listen,” he said, his voice low between us, “don’t leave just yet. I sort of hoped we’d get a chance to talk afterward, just you and me. Unless you’re not up for it...”

I sniffled and shrugged as if unsure, but the thought of holing up with him somewhere for a little one-on-one numbed the ache in me. I couldn’t ignore how interested he seemed to be in me and I’d be lying to myself if I said I didn’t want to see where that might lead.

“How’s that sound?” Nigel wanted to know. “You want to stick around for that?”

I shrugged again. “I’m not...” I didn’t know what I wanted to say, so I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand and sighed. “I just don’t

want to ruin everyone else's good time," I admitted. "Maybe I can wait in another room?"

"Sure." Without warning, Nigel pulled me into a tight embrace and I breathed deep his scent, a mixture of man and musk that warmed my blood. "I only have a few more things to show off here before I'm ready to take orders. Where can I find you when I'm done?"

Any thoughts I had of leaving disappeared with that hug. "The guest room," I said, nodding at the staircase at the end of the hall. "First door on your left upstairs. Just tell Barry—"

"Tell me what?" Barry asked as he came up behind us. "Jason, are you okay? You look really pale."

Extracting myself from Nigel, I gave my friend a wan smile and nodded. "Just a bit overwhelmed," I admitted. "Can I go lay down for a few? Do you mind?"

"You'll miss the rest of the party," Barry said, concerned.

"Barry," I sighed. "I can put a cock ring on with my *teeth*."

Nigel laughed. "You'll have to show me that trick."

"I'll be upstairs," I told him, then hurried out from under the mistletoe before Barry could remember it was there.

The guest bedroom looked much the same as it had the last time I stayed in it, a few weeks ago when Chad first moved out and I didn't want to spend the night alone. The small lamp on the bedside table cast the room into shadow and threw a golden glow over the bed itself. I sat at the foot of the bed, kicked off my shoes, then stretched back on top of the covers to stare at the ceiling fan hanging motionless above me. Voices from downstairs drifted up like ghosts around me, Nigel's

distinct above the others.

Nigel. What a flirt. Sexy, but would he even remember me after tonight?

It had to be part of his show, playing up to me like he did. The salesman in him chasing after a client, eager to make a commission. How surprised would he be when he realized I wasn't about to buy any of his toys? Yeah, the lotions were kinky, I had to admit, but I didn't need a dildo or masturbator to get off. I wasn't about to be that lonely fag feeling himself up in the dark just because he couldn't find a boy to fuck. I'd rent a gigolo before I got that hard up.

I had a sneaky feeling the '*special gift*' Nigel had planned for me was nothing more than a certificate for Boytoys products. Why did I even let him talk me into staying?

Because he's cute and he's the first guy in a long time to show any interest in you. Yeah, it might be forced, but you won't know that for sure if you don't hang around to find out, right?

* * * *

I wasn't aware of closing my eyes or drifting off to sleep, but some time later I woke to the soft sound of a latch. Blinking against the lamplight, I rubbed at my bleary eyes and struggled to sit up. "What time is it?" I mumbled. Vaguely, I thought of my car out in the dark winter night and my apartment across town. I didn't think I could to make it there.

A strong hand touched my chest, easing me back to the bed.

“Shh,” Nigel whispered, his lips cool against my hot forehead. His fingers picked at one hard nipple through my thin sweater and I let him lay me down. “Hey there, Sleeping Beauty. Did you dream of me?”

“I wasn’t asleep,” I argued, but he kissed the words from my lips and left me breathless. This wasn’t the innocent peck I got beneath the mistletoe; his mouth covered mine hungrily, his tongue licking into me with a surprising eagerness that caused me to arch toward him, wanting more.

He smoothed his hand down my stomach to the hem of my sweater, then flicked beneath the knit fabric to rub against my bare skin. I curled into him and he stroked along my back, down the curve of my spine to ease into the back of my jeans. His insistent kisses held me captive—I didn’t protest when he climbed above me to straddle my hips, and when he broke away long enough to pull my sweater off over my head, I laughed. “Is this my gift?”

“Merry Christmas,” Nigel said, his lips on mine again before trailing down to leave heated kisses along my throat. He found my nipples, nuzzling first one, then the other, as his hands fumbled at the waistband of my jeans. I giggled when his hair brushed across my chest, teasing my nipples.

My zipper parted easily beneath his fingers. “Let’s get this package unwrapped,” he said, squeezing my budding erection through my underwear to punctuate his words.

I sat up a little, leaning on my arms to raise my hips so he could pull down my jeans. He slid down with them to stand at the foot of the bed as he tugged my pants off. My bare legs looked impossibly dark in

the yellow light cast by the lamp. Nigel rubbed a hand up either leg to pick at the bottom of my briefs. "These too."

He pulled the briefs down slowly, exposing the firm muscles above my hips and the faint line of hair that trailed down into a knot of curls at my crotch. The briefs pressed my dick into my balls with a sweet ache and my heart pounded in my groin, beating out a throbbing rhythm that made me gasp with pleasure. Nigel inched the briefs down a little further, squeezing my genitals.

God. I wanted to savor the dizzying pressure and explode at the same time. "Please," I sighed, bucking my hips to rub my dick against the tight confines of my briefs. "Oh God. Nigel. *Jesus.*"

"I thought you were Jesus," he joked. With one quick jerk, my briefs were gone and my heavy cock swung upright to stand on its own. Nigel ran a finger down the length of my shaft, a smile on his face at the moan that escaped my lips. "For all the toys in my bag, there's nothing quite like the real thing. Hey there, beautiful."

My dick shivered in response. Nigel circled my cockhead, his touch barely there and so delightful, it took all the strength I had not to come in his hand. I suspected he had more in store for me and I wanted to hold out as long as I could. If this was all I got from him, this moment, tonight, I wanted it to last.

Apparently Nigel did, too. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a thin leather strap and snapped it around the base of my shaft. "I know you're not big into toys," he said, tightening the cock ring around my thickness. "But if you'll let me play a bit—"

"Please," I said again as I thrust against his hands. "Whatever you

have in mind, I'm game."

"A team player, eh?" he asked, tweaking my dick. "I like that in a man."

When he bent down out of sight, I heard him rummaging through his bags of goodies. I rose up on my elbows to see what he was doing...he tossed a bottle of self-warming lube onto the bed, followed by a clear dildo, curved at one end with a fat ball at the other, two more round knobs behind it about an inch apart. Then a small box that held what looked like breath strips. I picked it up but Nigel plucked it from my hand. "Mine. Lay back. Relax."

Instead, I fingered the clear beaded dildo. "What's this for?" I asked.

"Like you don't know," Nigel replied. Hefting the dildo, he guided it between my legs and poked beneath my balls. "Open up," he said with a grin.

I laughed and spread my legs wider in invitation. "I thought you said no sampling the wares."

"I held these out for you." Setting the dildo aside, he grabbed the bottle of lube and dribbled it onto the tip of my dick.

The liquid was room temperature, but the moment it touched my flesh, it heated up until it felt like flames trickling and tickling and warming down the length of my shaft. I drew in my breath as my cock quivered beneath the sensation and Nigel poured more of the lubricant over my balls, rubbing it into my skin with his thumb. He spread it lower, below my sac, using it to ease a finger inside of me.

My ass contracted around his finger, trying to draw him in, but he

pulled out and rimmed me instead, slathering the liquid heat around my trembling hole. I lay back and raised my hips up off the bed, my dick thrusting into the air as his fingers danced over my ass.

“Oh God,” I sighed and, “Yes,” and “*Yes.*” When he replaced his finger with the round end of the dildo, I pushed down onto the clear rod and a raucous cry tore from my throat as the beads entered me one after the next. “God *yes, yes!*”

Nigel complied, moving the rod with the same mind-numbing indolence he used while removing my briefs earlier. He eased it in deep, deeper, until the first ball ignited a spark far inside of me and I bucked wildly against his hand. Then he pulled the dildo out inch by excruciating inch, until the last two balls slipped free with a slick *pop* that rippled through me.

In again, gradually, my muscles sucked in the balls one at a time. That glorious touch deep within me as the first ball kissed my prostate, my ragged gasp, then out again as if he had all night and wanted to bring me to the edge of orgasm again and again and *again* before finally letting me plunge headlong into the abyss. My voice cried out with a primal lust beyond thought, beyond words, as he fucked me slowly with the dildo. I fisted my hands in the sheets around me, thrashed against him, felt myself dragged forcibly to the brink of madness.

Nigel met each demand I made with the opposite effect—I begged him harder and the dildo barely brushed my skin; I wanted it faster and he slowed down, drawing the dildo through me until I sobbed with a desire so palpable, it ached. “Please,” I sighed, and that was the only command he obeyed. “Yes, please.”

Still working the dildo, he stuck one of the breath strips into his mouth, ran it around his tongue for a bit, then kissed the tip of my dick. His lips were minty cool and when he took my length into his mouth, I felt the refreshing taste of him buzz along my skin. At my sharp intake of breath, he grinned. His eyes were inky pools of darkness in the shadows thrown by the lamp.

“Like that?” he asked.

I could only nod—there were no words left in me.

Nigel sucked on the head of my cock like a kid on a lollipop. “It’s one of our best sellers. Anesthetizes your throat so you can do this.” He took a deep breath and took my full length in.

As the dildo continued its slow movements in and out of my shuddering ass, Nigel matched his blowjob to the same maddening rhythm. He deep-throated my erection again and again, shoved the dildo further in, until I was nothing but a mindless mess of open nerves.

Tremors of desire racked my over-sensitized body. Finally, *finally*, he thumbed open the snaps on the cock ring and allowed my orgasm to rip through me like a tsunami. Nigel drank down as much as he could then sputtered, my dick slipping from between his lips as he sprayed me with my own juices. “You could take a man’s head off,” he said with a laugh. “Jesus.”

I fell back against the bed, sated. Through half-lidded eyes, I watched him wipe me off his lips and my breathy voice sounded guttural to my own ears. “Yes, my son?”

He laughed again and lay down above me, his mouth finding mine. The taste of myself on his breath took mine away. His hands and

kisses made me hard all over again and when he finally pulled the dildo free later, I came a second time.

* * * *

On Christmas morning three days later, my cell phone rang. The shrill sound pierced my drowsy brain, startling me awake. Groggy with sleep, I reached out from beneath the warm covers of my bed to fumble along the nightstand, but I couldn't find the phone and gave up.

Beside me, Nigel stirred among the sheets, pulling me close. "Time is it?" he mumbled.

"Early," I answered. The phone stopped and I sighed, relaxing into Nigel's arms.

I was almost back to sleep when the phone started up again. This time Nigel made a grab for it, leaning above me as he answered it.

"Yeah?"

I kissed his upper arm where it stretched across my face. Nigel gave me a quick smile that lit up his dark eyes, and I plunged my fingers into his mussed hair. "I'm Nigel," he said into the phone.

"Who're you?"

I tried to imagine who it might be this early—my mother? Barry? "Who is it?" I whispered.

Nigel held the phone out to me. "Chad?"

"Chad who?" The words slipped out before I could stop them and the caller's livid response raged from the phone's small speaker. I heard the emotion in my ex-lover's voice but couldn't make out the words. Oh

yes, *that* Chad. “Hang up,” I told Nigel.

He didn’t have to be asked twice. He hit the *End* button, then held it until the phone powered off. “Friend of yours?”

I took the phone from him and tossed it to the floor. “Someone I used to know.” Burrowing back beneath the covers, I ran my feet along Nigel’s strong, bare legs and curled around him. “Merry Christmas, you. Wonder what toys Santa brought us this year?”

With a grin, Nigel reached down to rub at my cock hardening between us. “Once we take care of this, we’ll go find out.”

THE END