



Jingle My Bell

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Upon A Midnight Clear

Anisa Damien

Chapter One

“If you stare any harder, you’re likely to burn a hole through his draws.”

Drea Michaels couldn’t turn her eyes away from the specimen in question. Hell, what woman would want to look away, when Carter James looked good enough to sop up with a biscuit!

She clenched her thighs together underneath the booth table. Her fingers played idly with the rim of her glass. The French Toddy had lost its allure the moment she caught a glimpse of him out of the corner of her eye, and as usual, her response was immediate. “I wonder if he prefers boxers or briefs.”

“After two years of lusting after him, I’d think you’d have all the goods; like does he prefer missionary or doggie style?” Liz rolled her eyes.

“Doggie style,” Drea said. The words slipped off her tongue. She felt her cheeks grow hot and leaned her chin against the palm of her hand, knowing a wistful look crossed her face. She was completely oblivious to the R and B music playing in the background, or the hookups taking place around her. Mockingbird, the hottest after-work bar in downtown St. Louis, was in full swing. Energy for the upcoming Christmas holiday vibrated around the room. And Carter, the club’s owner and Drea’s friend was burning her panties off without even knowing it.

She wasn’t blind. She knew her full breasts, size-fourteen body, kinky shoulder-length black curls and toasty mahogany skin weren’t in line with Carter’s usual type of woman, but she didn’t give a damn. The fact that he was white and she black didn’t mean a thing. His powerful physique, six-pack stomach, sensual dark eyes, tanned complexion and bedroom smile was totally *her* style.

She let a wicked grin spread across her face. There was a first time for everything. She turned to look at Liz Stevens, her girlfriend since grade school and business partner in their hair salon, A Cut Above. “I want him.”

“You’ve been chanting that little mantra for the last two years.” Liz smiled mischievously, shaking her head. “What are you going to do to get him?”

“What do you expect me to do? Throw myself at his feet, naked and say, ‘Screw me, big daddy?’” Drea groaned, her gaze wandering back to the front door, where Carter greeted customers.

His easygoing persona and bedroom eyes turned more than her head. A couple of blondes standing close to him smiled brightly, shoving their breasts in his face. She silently seethed. She had no right getting jealous, especially since he had no idea how she felt. Oh, they played around, flirted endlessly, but she was sick of joking. She wanted him in her bed. Now!

She imagined those soulful, midnight eyes tempting and coaxing until she succumbed to his every will. What she wouldn’t do to feel all six-foot, three inches of Carter pressed against her. His large hands molding her ass. His fingers plundering her slick folds, teasing her clit with sinuous caresses. She was sure he would rock her world.

Hell, at the rate she was going, she’d be surprised if she still remembered where her diaphragm was.

No one wears a diaphragm anymore! Drea chided herself. Only one thing stopped

her musings from becoming a reality—he refused to date friends. Friends? She cringed at the confinement the word presented. Friends did not imagine each other exploring ghetto Karma Sutra together.

“That would be a good start.” Liz picked up her martini glass, swirled the cosmopolitan around and brought Drea back to reality. “What else you got?”

Drea rolled her eyes. “You know how Carter is. He’d probably go into catatonic shock if he even thought I was coming on to him.”

“He may not be as oblivious as you think.”

Her friend’s assured tone brought her head back around. “What do you mean?” She asked, brushing a wayward curl off her face. “You don’t think I have it in me?”

Liz laughed. “Have it in you; yes, actually acting on that tidbit of knowledge; no.” Her face lit up, a sarcastic grin on her lips. “First of all, you work too much to even have a life.”

“If I’m so busy, what am I doing here with you?”

“You’re here only because I promised we’d talk about where the crew from work was going to go to celebrate. It *is* the holiday season, you know?”

Drea rolled her eyes. *Here it comes.* “Tis the season.”

“Yeah, right. You can’t fool me. You just wanted to see Carter.” Liz chuckled. “I don’t see why you two just don’t get it on, already.”

Drea smirked. That would be the day. “He doesn’t look at me like that.”

“Mmmn hmmn.”

“What, it’s true! He *doesn’t* date friends.”

As if a woman who looked like Liz would have a problem getting her freak on. She could have been Halle Berry’s sister—except with green eyes and a darker toffee complexion. The end result of her friend’s leggy, shapely body and flirtatious attitude was endless dating. And ... Drea leaned her chin against the palm of her hand again, endless sex!

“Can you be serious for a minute?” Drea asked. “I mean, here I am about to spend another Christmas alone. New Years is just around the corner and right after that my thirtieth birthday. Another year gone without knowing what it would be like to be with Carter.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.” Liz replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I dare you.”

Drea shifted in her seat, tossing her friend a puzzled look. “Dare me to do what?”

Liz leaned towards her, a mysterious gleam in her eyes. “I dare you to seduce Carter before Christmas. That’s five nights to get him into your bed.”

Drea felt a wave of nervousness settle in her gut. Seduce him? Could she do it—after all this time of being “just friends”? It was ridiculous. Still, the idea of being dared was intriguing. She squelched the self-judgments that usually stopped her from doing anything remotely risky. She cleared her throat, shifting in her seat again. “But...”

“No buts. You want him? Then go get him. You don’t need me to tell you how, and you can’t waste any more time.” Liz batted her eyes playfully. “Girl, you deserve some happiness. I’ve watched for two years while you’ve measured every man who tried to get close to you against Carter—each one was lacking something or another. I’ve watched you turn them down and end up alone. That’s not living, if you ask me.”

Drea turned to look at Carter shaking hands with Thomas, one of his bartenders. She didn't have a snappy comeback for Liz's words because they were true. For two years, she'd lived in her own private hell, her own limbo where Carter had been so close, yet so far away. Her heart clenched every time she'd seen him with what he called his 'eye candy' and during those times, he'd seemed like he was forcing himself to have a good time. Or was she wrong? Was that just her hopeful imagination?

She knew he was a man with his own code of ethics; it was one of the things she loved the most about him. They'd learned enough over the past two years to know each other as intimately as lovers. The only thing he wouldn't talk about was his father. She'd become a whiz at hiding her lusty thoughts and projecting the image of "just friends."

They'd been friends since he'd walked into her shop and asked for a haircut, which she'd done herself. She'd been stuck on pause ever since. There was no pain worse than watching someone you wanted going on with their life without knowing your desires. She didn't need a ring on her finger; she'd settle for tasting every nook and cranny of his body every day for a week.

And if Liz's hair-brained plan doesn't work?

Drea straightened her shoulders and looked her friend square in the eye. "I have five days—before Christmas—to seduce Carter, or I'll walk away."

Liz's mouth formed an O. "Walk away? Are you sure about that?"

"You know, I wasn't until now. But you're right. I have been walking around like an extra on the set of *Night of the Living Dead*. I can't keep doing this."

"But you two have a great friendship—that's a big risk. Are you sure you want to change things?"

Drea grinned, playing with the napkin detailed with "Mockingbird" in script lettering. "This was your idea. Are you trying to talk me out of it?"

"No, I just want you to weigh your options. I know what a risk this is for you, especially since Neil..."

Drea waved her hand in the air. "No! We are not going to go there. Neil, the bastard, will remain banished to the domicile of the damned. Besides, you wouldn't have dared me if you wanted me to think over my options."

"True, but I never said anything about walking away if it doesn't work out. That's a huge risk. You two are great friends. I want you to go in with your eyes open," Liz gestured with her fingers. "What's your next move?"

"No time like the present." Drea smiled brightly. "I'll be back." She took a deep breath, edged out of her chair and straightened her favorite tight black leather skirt—the one that made her look at least ten pounds lighter—ten pounds she wasn't going to kid herself into thinking she was going to diet away. She was going to initiate Seduction 101 with Carter, but first she needed ammunition—a little lip gloss wouldn't hurt either.

Drea headed to the bathroom. It was time to be like Stella and get her groove back!

* * * *

The fire in her eyes could make a man burn. Carter James felt he *had* to be the exception, although he'd be struck by lightning if he denied that Drea didn't turn him on. He could never act on it, though. He'd dreamt of what he'd do to her lush body if he ignored his one unwavering rule: No dating friends. But that rule went further than just turning a friend into a lover. He didn't believe in fairy-tale romances. His father's failed

attempts at happily-ever-after had spoiled any beliefs Carter held regarding matrimony. Two half-brothers, three half-sisters and five marriages later, Frank James was still determined to find “the one.” Carter had seen the damage lust could do and wanted to avoid the consequences at all cost.

Drea might think he didn’t notice the passionate glances she shot in his direction from time to time, but he did. His strength had been reduced to ashes long ago. The resistance he had now came from sheer willpower and even that was wavering. For two years, he’d avoided surrendering to the attraction he felt for her—it could only lead to disappointment for them both.

Carter smiled at a couple of women at the bar whose provocative gazes suggested they were down for whatever he wanted. He kept walking. He shook his head, running a hand over his military-short black hair. He didn’t even have the slightest temptation to initiate what was sure to be every man’s fantasy of a threesome. His mind was focused on the dark beauty that’d gone to the ladies room. He mentally kicked himself for tracking Drea’s movements.

Damn, the woman had him strung up by the balls! There was no escaping. Every look into her almond-shaped brown eyes made everything within him stand at full attention. Her rich-brown skin and full, berry-colored lips were different from the blonde-haired, blue-eyed types he dated. Her race made no difference to him.

Carter’s own Italian, French and Cherokee ancestors were a sign of his mixed ancestry. Lust was lust, and every curve of her hour-glass figure made his cock jerk. He’d dreamt of taking her every which way from Sunday and knew that none of his imaginings would measure up to the reality of having her writhing underneath him. Drea was an all-or-nothing type of woman. The kind any man would be stupid to turn away from. He had to be smart enough to avoid the mistake his body begged for.

Carter shook his head, hoping no one could see the hard-on pressing against his zipper. He made his way to his sanctuary, his office, and exhaled a breath of relief as he slammed the door behind him.

Blood rushed to his ears and his heart thudded against his chest. Drea’s nearness was driving him insane and she’d been across the room! What the hell was he going to do when she got closer? His resolve was melting like cotton candy.

Damn! All Carter wanted was to plunge his cock as deep as her body would let him and hear her call out his name in the husky voice he’d come to love. He cared too much to destroy their friendship for a night of earth-shattering sex, even if he wanted to give in to the temptation more than take his next breath. The consequences of losing Drea as his friend would hurt. She was special to him, always listening with her down-to-earth persona and that smile. He had fallen prey to it years ago. He’d never had such a long-standing, non-physical relationship with a woman and he’d be damned if his sexual urges would mess that up.

His usual tactic was to take a cold shower, letting the icy water subdue his overheated flesh, but not tonight. Tonight, he could almost smell the sweet taste of her plump lips, feel her round, soft hips cupping his cock as he slammed into her from behind. He could almost hear the hard thrusting of his dick into her wet center as her breasts jiggled over his desk.

A shower would simply not do even though he had one in his small office. He unzipped his pants, pulled down his briefs and freed his rigid cock.

Carter's eyes rolled back as he placed a hand around his over-sensitized head. It was her smile that he saw in his mind, it was those lips he envisioned wrapped around him right now. "Yesss!" He hissed, moving his hand slowly up and down.

Carter imagined Drea's wild curls between his fingers as he tugged her hair gently. She would be tight, wet and not nearly as ready as he was now.

No, not nearly enough!

* * * *

Drea smoothed the MAC gloss across her full lips and looked over the reflection staring back at her in the ladies bathroom with a critical eye. Carter had called her mouth voluptuous. A chill ran down her spine as she thought about how his coal-black eyes had emblazoned a kiss on them with just one look. If the man could make her all hot and bothered with just one glance her way—what the hell would happen when he actually touched her? It wouldn't result in the brotherly pat on the back he gave her when they were playing around.

She closed her eyes, sighing. No. He would lay one of those I-want-to-sex-you-up caresses on her and two years of unspent desire would explode through her.

She tossed the lip gloss into her small purse, straightened up, inched down her off-the-shoulder black knit sweater and ran her hands down her knee-length leather skirt. She was ready for anything tonight.

Even rejection? A tiny voice replied.

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it," Drea said, walking out of the washroom. Carter's office was just a few doors down. She tossed away the hundreds of reasons why she should just go back outside and pretend she hadn't taken on the challenge of seducing him. She had never backed down from anything in her life and when she said she was going to do something, she did it.

As she neared Carter's office, she heard a hoarse moan. And it wasn't from pain!

What the hell was going on in there? Was he alone?

Drea eased closer to the door, placed one hand against the frame and the other on the doorknob. She knew she shouldn't be spying, but she couldn't help herself. A soft gasp escaped her lips as the door crept open an inch. Her eyes connected with the most erotic sight she had ever seen.

Her mouth dropped as another strangled moan erupted from Carter's mouth. His head was thrown back, his handsome face taut with pleasure and focus. He sat in one of the nail-head leather chairs, faced at an angle that allowed her eyes to take in every wicked motion.

His long fingers wrapped around his erect cock, working his fingers up and down the hardened flesh, his briefs hanging low on his hips. She swore every muscle in her body clenched, her heart about to jump out of her body.

She'd never witnessed a man masturbating before, but watching Carter taking pleasure in the task caused her wet pussy to tighten with anticipation. Her fingers scrunched up her skirt, bunching up the sides. She forgot that she was standing in a hallway as his lusty mumblings made her think she was standing right there with him. She wanted to feel him thrust inside of *her* and not the fantasy he was imagining. He wouldn't have to pleasure himself, she'd do it herself, any way he wanted it. She wanted him to take her with the same reckless abandon he was unknowingly displaying before

her. Her eyes closed, envisioning those hands on her, his dick filling her up until she couldn't take it.

“Ahhh ... D-Drea.”

The passionate comment forced Drea's attention back to Carter. Had he just said her name? She replayed what she'd heard, thinking surely he hadn't yelled her name as he'd climaxed and his hot seed moistened the front of his pants. The truth didn't lie, that's what her mother had always told her, and now was no different.

She jumped back from the door, leaning against the wall for strength as Carter righted himself. Her mind was on overload. Did he have the same feelings for her? Why would he deny it? She felt a myriad of emotions flooding her senses.

Aroused—what woman wouldn't be?

Anger? Yes, she was damn angry at his denials of not wanting to pursue a relationship with a “friend” and here he was, mind you, in the seclusion of his office, getting off without her. A frown crossed Drea's face. *Murmuring her name*. As much as she was shocked at the events that had taken place, she was also frustrated.

He'd lied to her!

Chapter Two

Drea jolted from the hallway, not looking back, afraid if she did, Carter would know she'd been spying. She hightailed it on wobbly legs to the bar where tall, dark and handsome Thomas offered her a disarming smile.

"Hey there, pretty lady."

She smiled weakly up at the man she considered a friend. "Hey, Thomas." She cleared her throat, trying to mute the husky timbre and piercing anger that laced her words. "Can you tell Carter that I headed home? I have an early day tomorrow."

"Sure thing," he said, looking her over. "Are you okay?"

Hell no! I've just seen the man I've lusted over for two years, balling off and calling my name—without me!

"Yeah! I'm fine, just tired." Drea turned to walk away before he could ask any more questions. Her eyes found Liz chatting with a handsome stranger. The way his hands caressed her bare thigh, it was obvious a lot more was going on than met the eye.

Liz turned from the man, smiling up at her as she neared the table. "I was beginning to think you were never coming back. This is Jared. Jared this is my best friend, Drea." Her green eyes sparkled with mischief and wandered over her friend. "Everything okay?"

"Hello." Drea offered her a weak smile. "Everything's fine. I just ... I'll talk to you later."

"I'll go with you," a deep voice said from behind her.

"Hi Carter," Liz replied, waving. "This is Jared."

He shook hands with the other man.

She closed her eyes before turning to look over her shoulder. Her heart lurched in her throat. Carter was the sexiest man she knew. He intrigued her, and given what she'd just seen, maybe her plan wasn't as crazy as it seemed.

He smelled so good!

Drea wet her lips, looking up into his mysterious near-black eyes. "Hi."

Carter smiled sheepishly, a dimple appearing in his right cheek. "Hi yourself, lady. Got a moment?"

A chill coursed down her spine. Did he know that she'd watched him jacking off? Did he know that more than anything she wanted to fuck him?

"Actually, I was headed home." Drea tried to search his eyes to see if he knew, but his nonchalant gaze gave nothing away. She fidgeted with her purse strap, making a big display of searching for her keys. Her gaze wandered over him and she noticed that he had on a different pair of pants. She refocused on what he was saying.

"It's too late for you to hail a cab. I'll take you." He took her keys out of her hands; the brief contact causing heat to ricochet through her body. Her knees went weak.

"That's sweet but ... don't you need to stay here and manage things?" Drea smiled hesitantly, looking beyond Carter at Liz's bewildered gaze. She rolled her eyes, and then grinned brightly at him.

His eyebrows rose. "Are you trying to talk me out of taking you home? You're the one that is always telling me that I'm a workaholic." He grinned, his sensual mouth slanted to the side. "Don't worry, Thomas can take care of things."

“Thanks.” Drea finally said, wanting to punch him for torturing her and for being so good at it.

“Good night, you two. I’ll call you tomorrow.” Liz said in a singsong voice, winking at her friend.

“Night.” Drea replied between clenched teeth and snatched her coat from the back of the chair. “Nice meeting you, Jared.”

“You too,” he said, snuggling closer to Liz.

Drea was sure when she received the call from her girlfriend there would be some wildly erotic tale shared. Nine times out of ten it wasn’t her doing the talking. Could she admit to Carter that she’d seen him in the throes of passion? Somehow acknowledging it seemed hollow. She wanted to give him the real thing and enjoy every minute of it.

He helped her into her leather coat and then shrugged into his own quarter-length jacket and turned to her. “Let’s get out of here before someone needs me.” He took her hand in his, guiding her out of the loud music and warmth and into the starry night, where the busy scene of downtown greeted them. “I’ll go pull up the truck. Be right back.”

Drea nodded, silently thankful for the moment alone. The sound of the same door she’d just walked out of made her jump to the side to avoid a couple locked in a passionate embrace, tongues twirling. From where she stood, they either couldn’t see her or didn’t care.

Get a room! Would have been her normal response but she couldn’t take her eyes off of them. The woman’s hands were all over the man, who was slowly hitching up her dress.

She couldn’t look away. They were on a public street. Anyone could have walked by and seen them. Reckless. That’s what it was, she decided, just like her bet with Liz.

What the hell is wrong with that? When was the last time a man held you like that—and you can’t count the Ben and Jerry’s. It was moments like these that she wanted to strangle her self-conscious streak. There used to be a time when she’d been carefree like that. Daring. Bold. *Alive.* What the hell had happened?

Drea turned her eyes away for a moment before peeking again. The man gripped the woman’s hips, hoisting her up against his body, her legs wrapped around him. It was as if neither could get close enough. The thought of her and Carter being so intimately intertwined invaded her thoughts.

“Damn!” He whispered in her ear, looking over her shoulder.

She almost jumped out of her skin. “Jesus!”

“Wishing it were you and some handsome man?”

Yes. You.

For a moment, she thought she heard him say “Wish it were you.” Drea shook her head, her heart beat thunderously loud in her ears. Did he know? Panic and an overwhelming sense of urgency spread throughout her body. What would she say? How would she react? And if he knew—why the hell was he taking so long to say something? “I wouldn’t make myself that vulnerable.”

Carter chuckled softly, not moving from behind her. His warm breath fanned the back of her ear, taking away the chill from the night air and replacing it with the frenzied need to feel his mouth on her body. Everywhere. Anywhere.

“Babe, that’s freedom.”

Drea turned to look into his seductive eyes. “Are you into that?” She dipped her head

at the couple. She fought the urge to pull him close and give him all the freedom he craved, exploring her from head to toe.

“Voyeurism?”

“Yeah,” she replied, watching him closely. “Do you like being watched?” She hadn’t meant to come right out and possibly expose what she’d seen, but couldn’t seem to stop herself.

“By other people?” The wicked grin on his face made her heart leap. “Or you?”

She shrugged her shoulders, unable to speak.

“I’d rather concentrate on the woman I’m with. To me, she deserves all the attention I can give her.”

Drea felt the sting of his comment, even though he had said no more than what any woman would love to hear. The fact reminded her *she* wasn’t that woman. She bristled silently; each second that ticked by only increased her anger.

How could he deny both of them something that could turn out so wonderful? She tightened her hand on her purse to keep from punching him. “Exactly what would you do if it were me watching you, Carter? Do you think you could handle it?” She smirked, watching his eyes narrow as his control slipped. The wall he rarely let down faltered a fraction. Oddly, she’d never noticed that look of uncertainty in his eyes before. Passion. Anger. Lust. She saw it all within the stormy depths of his midnight eyes. How could she have been so blind?

He looked her up and down slowly, leaning into her. “I’m not sure I could handle you, even if the opportunity presented itself. Or myself for that matter.”

“I don’t know if you could either.” Her voice rose an octave higher, causing the couple to jerk apart, as they finally saw them and scurried down the street. She didn’t back down. “Just a moment ago, you said that couple was experiencing real freedom. Now, you’re telling me that you won’t or you *can’t* experience that with me?”

Carter looked away from her, a nerve in his jaw twitching. “You aren’t someone I would want to experiment with.”

Drea gasped, crossing her arms over her chest. “Oh really?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I meant that you wouldn’t be someone that I would want to play around with.”

She shook her head “Is that so?” She turned abruptly and got into his SUV. “Your loss.”

* * * *

What in the Sam Hill just happened? Carter felt like he’d been struck by lightning and he wasn’t sure why. All he’d said was that Drea wasn’t the type of woman he would like to play games with and she wasn’t. Something was wrong, but he knew from past history trying to get information out of her was like trying to break open Fort Knox. The woman was stubborn; it was one of the qualities he liked about her. Now just wasn’t the time for her to assert it.

He looked across the seat at her stone-like posture. A smile tugged at his lips. If the fates hadn’t ruled against him, he would happily wipe that scowl off her face with a hot kiss; taste the sweet honey of her mouth. He’d be overjoyed if he could pull over his truck in a dark parking lot and act like a horny teenager, bending her over the back seat and sliding into her wet heat. He’d fuck her fast and hard, if that’s what she wanted. Or if

she wanted him to go slow, he'd do whatever it took to hear her call out his name and watch her fall apart in his arms.

Carter had witnessed the lust in her eyes and tried like hell not to respond. There were just some barriers that shouldn't be crossed, and sleeping with Drea was one of them. He'd had a life filled with disappointment due to other people's wants. He wasn't about to let her be at the whim of his. He wasn't in the position to promise her anything outside sweaty, mind-blowing sex. Though he wanted nothing more than to show her all the things he could do to her. She deserved more. More than he could give.

His body begged to differ.

Carter felt the bulge in his pants grow tighter. He shifted in his seat; just being within touching distance of Drea made him want to spontaneously combust. She truly had no idea what she did to him. It had been hard as hell to keep his hands to himself as he'd stood outside Mockingbird tonight with her.

He couldn't take it any longer.

"You're mad at me." He looked at her from the corner of his eye. She barely even glanced his way. Her body language said "fuck off" loud and clear. "Mind telling me why?"

Drea turned to face him, frost shining in her eyes. His dick throbbed. That pouty full mouth of hers could cure a dying man. What he wouldn't do to have it around his cock, milking him for everything he had.

"I'm a grown woman."

His gaze swept over her curvy frame. Every inch of her made his pulse race. "That's apparent."

"If it's so damn apparent, why is it that you refuse to acknowledge it?"

"I'd be a fool not to acknowledge it, Drea, but that doesn't change anything. You know about my rule..."

She huffed, pushing herself back against the seat. She held her chin high, arms crossed and looked every bit the queen she was. "Screw your rules."

"Screw my rules?"

"Yeah."

Carter sighed. "You know why my rule stands. Why I don't date friends, Drea. Our friendship is too important."

"That's just it—who died and made you ruler of my life?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, for someone who appears to be so smart, I've never known someone incredibly dense as you." She went on, "It's *your* rule, not mine."

"Drea, we both decided..."

"No, we *both* did not! I've respected you for your beliefs Carter, but it's high time you start respecting mine."

He turned the truck onto her street and tried to concentrate on driving, instead of throwing the SUV into park and having it out with her. "Are you saying I don't respect you?"

Drea shook her head, a sad smile on her face. "I'm saying that you treat me like I don't know what's right for me, as if I can't make my own decisions."

"And what *is* right for you?" He parked the truck in the driveway of her townhouse, switched off the ignition and faced her.

* * * *

Drea turned away from him. The words were on the tip of her tongue. Why couldn't she just say that she'd dreamt of him fucking every inch of her body for two years, ever since the day he'd entered her salon. Why didn't she just say she wanted to have him any way she could get him? She'd worry about the consequences later. She'd take on the weight of the "what-ifs." She was a big girl. The biggest risk was not knowing what it would feel like to have him inside her.

"Answer me," he said softly, reaching out to lace her fingers through his.

It was questions like that which had led up to this moment. The butterflies in the stomach, the warm feeling that he would always be there, have her back no matter what. With Carter she felt safe. Because of that sense of security, Drea found the strength to look at him.

"You're right for me." The words came out in a whisper. She exhaled deeply, relieved she had finally said it, and grinned at his uncertainty. "Yes, you heard me right."

"Drea, I..."

"Ssh." She placed her fingers against his lips and almost sighed in pleasure when he kissed them. "I know you feel what's going on between us. It's been there since the beginning and hasn't left. Believe me, I've waited and waited, and the need to fuck you into the next Millennium is still there."

They laughed.

"I've never been told that before," he said softly.

Drea searched his eyes, her confidence growing. "I saw you tonight."

"Saw me?"

"You called *my* name, Carter. Tonight. I wasn't trying to spy, it just sort of—happened."

Their eyes met. Realization dawned.

"I-I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to be ashamed."

He smiled wickedly. "I didn't say I was."

Drea felt heat creep to her cheeks. Thank goodness it was dark inside the truck. She would have been embarrassed if Carter had witnessed her naiveté. "I want you. All of you. And I..." She took a deep breath. "I don't want to pretend anymore. I'm not asking for a relationship or a diamond ring. I just want to know what it's like to fuck you, to know what it's like to be reckless like the couple we saw tonight."

His sharp intake of breath made her grin. She'd hit the mark. Before she could plan her next move, Carter made one of his own; his lips met hers with a seductive tenderness that took Drea's breath away. His fingers wound in her curly hair, forcing her closer. His mouth demanded and she gave. His tongue swept between her teeth, teasing her tongue with a coaxing rhythm of suckling, licking and swirling. He made love to her mouth, tasting every nuance and sent her spiraling into bliss.

Drea's body hummed with sexual tension. Her hands wrapped around his neck, her breasts crushed against the hard muscles of his chest. He reclined the seat back.

"Come here." He watched her with the eyes of a predator. Ready. Hungry and so powerful.

She complied, tugging off her coat. She slipped off her heels and crawled across the seat to straddle him. His hands gripped her hips, grinding her against him. "Mmmn, this

feels so good.”

Carter slipped one hand up her thigh, pulled up her skirt and squeezed her soft flesh. “Yes.” His fingers massaged the cotton fabric of her panties, sending shockwaves through her body. “You’re so wet.”

She moaned, her body welcoming in the sensual invasion as if a dam had broken. It'd been too long since she'd last been with a man and she intended to enjoy every minute.

“Are you ready for me?”

His fingers dipped beneath the elastic, teased her wet folds apart and rubbed sensuously against her clitoris in slow circles. She almost screamed and within the pulse of her next heartbeat, she felt his fingers push inside of her, stretching her, testing her.

“Oh, yes.”

“God, you’re tight. I want to fuck you.” Carter stared deep into her eyes. “Would you like that?”

“Yes.” She was so close to coming that she was afraid this moment was a dream.

His lips trailed over her cheek, to the pulse of her neck and lower, and hiked her sweater up to the exposed flesh of her breasts that nearly spilled out of the lacy black bra she wore. He pulled the delicate material aside, freeing her stiff nipple and laved the sensitive flesh there as her nails clutched the lean muscles beneath the obtrusive jacket. “You don't know how long I've wanted to kiss you ... mmmn, taste you.”

His words enticed Drea to grow bolder in her perusal of his hard body. “Me too.” Her fingertips ran down his stomach, loving the flex of muscles she felt there. Her hands made quick work of unzipping his pants and found his cock hard and ready for her touch. His dick was big, just the way she liked them. She massaged him down to the base and then up again. “Hmmn, I want to taste you too.”

“Shit.” Carter’s head rolled back against the seat as she rubbed her thumb over the head of his cock. His breathing was ragged with passion. He clamped his hand around hers and pushed it away.

Drea didn’t understand the torment on his face. “W-what's wrong?”

“We can't—I can't do this.”

Her eyebrows arched, her hands hung limply. “Say what?”

“Drea, this isn't easy for me.” He closed his eyes, and then reopened them as if seeing her for the first time. “The last thing I should be doing is making love to you in my truck. You deserve more than that. More than I can give you. Now or ever.”

She moved away from him. She ran a hand through her disheveled curls, chuckling bitterly. “You’re joking, right? You’re really good at this push-pull game, you know.”

Carter frowned. “I'm not trying to play games with you.”

She turned on him sharply. “Oh, no? One minute you want me, the next you send me packing.”

“It’s not like that. You know I don't handle my business like that.”

“Then what is it like?”

He grabbed her by the shoulders, bringing her flesh against him. Her startled gaze focused into his. “I've never played games with you and I won't start now. Damnnit!” Carter shook his head. “I want you, baby. Badly.”

“Yeah, well not so badly or we'd be getting it on right about now.”

“It’s not that simple...”

Drea shrugged out of his hold and straightened her clothes. “It is. You just won't let

it be.” She grabbed her purse. “Know this; I'm tired of denying myself. I deserve the pleasure and the company of a man.” Her eyes wandered over him. “Instead of pondering on some daydream that will never happen and watching him get off—without me!”

“What are you saying?” Carter grounded out. “If not me, someone else?”

“That's exactly what I'm saying. Neither of us has a claim on the other. We're both free to see who we want right? You obviously won't give me what I need.”

“There's more to it than that, Drea and you know it.”

She opened the truck door and turned to face him. “Then maybe it's like you said before, some things shouldn't be tampered with and that's your choice. But I'm moving on.” She slammed the door as he called her name and practically ran to her door, knowing that he wouldn't leave until she made it inside.

Drea fumbled with the keys and dropped them. She stomped her foot, trying to keep the tears from flying from her eyes. “Shit!” She forced herself to take a deep breath, picked up her house key and successfully opened the front door. She slumped against it, unable to keep the water works at bay as she kicked off her shoes.

“Night one: a damn failure.”

Chapter Three

“Carter is on the phone for like the hundredth time asking for you.” Liz said, standing at Drea’s office the next morning. “The girls say you instructed them to tell him you weren’t in. Why don’t you want to talk to him?”

Drea looked up from the invoices and then at her watch. “I’ve had a reality check.”

“Oh?” Her friend laughed, closed the door behind her and sashayed to the desk, leaning against it. “What happened last night?”

“Well...” Drea straightened, crossing her arms over chest. “I concede—the bet is off.

“Okay,” Liz rose from the desk and sat down in a chair. “Spill it.”

“Let’s see. It took me one day to make a complete ass of myself. Last night, I walked back to Carter’s office...” She looked down at her fingers. “When I got there, he was jacking off. He called out my name. So naturally I assumed... I just thought...”

“Oh my!” Liz grinned, edging closer in her seat. “You thought that he was on the same wavelength?”

“Well, yeah. What red-blooded woman wouldn’t?”

“Did you tell Carter that you saw him?”

Drea sighed. “Yes.” *What good had it done?* She proceeded to tell Liz about last night, her pride still stinging. She had never wanted a man before like she did Carter. His codes of ethics were iron clad. Thoughts of being with him had consumed so much of her that she wasn’t sure where to go from here, but she for damn sure wasn’t going to wallow or beg for him to fuck her.

“I’m so sorry,” Liz replied softly.

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault that Carter is hell-bent on playing my noble protector. He claims that he can’t give me what I’m looking for. Maybe he’s right.” Drea chuckled bitterly. “Ain’t that a bitch? I’ve wasted all this time on some illusion and it hurts.”

“I can jack him up if you want.”

The women laughed.

“Nah, it’s not worth it. You know if there’s one thing I’ve learned after my breakup with Neil—it’s that you can’t make someone want you.” Yet she still wanted Carter, whereas, the moment Neil had admitted he was gay, Drea couldn’t be done with him fast enough, especially since he had lied to her about his sexuality for over a year.

“Maybe you knew this was coming.”

Drea’s head snapped up. “What?”

Liz smoothed her hand down her skin-tight jeans. “Being infatuated with Carter did allow you to remain unavailable...” she hesitated. “Are you sure you want to hear this?”

“No, but go on, Dr. Phil, I’m listening.”

“You were so focused on Carter that any man who showed interest in you didn’t get the time of day. Maybe it was your way of protecting yourself from getting hurt. No matter how much he stated that he wouldn’t get involved with a friend, your feelings for him didn’t change. You didn’t date. You stayed immobile, but now you can move. You can get out there and meet someone wonderful.”

Drea let her friend’s words sink in, and her eyes teared up. The truth was fucked up! She felt like such an idiot. “I don’t have to pay you, do I?”

Liz jumped up and gave her a hug. "Nah, your happiness is payment enough."

Drea wiped at the moisture skidding down her cheeks. "Well then, I'm going to start being happy with just being by myself."

"That sounds like a good plan, one I might join in."

"You're willing to give up the thrill of the chase?"

Liz shrugged her shoulders. "The thrill is gone. I want something more permanent. Security would be nice, but until then, I'm willing to wait until the timing is right."

Drea pulled away from the embrace. Her eyebrows raised and she giggled, "Jared's dick was too small wasn't it?"

Liz laughed, shaking her head. "Girl, I almost cried, but that's a whole 'nother story."

"Let's talk about where the crew wants to celebrate the holiday tomorrow night."

"You're not going to like it."

Drea rolled her eyes. It would be just her luck. "Let me take a wild stab in the dark here—Mockingbird."

"Ding! Let me tell you what you've won." Liz sat back down in her chair, and then said, "Can you handle it?"

Drea gave her friend a wide smile. "Oh, I'm going to do better than handle it. I'm going to make sure that Carter James knows that I'm not down or defeated."

"Now you're talking! What's up your sleeve?"

"A little Christmas cheer."

Night Two: Get knocked down, get back up!

* * * *

Carter listened to the trill of the phone ringing in his ear. He held the receiver away, tempted to toss it in the trash. He'd been calling Drea ever since he'd left her house two nights ago. She hadn't answered the phone then, and apparently wasn't going to this evening either.

He slammed the receiver down on the bar counter not knowing what he should do next. Obviously she was avoiding him like the plague. He'd stopped at the salon this morning to see her, but according to Liz, she'd called in, which was uncommon. He couldn't remember a day when Drea had been sick enough to miss work.

"Bad news?" Thomas asked, a lopsided smile on his ruddy-brown face, his keen gray eyes wandering over him.

"Don't even want to talk about it." Carter scrubbed the palm of his hands against the five o'clock shadow hugging his jaw line and tried to shake off the effects of a long night of sleeplessness. His mind kept replaying the caress of her lips against his. The way her breasts molded against him, the sensation of her hot little hands on his dick. He was in his own private hell.

Thomas laughed. "Woman trouble s."

"What makes you say that?"

"The look on your face." The other man shook his head. "Try diamonds, that's what my wife wants for Christmas. Guaranteed, plentiful sex for at least six months."

Carter laughed, wishing his dilemma could be solved with a piece of bling. "I don't think that's going to solve my problem."

Judging from the hurt look on Drea's face that night, he wasn't holding his breath.

The remembered sensation of her lips against his, the sweetness of her mouth, left him hard. Her taste was addictive and their lip locking had only increased his attraction to her. He ached. She was all he could think about and her little disappearing act wasn't making things better, especially after her threat of finding a substitute.

He knew he had no right to be jealous. But damn if he wasn't. The thought of another man touching Drea made his stomach twist into a knot. He'd be first in line to find the smarmy bastard who put one hand on her and shove his teeth down his throat.

If he kept this up, he'd surely develop an ulcer.

"You're right." Thomas shook his head, restocking bottles of liquor.

Carter jolted out of his wayward thoughts. "What?"

"Yeah, bro. It's official—you're doomed." Thomas chuckled, swatting him on the back, disappearing into the back stockroom for more Jim Beam Black.

Frustration swept through him as he thought about what his friend said. A man could only take so much.

What were his options?

He could forget about his screwed-up beliefs, give in to the temptation he'd been fighting and fuck Drea into dawn, but his rigid control would step in again, like it always did. Thomas was right. He *was* doomed.

Carter looked at his watch for the umpteenth time as Thomas slid back behind the bar. The after-work crowd was starting to arrive. His night crew was all in place. Usually he stuck around and mingled with the customers; tonight all he felt like doing was smashing someone's face in.

"Why the hell are women so complicated?" He moved from around the bar, smiling half-heartedly at some patrons as Thomas and the new hire, Jordan, handled the drink orders.

There were tons of things he could be doing with the holiday just a few days away: last minute shopping, bills that needed to be paid and a phone call he had yet to return to his father.

Carter had just turned into the hallway leading to his office when a familiar laugh caught his attention. He turned around abruptly, his heart thumping wildly. His eyes were surely deceiving him. He watched in awe as Drea, dressed to the hilt in a slinky black dress that hugged every voluptuous curve and matching dress boots, walked through the entrance. Her brown face shone with exuberance and ... *happiness!*

Her rich curls were swept back in some intricate style—Carter's fingers itched to loosen them—her lips were the color of raspberries, and if her date inched his hand any closer to her ass, he swore he would break it.

He looked away, surprised at the depth of his awareness. He knew the way she moved, the hypnotic scent of the perfume she wore and the way she bit her lip when she was nervous. He knew that her pussy was tight and it was *his*. He looked her way and caught her eye. Anger pierced his soul. As if not seeing him, she grinned and then replied to something her date was saying.

Carter felt everything in him that was male respond as if someone was trespassing on his territory. He gritted his teeth, shoved his fists into his pants pockets, trying to get a handle on his emotions—and failing.

He knew she had every right to go on with her life, but it wasn't fair that it was right in front of him, as if he didn't exist. As if two nights ago hadn't happened. Maybe he

should go remind her.

No!

Carter ran a hand through his hair. He was losing it. Big time! He wasn't used to this. He wasn't usually the one standing around waiting. The fact, that inadvertently he'd done the same thing to Drea, didn't sit well with him. He spoke to a couple of customers, trying to look busy, anything but to find those sensual brown eyes of hers on him, knowing he was watching her just as intently.

He shoved the invoices he'd been trying to concentrate on across the bar and stormed to his office. No amount of hand jobs or cold showers was going to douse the heat shooting through his veins like fireworks on the Fourth of July. All he wanted was the dark beauty across the bar. He wanted to strip her bare of the clingy black knit and rediscover the secrets beneath. He'd never wanted anything or anyone so badly. Pity he hadn't tasted much of her passion, but that didn't mean he had to stand around and watch her throw it in his face.

* * * *

Drea stopped herself from looking back to where Carter stood. He looked like a caged animal. Wild and unrestrained—a very sexy, virile animal. The black shirt fitted against the wide expanse of his chest like a glove and contrasted sharply against his bronzed skin.

The anger in his dark eyes had been clear, but the reason why eluded her. He'd set the limits. He'd been the one who'd said that he couldn't give her what she wanted. She hadn't wanted to come to the club tonight. But now that she was here, with her nails polished, her hair coiffed and dressed to kill, she wasn't going anywhere. The old her would have just gone home, left a message for her mom who was away in Europe traveling, and eaten popcorn, dressed in her comfy sweat pants.

Drea shook her head. Damn, her existence had been sad up until now. Tonight there was a vibe in the air. Good cheer and well-being sparked through the crowded dance floor. Drinks flowed and laughter was plentiful. She felt alive.

She finished her first Mai Tai and ordered a second. As if finally remembering that Robert, Liz's cousin, was sitting beside her, she turned to offer him a friendly smile. "Enjoying yourself?"

Robert was fine. His sweet chocolate skin, hazel eyes and tall frame would have turned any woman's head, but Drea wasn't attracted to him. Liz had invited him since he was new to St. Louis. "I would enjoy myself more if you'd dance with me." He said.

"Yeah, go and get your groove on, girl." Chante grinned.

Drea shook her head vehemently at her mischievous hair colorist. "Nooo."

Robert leaned closer, challenging her. "Are you telling me you're scared?"

Liz, Julie, Stephanie and her husband, Marlon laughed from the other side of the table.

"You going to let him get away with that?" Liz giggled, winking at her cousin. She was dressed to the hilt in a red dress with a side slit that was just short of obscene.

Marlon smiled. "Man, don't you know we're the minority here? You have to toe the line."

Stephanie jabbed her handsome husband in the ribs, arching her eyebrows at him. "Please, that never stopped you."

“Oh, break it up. We didn’t come here to hear marital sparring.” Julie laughed, dancing to the beat of the music. “I came to get my dance on.”

Drea turned to Robert. “I’ll have you know, I have moves, Mr. Shaw.”

He smiled sensuously, his eyes lingering on her breasts then slowly rose to her face. “I just bet you do. But if you’re that confident, why not show me what you’ve got?”

“Fine, let’s do this,” she stood adjusted her dress, liking the way the material swayed with her body as she sashayed onto the dance floor. The fact that several other men turned their appreciative glances her way wasn’t lost on her.

Tonight, she felt like she could do anything. The DJ played a fast song and Drea shook what her mama gave her and then some. She looked into Robert’s eyes. “Come on.”

What turned into an innocent play of bumping booties became a sensual show of more grinding than bumping. Maybe it was the Mai Tai’s or the gaiety of the season, but Drea was overcome by the feelings of joy spreading through her. She’d forgotten how much she loved to dance and the freedom that came with it.

The mood of the crowd changed and Drea found her skin gleaming with light perspiration. “Damn, that was fun.”

“Woman, you didn’t tell me you could move like that.”

“Well, you know, I got skills.” She grinned up at him.

The next song was a slow one and suddenly, she wanted to get off the dance floor, but Robert had other plans.

“Can I have this dance?”

“Of course...”

“I was about to ask the same thing.”

She looked over Robert’s shoulder into Carter’s stormy black eyes. Her breath caught. He looked so damn good. “I don’t know if that’s...”

“You don’t mind do you, man?” He said, not really asking as he took Drea’s hands in his and led her further away from the curious stares of her crew at the table.

“Robert, I...”

“I wouldn’t worry about ol’ Robbie.” Carter sneered, turning around so abruptly, Drea ran into the steel wall of his chest. “You were dancing so close to him, you might give him the wrong idea.”

“That was rude.” She looked into his mysterious eyes as his hands locked against her lower back. “What idea would that be, as if it’s any of your business.” Her soft curves fit the contours of his lean body perfectly. Her heartbeat throbbed in her ears as a delightful shiver of wanting ran through her.

“Two nights ago you were in my truck holding my cock in your hands and wanting to fuck me, and now you don’t think another man caressing you like that is my business?”

She tried to look unfazed by his nearness. “No!”

His gaze was riveted on her face, then moved over her body. “You dress like that and expect me not to touch you?”

His words stoked something deep within her. She tried to keep her wits about her as she moved back from his intimate hold on her body, but he only held her tighter. “It wasn’t my idea to come here tonight.”

“You’ve been avoiding my calls.” Carter said, moving rhythmically to the seductive

beat of the ballad.

Drea's eyes almost rolled to the back of her head. Damn, the man could dance! She cleared her throat, feeling her body respond to the hard bulge of his cock against her pelvis. "I didn't think there was anything else to say."

He chuckled. "Oh, really?" He narrowed his eyes. "That's where you're wrong; I have a lot more to say to you."

She tensed in his arms. "Don't you think you've said enough? I mean, how many ways can a man say 'I don't want to screw you'?"

He stared at her and for a moment Drea wasn't sure whether he was angry or stunned. He leaned closer, pressing his lips against her ear. "I want to lick every part of you, from your head to your toes."

Drea tightened her hands against his back. She looked into his eyes, feeling like she was looking into his soul. Others around them might see a couple sharing a simple dance, but there was so much more going on. He was seducing her, and damn if she didn't love it.

"Don't say things you don't mean."

"You don't think I want you?"

She shook her head.

Carter placed her hand on his heart, his eyes never leaving hers. "Feel me, feel my heart."

The erratic beat made her jump.

"That's what you do to me every time I see you, or I hear your voice..." His gaze dipped to her mouth. "or taste your lips. It's never been about not wanting you. If anything, it's about wanting you too much."

Drea bit her lip, transfixed, totally under his spell. "Afraid of losing control?"

Time suspended and another slow love song wafted through the air.

"Babe, I lost control a long time ago."

Their eyes locked.

"What do you want from me, Carter? I can't..."

He pressed his fingers to her lips. "I want you to be here tonight when I lock up."

Drea started to protest but his mouth pressed against hers, his tongue licking her bottom lip as he nipped it with his teeth. She moaned.

"You decide."

Chapter Four

The song ended and Carter bent down to kiss her hand. "Thanks for the dance." He led her back to the table, completely ignoring the open-mouthed stares her friends gave them. "Good evening," he said, and then he was gone.

Liz snapped her fingers, smiling. "What the hell was that?"

"Hmmn, looked like y'all were having sex on the dance floor," Julie said, in her normal outspoken manner.

"When was the last time you treated me like that?" Stephanie pouted at Marlon, who just rolled his eyes.

"Damn, I'm jealous. I haven't had actual sex that looked as good as it does on your face from that dance. You wear it well, girl." Chante said, finally looking up from Robert's face. It appeared the two had bonded while Drea had been on the dance floor.

She shook her head, sitting down in awe. When the hell had the tables turned? She hadn't come here as some needy female. Hooking up with Carter was the last thing she'd expected. But this time he *would* play by her rules.

Liz waited until everyone went back to their conversation before nudging her. "What's the deal with your man?"

"He's not *my* man." Drea shook her head. "I haven't the slightest clue what's going on with Carter. He wants me to stay until he closes the club tonight."

"Are you?"

She stiffened her spine. "I can't just play his games. This hot-and-cold routine is driving me insane."

"You sure looked like you were playing out there on the floor." Liz chuckled.

"Ha, ha." Drea thought of how hard Carter had been and imagined his cock in her. She crossed her legs to keep the ache from knocking her to the floor. "If I do stay, it will be to tell him a thing or two. He had the nerve to tell me that I was dancing too close to Robert."

Liz smiled. "Sounds like a jealous man to me."

"He sounds insane. Maybe he wants what he can't have."

"Hmmn, he sounds like someone else I know."

Drea frowned. "You must have the new me confused with the old one."

"Uh, huh. So what are you going to do?" Liz asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Get even."

* * * *

Night three: Pure pleasure.

Drea was going stir crazy. By the time the bar emptied out, she had helped herself to two more MaiTais, courtesy of Thomas before he'd left for the night. She had just enough buzz to feel the heady effect of anticipation and the tension of uncertainty.

The seductive sound of a saxophone crooned through the speakers and her feet swayed to the beat. She set her drink on the bar counter, rose from her seat and moved slowly to the melody, feeling her soul lift again. Her hands lifted the hem of her dress as

she shimmied, her ample breasts spilling over the bodice, but she didn't care. No one was around and Thomas had told her that Carter was finishing up some paperwork in his office.

She didn't want to think about what she would do when he resurfaced; all she wanted was to dance, to be free. She leaned against the support beam, dipping low and slowly rising. Her dress clung to the top of her stocking thighs, the black garters making her feel sexy and daring.

Drea ran her hands down her legs and up again, bending at the waist. She was thankful that no one was around to see that she wasn't wearing panties.

* * * *

Jesus! Someone had been listening to his deepest fantasies! Carter dropped to a seat at the bar, his mouth dry. Drea was doubled over, her breasts hanging free. The most delectable ass he'd ever seen was hitched up in a provocative position displayed for his pleasure. Blood surged to his cock. He couldn't tear his eyes away from her, couldn't get enough of looking at her. Her brown skin was illuminated under the lighting and the black curls between her legs split into a sexy V, showcasing her slick pussy. He wanted to thrust his dick into her. Now. He'd pay top dollar to hear the shock of surprise in her voice. He'd go deep. He had no doubt she could take all of him.

Carter licked his lips, wishing he could get down on his knees and feast on her like a succulent piece of fruit. Ripe and juicy. He wanted to taste her essence on his tongue, watch her climax and know that he was the only man that was allowed to touch her.

He watched, mesmerized as she turned around, her eyes colliding with his. He saw the fear, the embarrassment and assuaged it quickly.

"Don't stop on my account." His voice was raspy with need, and his cock pressed against the zipper of his pants to the point of pain. He had to have her.

Drea made no move to right her dress, her lips parted. "I-I didn't know you were there."

Carter grinned, slowly walking to where she stood. He stopped inches from her. "Would you have done that little striptease if you had?"

"That depends."

"On what?" He took one step and her erect nipples brushed against his shirt. His eyes swept over her, cataloguing everything within his line of sight. He couldn't help himself; he had to touch her. His fingers pinched her nipple and then rolled it between his fingertips. God, she felt so good!

"Do you like what you see?" She gasped out loud as Carter pinched her other nipple.

He loved the sound and decided he wanted to hear more of it. A lot more. "You have to ask?" He bent down to suckle the tight bud, pulled the sensitive flesh between his teeth and his tongue.

"Oh!" Drea ran her hands through his hair. "Carter, please, I can't..."

He looked into her eyes, sensing her fear. "I want you."

"I-I want you too."

He picked her up in his arms like she weighed nothing. "Tonight, I will have you and you will have every inch of me." He smiled down at her as he sat her down on the pool table and with one clean tear, he ripped her pretty black dress straight down the middle, exposing her heated flesh.

"Have you lost your mind? I just bought this dress." Drea leaned up on her elbows, watching him with wide eyes.

"Ssh. I'll buy you another one. Right now I don't want anything between us."

"Then you need to catch up." She looked pointedly at his clothes.

"Care to help me with that?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Drea leaned forward and ripping his shirt, the buttons flying in multiple directions. "Oops."

He sucked in his breath when her hands undid his belt, unzipped his pants. Carter stepped out of them after toeing off his shoes. His briefs barely supported the heaviness of his cock. He couldn't wait to feel her lips on him.

He splayed his hand across her full breasts, lower over her ribcage and past her belly button to the wiry curls between her legs. He rubbed his middle finger against her clitoris. He grinned when she quivered. "You're beautiful, every sweet, sexy chocolate curve of you." The contrast in their complexions only intensified his need to watch his bronzed, hard flesh meld with hers. His eyes caught the pendant he'd given her last Christmas. The diamond slid between her breasts.

"Mmmn, that feels so good."

Carter inserted one finger, then another into her wetness. Her inner muscles clamped around them, taking him in completely. He imagined his cock inside of her and the feel of her sweet pussy pulsating around him.

He pulled his briefs down and his cock sprang forth, ready to play. Drea licked her lips. "You're so big." Her fingers touched the head of his dick, moving in slow, sensual circles. Her hand moved up and down, making him harder, bringing him closer to the edge.

Carter groaned, pulling her hands away from his heated flesh. His eyes burned into hers. "If you don't stop, I can't promise I won't come."

Drea grinned. "Hmmn, and the problem is?"

He laughed. "Incorrigible." He pushed her down on the table, his lips pressed against hers, exploring her mouth with a renewed eagerness. Their tongues flicked and melded together. Her taste left him thirsty for more. His fingers bracketed her against him. He felt the sharp sting of her nails against his hips and she pulled him roughly against her. The head of his cock brushed against her dampened folds. They moaned in unison.

"Now, please!" She pleaded, wrapping her legs high around his waist.

The desperation in her voice was all Carter needed. In one deep thrust, his dick filled her tight pussy. He gritted his teeth. "Damn!" She was wet and it took him a minute to fight the overwhelming need to ram his cock into her again. "Are you okay?"

Drea looked into his eyes. "Hell, yes. Don't stop now."

"Stopping is the last thing I have in mind for you." Carter pulled out and then refilled her again, deeply, consumed by the feel of her and the wonder of the emotions colliding within him.

His head fell back. Would he ever get enough of her? He drove into her, again and again, stopping only to pull her legs up around his neck and shoulders.

"Oh!" She bit down on her lips as her eyes went wide. Her nails scraped his back as she rose to meet him thrust for thrust.

"Come for me, baby."

His dick pressed against her clit and he enjoyed the mewling sounds escaping her

mouth. The sound of flesh against flesh vibrated through the empty club. Perspiration glittered on her dewy brown skin as if she'd been caught in the rain. Her eyes held his and Carter knew that she was close to coming. "Drea, damn you feel so ... good."

"I'm coming!"

"Ahh!" His dick swelled and he pumped harder and faster into her slick heat ... and for the first time in his life, he came with a woman. His hot seed spread deep within Drea, bonding them as he never had with any other.

He cradled her in his arms, willing the thunderous rush of his heart to ebb. Their bodies were moist with sweat, their hearts beat in a heavy cadence.

"Did I hurt you?" Carter asked against her ear as he pulled out of her body.

Drea looked up at him. "No, but you sure gave new meaning to 'racking up the balls'."

He looked away, seeing the hope—the expectation in her eyes. "W-we should really get out of here, huh?"

He remembered when someone else had glanced at him with that same look. He couldn't do this.

* * * *

Drea felt something within her swell up and then deflate. She watched in disbelief as he busied himself dressing. She didn't have to hear it to know that he was backing away from her—again.

She eased down slowly from the pool table, glaring at him. "Thanks for the fuck, Carter."

His head whipped around. "What are you talking about? Everything was fine."

Drea felt her heart shatter. She stepped up to him. "Go to hell." She walked around him, picking up her tattered dress and shoes. If he wanted to make her feel like a whore he couldn't have done better.

He grabbed her arm, swinging her back around to face him. "Did I miss something?"

"Yeah, the part where you acted like you couldn't get away from me fast enough."

His eyes bored into hers. "It's not like that!"

"This sounds vaguely familiar."

"I thought we had a wonderful time. Why can't we just leave it at that?"

Drea felt her eyes bug out. She wanted to strangle him. "I'm not one of your booty calls, Carter, so don't treat me like it. The open-ended invitation to fuck was two nights ago, when you turned me down."

He threw up her hands. "Is it any wonder why I don't like making things personal between friends?" He reached down, found his shirt and shrugged into it.

"You're a coward."

"Excuse me?"

Drea narrowed her eyes. "What happened here tonight was wonderful, beautiful, and you belittled it."

He frowned. "Then I guess you got what you asked for two nights ago."

"And what the hell is that?"

"A good fuck."

Drea shook with anger. "Are you that fucking afraid to take a risk with me?"

He didn't answer.

She turned her head, trying to keep the tears from falling down her face. “Of course!” Grabbing her coat, she crammed her toes into her shoes and then looked back to where he stood. “I don’t need a man to take care of me, Carter. I don’t need for someone to play superhero with my life. I can make my own damn decisions. I can trust my own heart, which is more than I can say for you.” She unclasped the necklace from her neck and threw it on the pool table. “I’m done.”

Drea didn’t look back as she walked out of the club into the cold night, her heart breaking with every step she took.

Night three: Correction: Know when to walk away!

Chapter Five

Drea sat, looking out the window seat of her townhouse. Early mornings seemed to be the best time to clear her head, before anyone else was up. It didn't mean that she felt like moving, which is why she let her phone go to voicemail. She wasn't in the mood to chat with anyone and had already talked to her mother over an hour ago to wish her a Merry Christmas in Rome.

At least someone was having a good one!

Her mother had won a trip through her job as a secretary at the travel agency where she worked. Frankly, Drea was happy that her mother was away, it saved her from having to explain her sourpuss demeanor.

"Please pick up."

Her heart lurched. Carter. He sounded awful.

Good!

He sighed. "I-I don't even know what to say."

Because you don't even know what's at stake. Drea silently filled in. She sipped on her coffee. Tomorrow was Christmas and outside of visiting with Liz and her rambunctious family, she didn't have any other plans.

How depressing!

She knew from past experience that Carter always went to his father's, enduring what he'd always called a circus with his stepmother—of the moment—and his stepsiblings from varying marriages.

"I guess I could start with how truly sorry I am."

Yeah, right! Drea rolled her eyes. Did he really think that an apology would make everything that had transpired between them go away?

Men!

She could say that she was proud of herself, had this been a couple years back, she would have done everything possible to be with Carter, even sacrificing her own happiness. She wasn't the same woman anymore. She was stronger and wiser and as much as her heart longed to be with him, she made no move to pick up the phone. Instead, she unplugged it.

"There, now I can get some peace."

* * * *

Carter rested the phone against his throbbing head. He had tried calling her all day and didn't blame her for not picking up after the way he'd treated her. He wouldn't be surprised if he ever saw Drea again.

His heart dipped at the thought. He didn't want her out of his life, but he couldn't give her what she needed. He would only disappoint her, given his track record. Right now, he'd do anything just to feel her lips, to inhale her erotic scent as it baptized him in her spirit.

He didn't doubt that he loved her. He could never doubt that. It's what loving someone required that had him running for his life.

Carter flung the phone across the room. Leaning back on the leather couch, he looked up at the ceiling. He'd lost count how many microscopic holes he'd counted last night. He hadn't been able to sleep for more than a couple of hours and even then, his mind was filled with thoughts of making love to Drea.

How could he explain to her what he scarcely could handle himself? He thought back to that day his mother had died. Breast cancer. When she'd gotten sick, he'd been so rebellious, almost spiteful. The only thing he'd been able to see was that she was leaving him and his dad, and Frank James hadn't been much better, turning to a bottle of gin before going to the hospital to see how the cancer had eaten away at his wife.

Carter hadn't even wanted to see her that last time, Christmas night. The realization that she was dying was so unspeakable to his teenage mind that he felt betrayed. His family was no longer the way it had been just a year before.

Her eyes had been hollow, her face gaunt and his heart seemed like it would surely explode from fear and anger. He remembered holding her hand as she'd made him promise to take care of his father. She'd told Carter that his father might not be strong enough to take her death.

Christmas had never been the same for him since.

Carter shook his head. That was an understatement. His father had disappeared for days at a time only to resurface—drunk as usual—when Rebecca James had taken her final breath. From that moment, he had never seemed to please his father, not like his booze or his women could. He'd watched as security slipped further and further away—how could he offer more to Drea when he didn't know if he had it within himself? He'd already hurt her.

Looking at the phone that lay broken against the hardwood floor, Carter realized that he'd never taken the time to call his dad back. He usually avoided him because Frank was drunk. He dialed the number and was about to hang up on the third ring when Maureen, his fifth stepmother answered the phone in her usual clipped tone.

"Hello Maureen, is my dad there?"

She sneered into the phone. "Your no-good father hasn't been here. He up and left without any concern for me."

"What?" Carter's radar went off. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Frank left for rehab two days ago."

His heart sped. "I want the name of the facility."

"Why, he's never done..."

"Damnnit! I said I want the name. Now!"

Two hours later Carter found himself in Oakhurst Drug Rehabilitation Center waiting in the visitor's room for his dad to be brought in.

The door opened and a slender man with thinning brown hair and the same piercing eyes as Carter walked slowly into the room. His eyes brightened when he laid eyes on his son.

Carter rose from his seat, taking in the haggard looking man before him. "Dad? Why didn't you tell me?"

Frank James looked at his son. "I tried, but you didn't call me back." He grinned, grabbing his son in a bear hug. "You're looking well, aside from the circles under your eyes."

Carter frowned. "This isn't about me."

"The hell it isn't." His father hung his head. "I'm ashamed that I didn't have the strength to be a better father to you."

"Dad, you..."

"No, let me finish this and you can have your say."

"Okay."

They sat down at a table in a quiet corner.

"I was selfish, wallowed in my own guilt and was so lost that I never stopped to see you and your pain. Booze and women became my drug of choice. I let it cripple me and take away my chance to be a good father to you. In turn I crippled you. You became the parent and I, the child. What a burden for a kid to endure." He looked into his son's eyes, tears shining in his own. "Can you forgive me?"

Carter felt like a weight had been lifted off his chest. "Yes, Dad." He felt relief flood his very soul.

"It wasn't your fault, you know?"

"What wasn't?"

"I was there that night when your mom made you promise to take care of me. It wasn't your responsibility." Frank sighed, looking down at his hands. "Deep down, Rebecca knew that I would fall apart. She knew my faults as a man." His eyes meet his son. "Don't let my demons become your crutch, son. Live your life. I'm so proud of you. You always were your own man and you're running your own business. You're a lot stronger than I am. Meanwhile, I'm trying to get my life right, finally."

Carter grinned, the praise striking his heart, yet he didn't know if he could say he was a better man knowing that he'd potentially damaged the best thing in his life: his relationship with Drea. Reality struck him. If his father could admit his demons, face them and move on—then couldn't he?

Drea had been right when she called him a coward. He'd made himself as detached as possible while showing his jealousy and desire and expecting her to toe his line, his rules.

Carter sighed, looking at his father. "I'll be here to see you through this, Dad."

Frank smiled. "I was counting on that. Thank you, son. This will be the first Christmas that things will be clear for me."

Me too! Carter thought. *Me too.*

* * * *

Later that night, Drea leaned her head to the side, looking at the sad-looking three-foot tree she'd scooped up. It'd been the last in the lot. She was determined not to be miserable, even if the small pine did look like crap.

"Oh well. Nothing's perfect." She'd dragged out all her lights and bulbs and even had a Christmas Soul CD playing. She wiggled her fingers at a rendition of *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*.

She'd wrapped most of her presents, except the one for Carter. It was a silk scarf and gloves set. She didn't want to get anything remotely personal and had no idea if she'd even give him his gift.

Better safe than sorry, Drea thought. She was standing on her tiptoes, wrapping a line of lights around the top of the tree when the doorbell rang.

She ran to the door. "This better be someone who is willing to help decorate this

damn...” Her eyes collided with Carter’s dressed as ... *Santa Claus*! A sexy St. Nick at that, she thought, taking in the red hat on his head that was slightly tilted to the side. The loose fitting Santa suit drooped around his hard body as if he could fit another person inside. He looked utterly tempting.

What the hell was he doing here?

“Hello, Drea.”

“What happened to your belly?” *Smooth Drea, real smooth!*

He chuckled, patting his flat stomach. “This Santa works out.”

Her eyes narrowed, wandering over every inch of him. Heat infused her body, reminding her that she’d felt that toned physique thrusting into her. “Hmmn,” she said, then, “Why are you here?”

“Because Santa has been a naughty boy and has come to ask for your forgiveness.” His eyes pleaded with hers.

“Why? I thought you were pretty clear the other night.”

He stepped closer, the soft fuzzy material of the suit brushing against her cotton t-shirt. Her senses went into overdrive. The stirring scent of his skin had the ability to hypnotize her. “Let me be clearer.”

Drea felt her insides turn into mush. She frowned; she wasn’t going to make this easy for him. Not by a long shot. “Again, why?”

He didn’t respond.

She shook her head. “Some things never change with you, Carter. When you finally decide to be straight with me—look me up, maybe I’ll be around.” She stepped back to close the door in his face, but his booted toe stopped her.

He wedged part of his body between her weight and the door. “I love you.”

Drea backed away. Her mouth trembled. Had he said what she thought she heard? “What?”

He opened the door, closing it behind him, and then turned to look into her eyes. “I love you, Drea Michaels. I always have.”

Her ears were ringing, her heartbeat roaring loudly against her chest. She’d wanted to hear those words for so long. “Carter, you’re confusing me. If you love me, how could you turn your back on what was the greatest sex of your life?” She blinked, waving her hand wildly in the air.

He chuckled. “That’s my Drea.” He closed the distance between them, taking her in his arms. “Baby, so many things have become clear to me. I own you an apology. I’ve been sending you mixed signals for awhile now. From the bottom of my heart, I’m sorry. You have to believe me.”

Drea slowly put her arms around his waist. “I do.”

“Can we sit down for a minute?”

“Yeah.” She led him into the living room, watching as his eyes lit up at her crazy Christmas tree.

“Very nice.” He walked in after taking off his wet boots, surveying the chaos of wrapping paper, ribbons, bows and Christmas ornaments.

Drea swatted his arm before flopping down on the micro-fiber cushion of her couch, pulling her legs underneath her. “Don’t be talking about my tree.”

“It’s ... interesting.” He chuckled.

Carter sat beside her, his legs brushing hers. Even with the baggy sweat pants on she

could feel the raw strength and masculinity he exuded. It made everything within her stand at attention. She was hopeless but she wasn't going to let him know that—yet.

"I don't know where to begin."

"The beginning is always good." Drea said.

He took a deep breath. "My mother died when I was a teenager. Breast cancer. It was the worst time of my life. It felt like my world was coming to an end and by the time she'd gotten too sick to take care of herself, we placed her into a hospital." He paused.

Drea's heart went out to him. "That must have been devastating for you. I'm so sorry." She placed her hand over his. "It's okay."

"No, it's not." He reopened his eyes and a whirlwind of emotions shined through them. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "My father was a wreck; he turned to drinking and women. He was never around or if he was, I was the one helping him to the toilet or putting him in bed. My mother made me promise to take care of him. The more I tried, the more I failed. He didn't want my help."

"He needs to help himself first. Oh, Carter. That's a hell of a thing to ask a child to take care of a grown man. You didn't fail at anything."

He turned to face her. "I didn't want to fail you, Drea. Ever. And I've managed to do that—twice."

She chuckled. "No one said you were a genius."

Carter grinned. "Oh, no?"

"No one said you had to be. I'm old enough to decide which risks are worth taking in my life, Carter."

"And am I worth the risk?" he asked, softly.

She heard the hesitation, the fear of rejection in his voice and marveled at how their roles had changed. Her heart overflowed with love for this man. *Her* man.

"Yes, I do." Drea said. "I think I just might love you."

Carter pulled her into his lap. "You think..." His lips greedily took hers, his tongue exploring her mouth with generous licks. He pulled away slightly. "Or you know?"

"Mmmn. Why don't you remind me, Santa." She straddled him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He grinned between butterfly kisses. "Have you been naughty or nice?"

Drea laughed. "Definitely nice."

"I was going to say naughty." He rose, repositioning them, his arms bracketing Drea as he laid her against the couch.

She felt his cock hardening between them and rubbed her fingers along the well-formed bulge in his pants. "Is that my Christmas present or are you just happy to see me?"

Carter removed her t-shirt and bra. He stopped to kiss her pointy nipples. "I'm definitely happy." He caressed the side of her cheek with his hand. "But I'd be happier if you were my wife. I promise to love you for the rest of my life. What do you say?"

Drea grinned like an idiot. Her dreams were coming true. She couldn't remember a Christmas that could top this moment. "I'll accept—under one condition."

His eyebrows arched. "O-kay..."

"Will you wear the Santa suit every year?"

Carter laughed, kissing her. "Anything you want, babe. As long as I get to love you." He kissed her again. "Taste you." His tongue delved deeper into her mouth, making her

whimper. He unzipped his pants, his dick hard and ready. Drea met him halfway, shimmying out of her sweats and underwear. Her hips rose to meet him, her pussy wet and ready to join with his body.

He slipped two fingers deep into her. "And fuck you every night."

Drea sighed, "Now, how the hell can a girl argue with that?" She pressed her lips to his. "I accept," she said, just as Carter thrust inside her, sending a spasm of heat coursing through her.

"Hmmm, good." Carter groaned as he moved slowly. "Because I wasn't taking no for an answer." He grinned sensuously at the look on her face. "Merry Christmas, baby."

"Oh!" Drea screamed, as he plunged into her again and again. "Merry Christmas."

She was going to live in the moment and nothing mattered more than having Carter inside her body, her life and her heart.

Night four and a half: Night five is going to have to take care of itself!

The End

About the Author:

Anisa Damien lives outside of Chicago with her husband, 10-year old son and demonic cat, Sly. The love for writing has held her captive since grade school and hasn't let go since. When not working at her day job, she is concocting sexy heroes, sassy heroines and the mischief she can get them into!

Anisa enjoys spending time with her family, watching movies, eating chocolate and reading.

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Mistletoe Magic

Alyssa Brooks

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Dedication

To the best critique partner, Larissa Lyons, who helped me shape up this story and make it the best it could be.

Prologue

December 2001

She just couldn't do it. Not this year. It was too soon. A hiccup caught in Noelle's throat and she forced back tears.

The worn cardboard box sat on the attic floor at her feet, hanging open. Christmas decorations, red, green and gold, peeked through the flaps. Kneeling, she ran her hands through her hair. *God.*

Two hot tears ran down her cheeks. Christmas had always been her and Dan's favorite holiday. They'd loved decorating their farmhouse from top to bottom and throwing a huge party for everyone in the small town they lived in. Now ... now Dan was gone. So were the feelings.

She sniffed and closed the flaps in angry, abrupt motions. Why even celebrate the holidays? Christmas was stupid.

She stood, lifting the box. She carried it over to the pile of boxes labeled XMAS and tossed it on top. She started to turn and walk away, but a smaller box caught her eye. Pausing, she picked it up. A strange feeling ran through her. A yearning. A lust. Warmth. She just couldn't put it down. She had to open it. To touch the mistletoe decoration she and her husband had stood under each year for half their lives.

She yanked open the tattered flaps of the box, pulling the mistletoe out. The feeling only grew stronger, making her tear it from the plastic baggie protecting it. The moment she touched the artificial greenery, strong, desperate desire coursed through her. Immediately she felt herself dampening. Invisible hands roamed over her body and a warm breath caressed her ear. Dan's presence enveloped her. She could feel him all around her, touching her soul like magic.

"I've missed you," a barely audible whisper breezed through the air. His voice. Deep, yet tender. "Noelle."

The touch of a hand ran down her shoulder and arm, wrapping around her body and pulling her against a force of heat. Noelle shuddered, not scared, but alive with his touch. His love. It was all she could feel or think. His love.

His lips swept hers, tenderly taking her into a passionate embrace like so many Christmases before. Slipping his tongue into her mouth, he licked along her lips, teasing her with his passion. She melted into him, letting her budding nipples press against his warmth. She was melting, like a snowman in the sun. Her whole body came alive with hot, unbridled passion that made her wet with desire.

Running his hands over her body, he slid away the shoulders of her open-neck sweater and kneaded her neck muscles. His fingers were strong as ever, working her tightened muscles until they relaxed.

She fell to her knees, wishing, hoping, and praying she could feel himself inside of her once again. He followed her down, and she kissed him so hard her lips hurt, but she needed to taste him. To be sure he was really there.

She became lost in the kiss so deeply her body became Jell-O. Without thinking, she dropped the mistletoe.

“Noelle...” His whisper breezed through the air around her. Suddenly his hands disappeared from her body, his mouth fading as if it was never there. And he was gone, leaving her with a body pulsing with unquenched desire and a heartache so strong she could do nothing but curl up in a ball and cry.

Chapter One

Chase couldn't help but stare as she pushed the cart around the small country store. She was beautiful. Captivating. Who was she again? Noelle ... what was it? Fugate? It seemed like his Aunt Kitty had told him something like that. The surname was so unsuitable for her he could have laughed. She needed a name more like ... like his. Winters would suit the Christmas babe much better.

He felt a little crazy, following her down the aisle. A little bit like a stalker. But he just couldn't help himself. She was the most enthralling woman he'd seen since he'd arrived in town. His eyes drifted up from the boots hugging her well-shaped calves to the way her form-fitting blue jeans accented every curve. God, he wished she would bend over. Again. It was his favorite view. She was voluptuous. Curvy. That ass was enough to grab and hang onto. And damn, he wanted to.

And her waist, even through the thick, sparkly white sweater that reminded him of snow, he could tell he could wrap his hands around it. Nestle his arms under the perky handfuls of her breasts and nuzzle her swanlike neck. Sniff her thick blond hair as he knotted the straight locks around his hands. A moment ago he'd gotten close enough to inhale her scent and she smelled like pine.

Too bad, the things he'd heard about her. Crazy, they said. But who could blame her after her husband's tragic death? His understanding was that they had been considered Christmas connoisseurs around these parts. Threw a big bash and all. But according to his Aunt Kitty, since the combine had mauled her husband, tearing off his arm and eventually costing him his life due to infection, Noelle had lost it. Let the farm go. Let Christmas go. All she did was collect mistletoe and hang it around her house.

Crazy or not, she was about out of money. That was where he came in. Talk was, she might be interested in having someone running the farm for her. He had a proposition for her that would allow them to both make money. He could do what he absolutely loved, farming, and stay close to his Ma. She was too old to live alone now and he'd be damned if she was going into a home.

Besides, come hell or high water, he was *not* taking on some factory job. This part of southern Pennsylvania only housed small, family run farms and one lonely carpet-making factory. The building was hot as hell, and a hell of a lot more dangerous than any farm. And even worse, he'd be stuck indoors all day. Work like that would kill him.

Yeah. His Aunt Kitty's plan was perfect. He didn't have enough money to buy a whole farm, and Noelle's was the only one in need of any kind of hand. Plus, he'd be minutes away from his Ma. If only he could convince her.

His gaze focused on her and the sweet way her ass swayed as she pushed the cart. He followed behind her, half pretending to be looking at food and such, while ogling her as much as possible. He should be talking to her by now, but he didn't have the nerve yet. It might be easier if she weren't so damned pretty.

He'd only caught two glances at her face, but she looked like an angel—with the body of a goddess. Sweet, sky blue eyes veiled by thick black lashes. Heart shaped lips that begged for a kiss. An oval face he wanted to cup and draw near him. She was fair, delicate. Beautiful.

Suddenly she stopped, but he didn't. By the time he realized, it was too late. He rammed his cart into the back of her. The hit knocked her forward over the smaller-sized cart with a squeal.

* * * *

Noelle bit her lips to distract herself from the pain radiating in her heels and rear. Damn whoever had done this! She had a mind to give them a taste of her tongue. Stupid jerk! But she bit her tongue. Just what this dumb town would love, another reason to call her batty. A hot, angry sigh escaped her. She should just walk away.

Yeah, she would. She had to.

Slowly she pushed herself up, straightening. Blood rushed through her body, heating her face and neck. How embarrassing, like coming to town wasn't enough now that she was officially known as crazy?

"Are you okay?" An incredibly deep, southern voice of velvet asked her from behind.

So it wasn't some dumb biddy trying to provoke her. She drew a deep breath, nodded, and started to push her cart away.

"Hey, I'm really sorry about that, ma'am," he persisted, following right after her.

She continued to walk on. He'd give up in a second.

"Are you sure you're okay? Let me look at your ankle. It might be bleeding. You really should stop a moment. I hit you hard. Didn't mean to, but..."

Or maybe not ... what was his problem? The pest! She swung around to face him. "I'm fine, thank you."

Or maybe not... She sucked in a breath, startled by him. She had never seen a man with such striking eyes. So dark they appeared black, framed by thick, long lashes. Lighting streaked silver out from his irises. Unable to help herself, she fell into his gaze. Mesmerized. Taken by his dark eyes and pulled into his very soul.

It took seconds, maybe even minutes for it to hit her. *Fool!* She was behaving like a royal idiot! She yanked her gaze from his, still not quite in control as her eyes drifted over him. He had high cheekbones and a hard jaw. Tan, with leathery, weathered skin. And his lips were full, kissable.

She lowered her eyes, taking in his sinewy muscles and tall, lean form. He wore a tight black tee shirt and a pair of Levi's. Cowboy boots. Even a cowboy hat. She couldn't help but wonder what his hair underneath looked like. Was it long? Short? How would it feel wrapped in her hands as she held onto him, as he thrust into her?

She jerked free from the titillating fantasy. Tall, dark, and handsome, he was quite the lethal combination. And then it struck her. She'd been bent over the store's stupid tiny carts in front of him! These jeans were far too tight these days now that middle age was setting in. Oh. Dear. Heavens.

She shook her head, casting him a smile. "I'm fine. Thank you."

She turned and started away, but again he stopped her. "Actually, I was following you. I mean ... sheesh..." He cleared his throat. "I need to speak with you, if you have a moment."

"About what?" Wishing he would go away, she kept pushing the cart. Forget the rest of it. She headed towards the checkout.

"I'm Chase Winters, ma'am. My Aunt Kitty told me to talk to you about your farm.

Running it. If you have a moment, I have a deal for you.”

Noelle’s insides turned to steel. Just the thought of her farm becoming operational again gave her chills. She gritted her teeth together, throwing her few groceries on the belt. “No.”

She picked up her newest mistletoe with extreme care. She didn’t dare touch it. Instead she held it by the purchase tag. Once she hadn’t been so careful, and suffice to say, she’d made quite a scene in public. Which was why she now officially wore the crown of crazy.

Just holding them by the tag filled her with awareness. She could feel her husband breathing down her neck. Wrapping her with his love. Reminding her of his accident and the dangers of the farm. No way was she putting someone else in that danger again.

The urge to finger the mistletoe pulled at her. It was wonderful to feel Dan so strongly again, even if only for a moment. Over the past several years, he’d been slowly fading. Sometimes he wouldn’t come at all. She’d resorted to buying more and more mistletoe, trying to encourage him. She needed to keep him all around her, in every room, every nook and cranny. She waited all year to have him during the Christmas season. She would not let his presence weaken. She would not. She couldn’t lose it.

“No? If I could just talk to you, Noelle?”

Her head snapped around so fast she almost hurt her neck. “Who told you to use my first name?”

If that wasn’t rude! Some people had no manners these days. He had less business using her Christian name than he did knocking her over a cart. Jerk.

Her conscience nudged at her from deep within, pointing out the truth she chose to ignore. She was looking for reasons not to like him.

Again he cleared his throat. “Well, your last name isn’t ... that’s not the point. Look at what you’re buying. You need money. I need work. A few cans of soup and...”

She held up her hand, looking him directly in the eyes. “It’s not your business.”

His gaze softened to dark puppy dog eyes, darting to her canned foods. He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. “But it is.”

“How?” She glared at him, shaking her head.

The cashier went into a fit of coughing, only half covering her mouth. Both she and Chase stopped their conversation and looked at her simultaneously. The girl sounded really bad. Looked worse. Like, half dead.

Noelle whipped out a twenty, and handed it to the cashier before she went into another round of coughing. All Noelle could think about was getting the hell out of there. She spun on her heels and practically ran from the store.

Of course, she could feel him right behind her with each step she took. God. Why wouldn’t he just go away?

She walked onto the short sidewalk lining the corner of the Main Street and headed south. Wreaths of fresh pine with big red bows decorated every door, and garland was strung between telephone poles. Flurries floated through the air, cascading to add to the thin layer of fresh snow.

She walked in long, fast strides. His footsteps were still right behind her. Damn it! Why wouldn’t he bug off?

“Ma’am,” he drawled in a southern accent far too sexy. “You forgot your bag, and your change.”

His words stopped her in her tracks. Slowly she turned, realization brewing in her. Thank God he'd caught her. She couldn't afford to be losing stuff. Forgetting change.

She couldn't afford much of anything, including the mistletoe she couldn't resist buying. And soon ... soon she'd lose the farm to taxes.

She hesitated a moment, then accepted the money from him. "Thank you," she whispered. "I needed this."

"I know." He nodded towards a wooden bench. "Why don't we talk a moment?"

She didn't want to say yes. The prospect of it made her sick. And yet ... she knew she had to. "Okay."

She fingered the money she held, suddenly spotting the twenty peeking out from the bills. She'd paid with a twenty. There shouldn't be one in here. Her eyes flashed to him. Had the cashier miscounted or had he done this? She hesitated, not so perfect that she wasn't tempted to keep it.

In the end though, her pride won, as it always did. She held the twenty up. "Did you do this?"

A one-sided, all-too-gorgeous smile beamed on his face. "Maybe."

She grabbed his hand, stuffing it into his palm. "No."

He looked down and nodded like a kid caught, but it was she who was trapped. He had her hand now, and would not release it. After several seconds of trying to free herself, she gave a yank. He didn't budge. Instead, he pulled her closer. Too close. She could smell him, smell his manly, fulfilling scent of woods and work.

His thumb ran over her hand. "You said you'd talk to me."

"Okay." She tugged harder. "Just let me go."

His eyes bored into hers, as if they were looking directly into her soul. "Don't walk away. Promise."

Damn him. He just didn't quit. Now he knew she had a conscience, he was holding it against her.

"I promise." She yanked away and he freed her. To her surprise though, relief did not come. To the contrary, awareness rushed through her, making her wish he still held her hand.

His hand went to the small of her back, guiding her. His touch sent a warm tingle through her. The urge to scoot closer to him, to nuzzle in his embrace, seeped into her being.

People were probably right about her after all. What was she thinking? She *had* to be crazy! Not only was she about to hear him out on his awful proposal to get the farm going again, a large portion of her wasn't even doing it for the logical, necessary reasons. Reason wasn't something that meant much to her these days.

She just couldn't help the strange pull she felt towards him. The attraction. Not just to his looks. Oh, he was a hotty, sure. But it was *him*. The way he spoke to her. The sense he was a kind, good guy. The way he held her hand.

Taking her grocery bag from him, she sat on the bench and nestled it on her lap. She didn't look at him ... couldn't ... neither could she speak. She just waited.

He cleared his throat ... for the fifth time since she met him. "Talk is, you let the farm go. That maybe you need some money. I just moved back home to help care for my ma. For a while, I helped manage a tobacco farm in North Carolina. Loved it. The outside is where I belong, doesn't matter what it is. I'm sure I could handle some cattle and corn

crops as well as tobacco. I'd like to run the place."

Her face heated. One more thing for her to be embarrassed about. "I don't have anything to pay you. I don't have money to even start the farm up again. Not even close."

Not only had she let everything go, hating the place for what it had done to her husband, she hadn't thought to invest the life insurance payout. For a while, she'd mourned Dan so deeply she couldn't think straight. Now, the money was almost gone. Taxes were overdue. Unless she found work soon, she wouldn't even be able to eat. Fat chance of her finding a decent job in this town.

"Well, that doesn't have to be a problem, Noelle."

There he went again. Using her name like he was her friend. Like he knew her.

"I don't take handouts, thank you." She started to rise, but his hand caught her arm. Not hard or hurtful, but a gentle touch that warmed her straight through.

"What do you think you'll be doing when the money *is* all gone? Welfare?" He shook his head, giving just enough of a pause to let it sink into her. Hard. "Besides, I'm not talking handouts. One, you could take a second mortgage. Or, you and I can agree to certain terms. I put up the money to get things rolling. You agree to let me operate the farm how I see fit. I work my own hours and I pick my own crops and stock. A five-year agreement. We split profits. We'll sign something."

Heaven help her, she considered it. Biting her lip, she realized there wasn't much to think about. She had no choice. But she doubted he knew what he was getting into. She literally hadn't walked in one of the barns in years. "The farm doesn't make much."

"I'm thirty-five and I'm not rich yet." He chuckled. "Farms never do, Noelle. But it'll cover me staying here in town with Ma."

She couldn't help but flash him a weak smile. This was why she felt such warmth towards him. He seemed like such a standup kind of guy. Like Dan. "That's nice of you, coming to take care of your mother."

He laughed like it was nothing. "Hey, she took care of me, now I take care of her. Circle of life, right?"

"Not all men, or even women, think like that."

He was making it harder and harder to even consider turning him down. He said he needed this, too. She felt a tinge guilty to think of saying no.

"Not all people are good."

"True." She shrugged. She could think of a few bad ones. Like Nina, the town blabbermouth who'd told everyone she'd heard Noelle talking to the mistletoe, or the tax collector, who kept sending her late notices and adding on fees. Oh, and don't forget the kids who loved to egg her house.

Once upon a time, she'd loved the people in this small town. But now, through the eyes of a woman labeled crazy, she saw them for who they really were. Had anyone cared about her truly, the rumors would have never started.

"Do we have a deal?"

She didn't give herself the time to think on the notion of another accident happening or of someone taking Dan's place. She had to do what she had to do, and he was the best thing to come her way in a long time.

"Fine." Her voice sounded hard as steel. She wished she could feel that way, instead of like she'd collapse into a pile of mush at the thought of one more accident on the farm.

Reaching out, he patted her thigh. A zip of longing coursed through her, and she

wished it were more than a friendly gesture. Her loins heated, rushing to her sex and dampening it. She shifted uncomfortably, crossing her legs as if she could lock the desire away.

“We’ll make a fine team. You’ll see, Noelle. I’ll be out tomorrow to look over the place.” He stood, leaving her sitting alone on the bench. Absolutely wet. Absolutely terrified.

Chase Winters had just turned her peaceful life upside down in fifteen minutes. Everything she had decided. Poof. Gone. All she was sure she *didn’t* want. Dear God. If this was how he affected her during their first meeting, what would happen over the next five years? Oh, dear heavens...

* * * *

Chase wanted to turn around and gaze at her as she walked off. To watch the sway of her hips sashaying down the sidewalk. To study her round, tempting little rear. Damn. The woman had knocked him right off his feet. He knew the things they said about her, but already he could see it wasn’t true. She was hurting, yes. She was a little hard now, okay. Going through a spell. But crazy? No. She was as sane as he.

Something about her fit right in with the snow. The holidays. Even this quiet little town, despite the hurtful rumors. She was country, a simple woman who loved simple things. Just the type he’d always wanted. Flashes of homey images of Noelle as his wife played through his mind like a movie. It was easy to imagine Noelle doing things like gardening. Knitting. Cooking family dinners. Singing lullabies to his children. He almost laughed at himself for being such a romantic fool, but something about it really wasn’t funny.

Once he walked off Main Street onto High Lane, the narrow street where his mom and he lived in an older Victorian home, he gave a little whoop and took off running. Like he’d done as a boy, he reached in front of him, trying to catch snow flurries. He felt light, happy, like a damn school kid.

It wasn’t just the deal he’d made, either. Oh, it was great that things were working out for him and his Ma. There were so many bonuses to working Noelle’s farm, he couldn’t even name them all. The freedom, the fresh air, the convenience ... it was perfect for him. But that wasn’t why he was walking on clouds.

No. It was *her*. By God, he’d heard other guys say it before. *Soon as I set eyes on her ... that was it*. But he never really thought such immediate affection was possible.

Sure enough though, he knew it could happen now. The feeling ran straight to his belly, like a bubbling pot boiling over. No woman had ever made him feel like this in just one meeting. Attracted. Lighthearted. Giddy. Warm. This was it for him. Noelle Fugate had him hook, line and sinker. So, what to do about it? How could he even consider courting her if he was going to work for her? But how could he not?

Chapter Two

Noelle held the mistletoe carefully between forefinger and thumb, walking to the couch. She needed Dan's comfort so badly. With everything going on, she needed to be held. Kissed. Loved. God, she missed it so much.

Lying down, she wrapped her hands around the mistletoe. This time, though, the rush of his presence didn't come as quickly. She almost burst into tears. Why was his spirit weakening like this? Would a time come when he didn't appear to her?

She squeezed the mistletoe harder, hoping, wishing, pleading with her very soul for him to come to her.

Slowly, she began to feel him around her. Warm. Present. But not like the other times. He wasn't touching her. Kissing her. He never withheld his touch. He usually came right to her.

Was he angry with her?

"Dan..."

Several second passed before he answered.

"Shhh..." His soft feathery, kisses moved down her neck, over her chest to her breasts.

She let her sweater shrug from her shoulders, enjoying the way he nuzzled and nibbled at her collarbone. She couldn't see him, couldn't touch him, yet his kisses were so real. He even left a trail of wetness over her skin as he tasted it.

"I'm always here, baby. I promised. We will never be apart." His voice was not a voice at all. She couldn't actually hear him. She felt what he was saying.

She knew their connection was how he'd managed to come to her as he did. Their souls were united.

"I love you Dan, I need you."

His heat enveloped her, coursing through her body in a rush of desire. Her body reacted to him in a lightning flash, wetting, tightening. He was all around her, all in her. In a tight embrace, he pulled her into the heavens for a moment. She rode on a magical carpet of desire, higher and higher. Working the hardened buds of her nipples with his mouth and teeth, he worshipped her breasts as he always had. She thrust her hips in the air, meeting his demands.

God, she was so close. About to burst.

Suddenly a loud knock banged on the front door. Immediately Dan began to fade, his whisper lingering behind him. "You're making the right choice, Noelle. You'll always have my love. We'll always be together. But you can't always need me. You can't."

* * * *

Chase knocked again, peeking through the yellow stained glass side panel of the old-fashioned front door. Why wasn't she answering? He walked backward onto the front steps and stared at the house. His eyes searched the windows, checking to see if anyone might be peeking though them. But the curtains were drawn, the windows dark. He didn't see a single light on in the two-story, cream-colored Victorian farmhouse. The place

looked cold. Empty. Haunted. A shame too, because he could easily imagine it lit with Christmas lights, decorated with pine garlands and wreaths. Warm and welcoming.

He sighed, shook his head, and walked back to the door. He knocked again. He'd told her he'd be out today. When he'd arrived this morning, he'd knocked then. Just like now, no answer. Nothing.

He groaned, once more banging on the door, but this time a hell of a lot harder. He knew she was home. She had to answer. If she didn't, he'd freeze to death.

Turning, he wrapped his arms around his chest and stared at the pelting snow. It was coming down thick, in big huge flakes so fast it was mounting up like nothing he'd ever seen. And the temperature ... brrr! It was cold enough to freeze a witch's tit.

He still couldn't believe it. This hadn't been in the weatherman's forecast at all. The storm was supposed to have traveled east, hitting Ohio. Here in lower south central Pennsylvania, they were supposed to have sunny skies and cool, crisp weather. *Looks like they were wrong again. No surprise there.*

He shook his head. A couple of hours ago he'd gone in the barn to start cleaning things up, especially the office. If he was going to be ready for spring, he had a lot of repairs to complete. He'd only been in there an hour or two, and now he was stuck. The truck wouldn't even consider climbing out of her dirt lane. And you better believe he'd tried and fought it like almighty hell. How had she not been bothered by the sound of his truck's squealing tires? Where was she? Was she even okay?

He needed to call his Ma and her neighbor to make sure everything was all right and someone would look after her. Noelle *had* to answer. Now.

Turning back to the door, he decided to try the knob. To his surprise, it turned with ease, and he gave the door a shove. As he did, he noted the way it creaked and bellowed. This house had to be at least a hundred years old, and she wasn't taking care of it. She was lucky it wasn't falling in around her.

He couldn't believe she hadn't even locked the door. All this damn time.

He let himself into the foyer, immediately stopping in his tracks in shock. Everywhere—in every nook and cranny, in every doorway, in every window—hung mistletoe. There wasn't another Christmas decoration amongst them. Just mistletoe. Everywhere.

And then he heard her sobs. Hiccupping, heartbreaking cries of pain that drove clutching worry into him. He broke into a run, dashing into the living room. She lay on the couch, curled in a ball, her face hidden in her knees, her whole body shaking with grief.

Damn it all, what happened to her? A knife twisted in his gut as he knelt by her, stroking her hair. "Are you okay?"

"He won't let me need him anymore," she choked out.

What? Who? He pulled himself up to sit on the couch and drew her limp body into his arms. To his amazement, she let him, resting her head on his chest. He stroked her long blonde hair, wishing he could comfort her with his touch and soothe her cries.

"Who won't, darling?"

"D-Dan." A whole new round of sobs followed.

"Who is *Dan*?"

He wanted to offer to kick his ass right then and there. Was he her boyfriend? Aunt Kitty hadn't said a thing about a boyfriend. In fact, she said Noelle had been all alone for

years and years.

"My husband."

Oh. Shit. This wasn't good. Could he be wrong about her? Could she be a little crazy? He cleared his throat, choosing his words carefully. "I thought your husband was no longer among us."

"Of course he's among us ... he just not alive anymore."

"Oh." He stroked her hair again, pretending to understand.

But he completely didn't get it. Dan was dead, how could he not let her need him? Was she talking to a ghost now? It didn't make sense. She didn't make sense.

She looked up at him with wide-open cornflower blue eyes ... scared, needy. Her bottom lip jutted out in a pouting fashion so damn pitifully sexy he couldn't help the rush that coursed through him. His insides stirred, desire taking him over. Before he could stop himself, he was sweeping her lips into a gentle embrace. To his utter shock, she responded.

Eagerness lit through him. He melted his mouth into hers, turning the kiss from sweet to hot and passionate. Nibbling at her lower lip, he encouraged her to open her mouth. She followed his lead, parting her lips for him to dive in with his tongue. He swept it along hers, loving her taste. Her response. She was sweet. Warm. Delicious.

His hands slid down the back of her neck, over her shoulder blades. Moving one forward, he cupped the side of her left breast. His other fingers kneaded her back muscles. God, she was delectable. If his cock got any harder it might turn into a medical issue. He wanted her so bad he couldn't stand it.

Devouring her with his kiss, he moved his hand from her back and knotted his fingers in her hair. Slowly he flicked his thumb against her nipple, loving the way it budded for him. He had to have more of her. He had to taste that nipple, to lick and nip at it.

Lowering her against the cushions, he continued to kiss her. She moaned softly, running her tongue along his. Then, without warning her eyes jerked open and she pushed him away.

"Oh my God," she squeaked.

He sat up, wanting to respect her, but dying to climb right back over her. His cock pulsed with red-hot fiery need. He could hardly breathe. He was literally panting for her.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I..."

"You have to go," she whispered.

He stood, nodding and giving things a minute. They needed to clear the air. Then he spoke, keeping his tone even and serious so she wouldn't think he was screwing with her just to get into her pants. "I can't." He nodded towards the big bay window. "Have you looked outside lately? I'm stuck here."

"No." Twirling around, she climbed onto her knees and peered over the couch. "Oh no."

He shrugged, shifting his legs to ease his hard-on. Now this would be interesting. *Might as well try to make the best of it, if it were possible at this point.* And besides, he now had business with her. He wasn't letting go and he wasn't referring to the farm. Once a woman cried in his arms, he didn't just let it go. "It's cold in here. Want me to start a fire?"

She whipped her head around, looking at him like he was the nut. "Are you

kidding?”

“No.” He shook his head, standing and again gazing at all the mistletoe. “The storm has trapped me here. No questioning that. But I’ll be damned if I’ll get out of your hair until you tell me what’s going on.”

Her jaw dropped, and he could see her tongue roaming the inside of her mouth as she processed the concept. “None of your business.”

He knew it wasn’t, not rightly, but he didn’t care. She’d cried in his arms. She’d involved him. It was his business now, as far he was concerned.

“Look, I know you aren’t crazy. So what is it? A game? Witchcraft? Ghosts? *What were you talking about?*”

Her eyes turned steel blue, hard and cold as she gazed at him with utter contempt. Several seconds passed before she uttered a word, but when she did, her tone relayed the witch concept more than anything. “Well, Mr. Winters, it appears you simply are trapped with a crazy woman. Nothing more. Crazy, crazy, crazy.”

With that, she stood and disappeared.

* * * *

Noelle raked her fingers through her hair, her breaths coming in such gasps she was close to hyperventilating. “Oh ... my ... gosh ... sh ... shit.”

She couldn’t believe him. More importantly she couldn’t believe herself.

She leaned against the kitchen counter over the sink, staring at the torrents of white fluffy snow pelting down upon them. How long could this possibly keep up? How long could she?

She was a damn near ready to burst. She wanted Chase too much. Needed him. His arms were like wrapping herself in heaven. Everything bad went away. Disappeared. All that was left was pleasure and passion. How easy it would be to let herself go with him ... to be...

Wait. What was she thinking? She *needed* him? No. She needed Dan. Dan was her husband. Dan was...

Dead.

Worse, Dan had told her to stop needing him.

Deep in her heart, she knew he was telling her to move on. To live again. And since Dan always just *knew* everything, no doubt he was aware of Chase’s increased presence in her life. On their farm. Was he telling her to be with Chase? Was he telling her she’d made the right decision to open the farm?

But how could she?

Truth itched for release from her mind. Though she didn’t want to admit it, she couldn’t help but think how it easy it would be with Chase. His kisses were enough to make her forget anything. God, they way his lips felt upon hers. So plump, so needy. Just the thought of his tongue caressing hers had her dampening with desire.

He was the first real, live man to touch her in so long. For years, a ghost’s touch had been her only pleasure. And now ... now she was reawakened.

She gulped. For the first time, she looked around her kitchen and dining area at all the mistletoe. Suddenly, she saw it in a new light. What *was* she doing? She couldn’t hang on to Dan like this forever. And she did tend to make herself appear a bit crazy. She wasn’t, of course. Her reasoning was sane as ever.

Reaching up, she plucked a branch of mistletoe from its hook in the doorway. Her fingers caressed the greenery, shocking her when she felt nothing. Nothing at all. Not even his presence.

For the first time in a long time, she smiled. Maybe it was time. Letting go no longer seemed such a tragedy. It actually felt good.

Not that she would push things, certainly not with Chase. But, perhaps it was time to let what happened, happen.

* * * *

Chase poked at the fire he'd built in the large stone fireplace of the spare room she'd given him, stoking the flames. Warmth wrapped around him like a big wool blanket. He thought about crawling into bed, but decided against it for now. He just wasn't tired. Not when he had her on his mind.

How was it possible to feel anxious, yet at home at the same time? It was easy to feel comfortable here. Her house had a charming, old-fashioned character with lots of crafts and antique furniture. He didn't feel out of place. Not at all like a guest. Which he supposed was a good thing, considering. He'd probably be stuck here several days at best. Now that the weather forecasters had gotten their stories straight, they were calling for a blizzard that could mount up to three feet of snow. Not to mention the likelihood of high winds and drifting. There was simply no way his truck was making it out of this steep dirt lane or back to the windy road into town. Hell, he didn't even have four-wheel drive. Where he'd been living, it hadn't been necessary. He supposed he needed to invest in a new truck now that he was here, but hell, if it left him in convenient predicaments like this...

He heard yet another bang downstairs, like someone was jumping around. What was she still doing up at this hour? It was almost midnight.

He supposed he'd given her enough space. He wanted to know more about her. Just wanted to be close to her. Besides, he was never going to sleep with her on his mind.

He stood, stretched out and headed toward the door. Once in the hall, he followed the cherry wood banister around the balcony to the stairs. From here he could see her, holding a big black trash bag and staring at the mistletoe in the doorway to the living room. She reached up to touch it, and drew her hand back in a snap, as if she'd been shocked. Shaking her head, she lifted the bag and walked away.

What was that all about? He made his way down stairs slowly and quietly.

He reached the bottom, and looked around. Surprise hit him all at once. Besides the mistletoe sprig she'd jerked back from, everything else was gone. There had been hundreds. Now none. Why? What was she doing? It made no sense. *She* made no sense. Hell, she was making him crazy.

He wandered from the living room to the dining room, then into the kitchen, and found the same cleanliness. The mistletoe was gone. Sitting at the breakfast nook in the kitchen, he waited for her to come back.

And waited. And waited.

Where was she? Worry began to furrow his brow. Ten minutes passed, at least. It didn't take that long to toss some trash in the bin. Should he be worried? But what if she was doing something else?

He stood and strode to the door. Peering out, he noted her footsteps in the snow

blown onto the porch by the high winds. But the darkness of the night ended her path, and the snow was coming down harder than it had all day. That was pretty damn hard.

He couldn't leave her outside, no matter what she was doing. Crossing to the mud closet, he retrieved his boots and laced them up, then shrugged into his thick winter coat. He exited out the door into the freezing weather, the cold hitting him like a slap in the face. He sucked in a breath, the air burning his lungs. Snow began to cling to him, turning his brown jacket white in a matter of seconds. He could hardly see five feet in front of him. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small flashlight. It improved the view little, but at least some. He walked straight to the trashcans he'd seen when he arrived earlier. The snow nearly reached his knees. He had to wade through, and each step took work. He found her half-buried tracks easily enough, and they led to the edge of the parking space where the trash cans set. But she wasn't there and neither were they. He looked around, noting no lights were on in any of the barns. Where the hell could she be?

"Noelle?" he called out. "Noelle!"

For a moment silence answered him. Then, to his amazement, he heard a moan coming from his left. Panic rushed through him as he trampled through the snow in the sound's direction, his eyes searching for her. She was nowhere to be found, yet he knew she had to be right in front of his face. Again she moaned, this time behind him. He whirled around, his eyes searching the ground.

He kept wandering, calling her name. Finally he spotted her shadow, lying several feet ahead of him on the ground. Rushing to her side, he dropped to his knees beside her. "Noelle?"

The sound of her teeth chattering answered him. And no wonder—she wore nothing but a flannel shirt over her pajamas. He laid his hand against her cheek, feeling how cold she was. Damn. He scooped her up into his arms, whirling around, trying to find the house in the blizzard.

Instead, he made out the big black shadow of the barn. Somehow, they had wandered awfully far from the house. The blowing snow, thick and cold, warped one's sense of direction.

He didn't have time to fool around trying to find his way back safely. They'd have to take refuge in the barn. He trudged through the deep snow to the door, lifting the latch and sliding it open. An even darker black met them as he stepped inside and slammed the door shut.

She shuddered and moaned, making the twisted feeling in his gut grow even tighter. He had to get her warm. Setting her on the ground with care, he felt his way around for the light switch alongside the door he remembered from earlier. He found it and flicked on the dim, hanging overhead lights. Thank God they still worked. He hoped the bulbs weren't too old. Unless he could think of something else, they were likely stuck out here for the night.

Her eyes fluttered open, her teeth still clanking together loudly. Her clothes were soaked through and through, little hunks of ice and snow clinging to them. The bare parts of her skin, her hands and ankles, were blood red. She'd be lucky if she wasn't frostbitten.

A surge of anger ripped through him, and he had to stop himself from yelling. "Why the hell did you go out like that?"

"I didn't think..."

"Damn straight you didn't." He shook his head, bending and scooping her up as she

cried a protest. "Don't even start. You could have died out there. You're stuck with me now."

She wriggled in his arms, rubbing her tempting body against his. "I can walk."

"And I can carry you." He could also get a hard on stiffer than a steel rod. And he did. Oh, he did. Damn. The feel of her in his arms, her every curve pressed against him was too much. His hand cupped her lush ass, his lust pleading with his reason to squeeze it.

Unable to resist, he let his forefinger caress her delicious, round cheek. Damn, he wanted to slip his hand in her pajama pants and touch her soft skin. To explore other, more intimate areas. To taste her. How easy it was to imagine being inside her, the tight, silky way she would feel enveloping him. For a moment his mind drifted into an interlude, imagining everything vividly. The sweat. The feel of her naked body pressed against his. The pleasure as he rammed into her over and over and...

Suddenly she made a little noise and he realized she was staring at him with parted lips. They hung open in shock, her sky blue angel eyes wide. No doubt she could read what he was thinking ... unless he'd done something weird like grunt. Had he? *Shit*. He cleared away his lustful thoughts, wishing he could clear away the desire. Could she feel his hard on?

Damn it! Enough all ready. He had to get her warm. She was going to end up sick as hell or worse.

Heading across the musty, hay-scattered dirt floor, he twisted the knob to the office and stepped in. He set her down, reaching to flick on the light. Nothing. Great. He'd been in here earlier, checking things out. This had been the room he'd focused on, though he hadn't thought to check the light bulb. He'd dusted, cleared room on the desk, and made notes of what he needed to do to get the place running by spring.

He stepped into the dark office, knowing it was a place they could get warm. The barn was old, so old it was amazing it still stood, and there was an ancient stone fireplace. Her teeth chattered again, a shiver running through her body, reminding him of her chill. He was wasting too much time. She needed to get warm.

"Sit down. Get those wet clothes off. They're only making you colder," he told her, looking around for something to spark a fire with.

"No way." She shook her head, anger burning in her voice. In a show of defiance, her hands went to her hips.

He looked at her hard, unwilling to negotiate. "Sure, I wouldn't mind seeing you naked, sugar. But that isn't why I'm suggesting it. Your clothes are soaked, and clinging to your skin. You'll be better off nude. Take them off. Or I will."

"What?"

"You heard me. If you can't use you own sense, I suppose I'll have to for you. What the hell were you doing out there, anyway?"

"I was taking out trash. All the wind and snow made me lose my way and..." She squealed in frustration when she saw the 'I told you so' look he flashed her. "Since when are you my keeper?"

"Since now, damn it," he snapped, unable to hold on to his patience. He was trying to take care of her. Didn't she get it? She could have died out there. Where were the thanks?

Suddenly her tone changed, becoming daring yet sweetly laced. "Fine, suit yourself."

To his absolute shock, she began to strip in slow, sultry movements. Standing in the shadows, where only streaks of light revealed what she was doing, she shook her body. Slowly. Tantalizingly. Her hips circled round, thrusting forward. The look in her eyes changed. She metamorphosed into a sex goddess, dancing and teasing him without mercy. But despite her efforts, she still shook with cold. He longed to heat her up.

Her flannel shirt fell to the floor, then her pajama top, then...

Chapter Three

Noelle almost giggled. She just kept getting bolder.

She almost couldn't believe herself. What the *hell* was she doing? She didn't do stuff like this ... ever!

Yet, a spark in her had come alive. Tonight, she felt ornery. Naughty. Daring.

When she was around Chase, she was freed from the smothering grief over losing Dan. She wanted to break free, to be wild, to have fun. Considering the massive woody Chase sported for her, the idea was impossible not to resist.

She tried not to think of what she was doing as she did it. She wanted to strip for him. She wanted *him*. That was all that mattered. She was going to enjoy this. Sliding down her pajama pants, she wiggled her hips in a seductive way, inching them downward. His mouth widened so far she wouldn't be surprised to find drool running down his chin. She lowered her gaze to the hardened lump in his pants ... the *large* hardened lump.

She wanted to tear away those tight Levi's and...

God, he was hot, even in the dim light cast from the main area of the barn. Soaked, wearing a simple ensemble of cowboy boots, snug blue jeans and a snow-covered thick brown jacket, he drove her crazy. The way his muscles knotted, thick blue veins snaking along them. There wasn't a thing soft or cuddly about the way he looked. No. He was rough. Tough. And best of all, she knew that underneath it he was sweet as sugar. How could she go wrong?

Her bottoms dropped to the floor. The only thing remaining was her underwear ... an embarrassing pair of white cotton panties. She figured she'd be more comfortable with them off than on. Goodbye to them, then! Pulling the fabric off her legs, she tossed the underwear at him.

A shudder ran through her body, both from desire and the cold. Admittedly, this felt better than the soaked clothes, though. They *had* been making her miserable.

"Well, cowboy, I'm still cold," she whispered. "Warm me up."

"Sure thing." He cleared his throat, looking unsure for a moment.

She cast her gaze to the fireplace. He followed it, almost jumping. "Oh."

She leaned against the chair, licking her lips as she watched him work on gathering things for a fire. Luckily, old musty newspapers and split wood still sat alongside it. He bent over, giving her a full display of his perfect rear. He had two chiseled handfles, cute yet sexy, that just plain turned her on. A guy's ass was one of his finer points. Her eyes wondered south, to his legs then feet, then upward again. Every inch of him was muscular and lithe. Nothing too bulky, but certainly not thin. Staring at him made her dampen, and the urge to rub her hands along her breasts increased. She just couldn't resist. Slowly she caressed her hands over her chest, allowing her fingers to flick against her bare, hardened nipples. A surge ran through her, straight to her groin. She clenched herself, her clit throbbing with need. She wanted him so badly. It was like a raging river had just burst through the dam. She'd been pent up for so long. Now she was free. Wild. And he was her prey.

In no time he had the flames sparked. She wandered closer, needing the warmth

badly. She was cold to the bone on the outside ... inside she had no such problem.

She stepped up to the edge of the hearth. Warmth licked her skin, heating her as she stood very close to him. He stood, turning to her. His hands settled at her waist. "I never imagined you being bold."

"Don't talk of it. I can't..." she whispered then quickly raised her eyes to meet his. "Let's just let it happen."

He returned her stare, his eyes locked with hers. Slowly he nodded. His hands roamed upward, cupping the sides of her breasts as he pulled her to him. He held her gaze, his lips drifting down to hers. His kiss was slow, deliberate. He nuzzled her mouth, his lips like heaven against hers.

Need hit her body so fast it was like lightning. Wetness pooled between her thighs. Sensations burst out from her areolas. His lips nibbled hers, sucking on her lower one gently. She stood on tiptoes to allow him better access. She needed him to so much. In this moment, it was life or death.

His hands wandered to her back, slowly tracing over her bare skin to her ass. He cupped each cheek, pulling her up to him. His lips moved from hers, following a trail of tiny pecks down to her neck. He sucked and nibbled hard, tasting every inch of her skin. His breath caressed her ear. "Ready for a romp in the hay?"

"Oh, yes." She threw her head back to allow him full access to her neck. He proceeded to tease her earlobe with his teeth. Her clit pulsated, making her clench as a whole new rush of desire swept over her. Tingles ran through the sensitive spots on her body, traveling from her ear to her neck to her spine. He continued to bite and tease her lobe, making her arch and pull away. It was too much!

He caught her, drawing her to him once more. This time, she took charge. Her hands rested on his chest, hating the damp clothes covering his body. They had to go. Now. Her hands traveled lower, and slipped into the front of his jeans. She grasped his cock, moaning at the wonderful feel of its length in her hands. He tore open the buttons of his jeans and pushed the denim past his legs. In no time, the pants were off.

He groaned, leaning his head back and ripping off his shirt. "Woman."

He pulled away from her, heading toward the shelves along the wall. He pulled the saddle blankets from them. Shaking them out vigorously, he spread them on the ground in front of the fire. Then he grabbed her hands and pulled her down on top of him. Straddling him, she let his cock rub between her thighs, loving the tease.

Leaning forward, she put her breasts in his face. He cupped them with his large hands, bringing her left nipple to his mouth. Licking around the circle of her areola slowly, he flicked his tongue back and forth. She arched, squealing as tingles coursed through her body, running rampant. Suckling her nipple, he reached around and cupped her ass. The feel of his hands heightened her desire. He massaged her, caressing and stroking.

One hand slid further down, into her slick sex. He slipped two fingers inside her, stroking back and forth. She threw her head back in ecstasy, wishing it was his cock filling her. "I need..."

"I know. All in good time."

His pinky rubbed her nub, sending sensations through her. "I can't..."

"Shhh..." His mouth left her nipple, claiming her lips. Their tongues twisted together as he rolled her over. He slipped his hand free, sliding it over her thigh. He rested it right

over her sex, continuing to kiss her. Wrapping her arms around him, she thrust her hips to encourage him to enter her.

This time, he didn't deny her. His cock rubbed against her hole, finding its place before he drove in. Her tightness stretched for him, overfilled. Crying out, she bucked up at the pleasure. He fit her so well.

He began to thrust back and forth slowly, then changed his movements to hard and fast. He lifted her hips in the air, gyrating as his hands cupped her ass. She met each plunge, slamming herself against him.

He continued the fast and furious pace, swirling his hips, diving deep within her. The man knew how to work it. She moaned, ramming herself all the harder against him as she arched up. She couldn't help bucking; she was ripe with ecstasy. Sensational pleasure owned her body, tingling through her from head to toe, driving her body to higher heights.

His finger slid down the crevice of her ass, lower and lower until it hovered over that private spot. Her anus puckered for him, wanting to be filled as well. As if he read her mind, he wet his finger in the juices dripping from her sex. He slipped his pinky into her, fulfilling her need. Just his entry sent her flying high, her body lost it, convulsing as she came.

Chase jerked inside her, burying himself deep as he came. His warmth overflowed in her as he collapsed on top of her. Sliding his hands around her neck, he rolled over and cuddled her against his body heat.

Noelle cuddled against him, nuzzling her nose against his chest. God, his arms around her were heaven. After all this time to have found a guy like Chase, one who could bring her pleasure, and make her forget everything ugly. To feel so damned good about it. This was a dream she never wanted to wake up from.

* * * *

Chase cuddled her in his arms as she drifted off easily enough. He, however couldn't sleep.

All he could do was stare in wonderment. He watched the fire licking and changing colors from orange to yellow to red and blue. His hands caressed the bare skin of her back, loving her silky soft feel. Damn. He didn't know if this was perfect or a mess. Normally it wouldn't be smart to involve business with pleasure. How awkward could it get if things didn't work out between them?

But he couldn't resist her. There was no way he could work for her for five years and not make love to her. It was simply bound to happen. Perhaps he'd just have to take the romance into his own hands. Woo her.

His life suddenly seemed so wonderful. All he wanted to do was wake her up and go at it again ... but he couldn't do that to her. So he cuddled her tight, relishing everything from her curvy body pressed against his to her smell. He could lay like this for the rest of his life and never grow tired of it.

He'd gotten her to sleep with him. But how could he get her to let go of her dead husband? To live and love life again? To even enjoy Christmas? He wanted to see her as the woman she was, not the mourning, poor soul she'd become. He knew she would always love her husband. But if tonight was any indication, she was ready to move on.

Ideas began to coalesce in his mind. He was going to take advantage of this

snowstorm. Stay until the last flake melted.

Christmas was in a week. Somehow, deep inside, he knew if he could change this Christmas, to make it a wonderful time for her again, she would bloom like a beautiful, ruby-red poinsettia. Ma would be pissed if he weren't home for the holiday, though. He sighed, realizing how caught up he was getting in wooing a woman he'd known for two days. He couldn't ditch his own family for her. To him, nothing meant more than family. But the ideas just kept churning. He couldn't get the thought of having her out of his head.

He'd stay until Christmas Eve, and if things worked out, he'd take her home to meet his mother for Christmas. It was a long shot, even a bit absurd, the thought of him falling head over heels so fast. But Noelle had a way of itching at his soul without saying a word, pestering him to care. To be with her.

Yes, he was going to do all sorts of things, naughty and nice. Now where to start... He saw himself presenting all sorts of sweet romantic Christmas surprises to her. Making her suppressed dreams come true. And she of course, would fall in love with him. Metamorphosed from the town crazy to the woman he knew she was. And then ... visions began to dance in his head like sugarplums. Happily-ever-after played right along with his plans. Normally he'd shove such thoughts away. But not this time. This time they seemed to fit in so well.

Hours later, his eyes grew heavy. Slowly, sleep began to take him...

* * * *

Her heat woke him. Her body had become hot and so sweaty he'd been dreaming the place was on fire. His stomach twisted in worry. He jerked his eyes open, suddenly acutely alert. And worried.

He practically stuck to her, having to pull himself free as he sat up, carefully laying her to the floor. Damn. Her skin was scorching with fever. This was not good.

He laid his hand on her forehead. "Noelle. Noelle, wake up."

"Miserable," she murmured. She burst out in a fit of hacking coughs. She sounded so congested.

Damn. Fear clutched him. She was sick as hell. And he didn't have to think hard to guess where she'd gotten the cough from—the clerk at the store. Yesterday's bitter winter storm could make even the slightest cough a dangerous illness ... and accelerate the symptoms.

She was shaking, cold though she was hot. Damn it all, she needed a doctor. But there was no way he could get her to one. The risk wasn't worth the benefit in this weather ... travel was too dangerous. He threw the blanket off and wrapped it around her. He snuggled her up tight, his hand caressing her forehead. He had to do something for her. They couldn't stay here.

But what time was it? They couldn't venture out into the dark again. If he got them lost it'd kill her. The office was sealed up well for an old barn, likely to keep the heat in. He threw on his clothes, stepping out the office door. The cold, as well as dim light, greeted him. Through the cracks in the barn paneling, sunshine streamed through

Perfect. At least he could get her to the house. He hurried back in, poking the remaining embers in the fireplace to the very back for safety. Then he gathered her in his arms, covered her face with the blanket and headed outside.

* * * *

Noelle sniffled, slowly lifting the spoonful of homemade chicken noodle soup to her mouth. At least she was feeling somewhat better, thanks to her personal guardian angel that sat in the rocking chair beside her bed, flipping channels. He hadn't left her side in three days, except to do sweet things like get her cool rags and make her soup. No man had ever made her soup before, not even Dan. Each time she'd broken free from the deliriousness of the fever, he'd been there to hold her hand. He told her stories, funny things that had happened in his life. The ornery things he did as a child. He'd even watched soap operas with her.

She owed him big time. Not only had he saved her life, but now this. It made her sorry for the way she acted the night in the barn. Yes, she'd slept with him out of passion, but there had been an underlying resentment to him nosing his way into her life. She wasn't used to, well, anyone anymore. She was used to being alone. Fending for herself. Loving only a ghost.

What she felt right now was different. As much as she hated it, Dan wasn't at the forefront of her mind, Chase was. Now she almost wished they'd waited and made slow passionate love. The kind of sweet, pleasure-filled sex that bonded two souls together. Not getting randy just to obtain satisfaction. Somehow, she wished they'd had more...

Taking the last slurp of soup, she turned to Chase. "I'm done. I think maybe I'd like to try out my feet today. Get in the shower. I stink."

He chuckled, his dark eyes lighting with pleasure. "Not too bad. But it's good to see you feeling better. I was really worried about you."

A red-faced moment rushed through her. He'd said something so sweet, something she was grateful to hear, yet she just didn't know how to respond. She wasn't used to men, or anyone, caring. Not since Dan had died.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I owe my health to you."

"You think you're all right to get in the shower alone?" he asked, then shook his head as if he'd changed his mind. "No. I think you're still too sniffly and unstable. I'll draw you a bath and help you out. I'll even wash your back."

"Chase..." She hesitated, biting her lower lip.

"Oh, come on. It's not like I haven't seen you nude before. And besides, who's been bathing you with a cool rag these past few days? Who changed your nightgown? Come on." He held out a hand for her. She took it, still feeling slightly strange. Compared to those things, even to sleeping with him, this felt incredibly intimate. To have him watch her wash herself, possibly help her. Yet, he was right. It wasn't anything he hadn't seen already. And honestly, she did feel a bit lightheaded as she stood up.

His arms wrapped around her to hold her steady as he led her into the bathroom. Once there, she sat on the toilet as he drew a bath in the old claw-foot tub. The water steamed and he readjusted it, then dumped in some bubble bath, the sweet, sensual lavender perfuming the air.

He said nothing. Neither did she. He walked to her and lifted her nightgown over her head. She raised her arms, letting him pull it free. Tossing it aside, he knelt before her. "I just can't help myself. You're beautiful. Even smelly." He smiled.

His lips found her nipples, slowly French kissing them. Immediately she became wet, instant desire erasing everything but him. Her body coursed with hot want, sensations rippling through her with each stroke. Chase's magical tongue traced the circle

of her areola then licked upwards towards her neck. He nibbled at her collarbone, his fingers going to her underwear. Slowly he slipped them down.

He lifted her, still sucking and kissing her neck as he carried her to the tub and lowered her. She sank into the hot water, disappointed when his lips left her. "Join me."

"I..." He cleared his throat, looking hesitant. "Are you sure? If you're not feeling up to it..."

"Oh, I am." The word 'am' must have sent a lightning shock through him. He stripped his clothes off so fast it was amazing. In no time, his lithe, tall body was revealed. Last time she'd only seen him by the light of the fire. This was entirely different. Her gaze soaked up every curve of his muscles, especially his built chest and six-pack stomach. The man was fit. Gloriously fit.

Her gaze went to his engorged cock, standing nine inches tall and ready. His cock was wide as well, making her wonder how he even fit the thing in his tight jeans. In her. But damn, she wanted it there again. Weakness from her sickness be damned.

He stepped closer and she reached out, taking his cock in her hands. She ran her thumb along the veins of his shaft, caressing the soft spot behind its head. He moaned, lowering himself to her attentions. Moving onto her knees, she pulled him to her mouth. She kissed him softly, tracing her tongue along the back of his cock. She flicked the tip of his head, then grasped him in her palm, fingers curling over his wide width. Gently she pulled him forward. "In."

He stepped over the side, settling in the water towards the back of the tub. His legs wrapped around her as he pulled her to into his arms. She felt his sex pressed against her fanny, right along her crack. If she scooted back just a tad farther...

He spooned water and bubbles over her shoulders and chest with his hands. He pulled her closer as he soaked a loofah sponge, bathing her in the scent of lavender. The soft caress was magic against her skin, light yet powerful. She wanted more than a washing. She wanted him. Taking the sponge from him, she tossed it in the water with a splash.

Pulling his hands around to her breasts, she molded his strong fingers to cup them. He flicked and rubbed at her nipples, massaging the mounds. The rough calluses on his fingers only added to the sensations ripping through her body. He brought his mouth to her neck, kissing and nuzzling her. Tracing his tongue upwards, he took her lobe into his mouth. Tingles rushed down her spine.

She reached around, grasping his shaft. She ran her fingers along his length in a caress. He groaned again. "Slower."

This was one of those times where slow was not in her vocabulary. She wanted him—bad. Fast. Hard. She had a feeling, though, she was not about to get what she wanted. But she bet she'd love it all the same.

Lowering one of his hands, he scooped up bubbles and poured them over her body. They tingled with warmth over her skin. God. It felt good. Everything he did felt like heaven. He lifted a bar of soap and began trailing it over her curves. Lower and lower he worked, finally delving between the folds of her sex. He washed her there, his thumb occasionally brushing her clit.

He continued to tease her neck with his lips and tongue, driving her to the brink. She arched her body, and he took that moment to slip the soap around. He ran it between the cleft of her cheeks, washing parts of her that made her clench with need. His thumb

caressed her anus ... on purpose or by accident? It puckered, hungry for entry.

He must have sensed her reaction. "You like that, don't you?"

"Yes," she gasped in a half whisper. "I do."

"Bring your body back tighter against me."

She obeyed him, scooting back against his cock as far as she could. He slid his pinky finger in her puckering hole and pulled her on top of his cock. His rod filled her. Holding his finger in her anus, he moved slowly in and out of her. Ecstasy wrapped around her as she thrust against him.

He wrapped his arm around her breasts, cupping one, preventing them from jiggling as he played with her nipple. The water sloshed around them, flying everywhere. Not that she cared. The tub could fall through the floor and it would be worth it.

She leaned forward, allowing him better access to all of her. The position made his cock rub against her g-spot, driving her crazy. The pleasure built so high she could hardly take it. All at once, she burst. Her sex convulsed around him in a frenzied orgasm. He jerked inside of her as his cum filled her.

She panted, sniffing from her cold. God. Talk about the right medicine. Her nose might still be stuffy, but she felt like a goddess. Ready to get up and dance.

His hand splayed over her back. "That was great."

"Was? It's hardly over." She scooted around until she faced him. "It's my turn now."

Fishing for the soap, she snagged the slippery bar and began rubbing it over his body. Slowly. Tantalizingly. She was going to clean him up...

* * * *

A silly grin had glued itself to Chase's face and would not relent. He didn't feel like he was walking on two feet of packed snow. He was walking through heaven.

Axe in hand, he headed toward the stand of trees behind the house. She was napping, but when she awoke, he wanted to have a surprise for her. Now that she was finally feeling better, thank God, it was time to put his plan into action. After three days of worrying over her, he'd only grown to care for her more. And this afternoon in the tub ... that kind of sex changed a man. Yeah. He was definitely changed.

He searched through the trees, wanting to find the right one. The hunt was on. He found more cedar than anything amongst the oaks and maples. But there had to be something decent out here. He wasn't giving up.

And then he saw it. He swore God himself was pointing the tree out, the way the sunlight beamed down upon it. Chase picked up his pace, amazed by the beauty of the tree. It was perfect in every fashion. Taller than him, it didn't have a single empty spot or dead branch. Enthralled, he reached out and fingered a limb. As soon as he touched it a strange, powerful feeling invaded him. Like someone had just punched him in the chest. Knocked the air from him. He gasped, and as he did, a man's voice spoke. "Don't hurt her. Take care of her. I loved her, but I'm going now. It's time ... your time."

Chase yanked back with all his strength, pulling away from the powerful, unnerving force. Falling to the ground, he sucked in a deep breath. *Shit!* What the hell was that?

His heart raced along with his breath. He almost didn't dare touch the tree again. Yet he had to know. Slowly he reached out again, fingering the needles. Nothing. Could it have been his imagination?

No. No way. It had been very real.

His teeth clamped together as he studied the tree for several minutes before he chopped it down. It was too weird. But then, things hadn't seemed normal in days, had they? He swung the axe in a frenzy, hacking away at the tree until it crashed to the ground. Then he grabbed it by the trunk and hauled it towards the house. He couldn't wait to show Noelle his prize.

* * * *

The sound of the door slamming shut woke her. Noelle turned over on the couch, looking toward the living room doorway. "Chase?"

Then it hit her—the strong, overbearing holiday scent of fresh pine. She snapped up like a whip.

In walked Chase, dragging a huge Christmas tree behind him. She gasped aloud, her eyes widening so far her pupils felt a draft.

"What the hell is that?"

"A Christmas tree." He tossed her a beaming smile that curled into his cheeks in a knock-you-out kind of manner. "Isn't it great?"

Panic raced to her heart. "No! No, you have no right bringing that in here!"

She pressed back against the couch, as if the tree would somehow hurt her. She knew it wouldn't, but she was scared of what it represented. Complete healing. She'd thrown away the mistletoe. She'd made love to another man. She'd let go as much as she could. She couldn't go on this far. She couldn't have Christmas without her husband.

A single hot tear rolled down her cheek, sniffles following. Her stomach twisted in annoyance at the thought of painful memories. Ones she'd thought she'd long since buried.

A look of shock crossed Chase's face, his dark eyes suddenly going puppy dog. Dropping the tree, he hurried to her and pulled her close. His fingers swept away the tears that now fell like a rainstorm.

"Hey, I didn't mean to upset you." His voice was like velvet. So soft. Kind.

"I know," she sobbed.

"It's close to Christmas. I thought we could celebrate a little, sweetie." He stroked her face, kissing her head. His lips were soft and loving upon her. She felt herself turning to mush. He had the power to do that.

"I thought we could try a little holiday mood on for size. But I don't want to upset you like this," he continued.

The words were so hard to speak. "I know ... it's just..."

"Tell me," he urged her. He sat on the couch and pulled her into his lap. "Tell me why Christmas upsets you."

"Because it was our favorite holiday, Dan's and mine. We always celebrated it ... and now he's gone."

"And it brings bad memories?" He let his words sit a moment. "Or good ones?"

She started at his question. *Good ones?* Her mind raced with the thought. The memories. The truth was, she and Dan didn't have a single bad Christmas memory. They were beautiful. Wonderful. Heartwarming. That's why she avoided them.

They were so hard to remember most of the time. A single thought of Christmas choked her up past the point of making sense. She couldn't do it. She couldn't.

"Do you think Dan would want you to be sad like this? I don't." Chase stroked her

hair.

Damn he was sweet. Loving. She wanted to be mad at him about the tree. About prodding her to talk about Dan. But it was impossible to be angry towards a man so very good.

“No,” she answered honestly. “He loved Christmas time.”

“I think you need to talk about him. Stop shutting yourself in. Tell me a story. Your favorite Christmas story.”

“I can’t.” She shook her head.

“Try.”

She hesitated, the knot already forming in her throat. Tears brimmed in her eyes at the thought of sharing a memory out loud. Her lips trembled as she began to tell him of their first kiss under the mistletoe.

“Dan was carrying on ... like always.” At first she was so choked up, she thought she’d suffocate on the words. “I was standing right there...” She pointed to the doorway. She sniffled, then something in her released. With each word she spoke, it got a little easier. “Back then this was his parent’s house, and we were both in our teens, so he felt free to act like a brat here. Suddenly he came stumbling into me. Practically barreled me down before he caught me. To this day I am convinced he did it on purpose just to kiss me. He held me there a second, tight in his embrace, looked up, and eyed the mistletoe. The next thing you know, we were kissing and in a not-so-chaste manner either, mind you. And then in came his parents.” Suddenly she was laughing, a weight lifted from her. And she couldn’t stop. “You know what? Let’s put up that beautiful tree.”

Inhaling deeply, she glanced at the mistletoe in the doorway and smiled. She would always have that. She would always have Christmas. With any luck, she’d always have Chase, too.

* * * *

Hours later, Chase made the tree official by plugging in the lights. Large old-fashioned bulbs she had inherited from her mother lit up the room in reds, greens, yellows, and blues. They lit up her heart as well.

Chase came around the base of the large tree, grinning like a kid. “We need a train.”

To her amazement, she felt herself sparkle. “I have one.”

He chuckled. “Of course you do. From the looks of the attic, you have everything Christmas.”

“We’ll never get it done tonight, it’s too late.”

“Then I say let’s enjoy what we have.” He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close. His hardened cock pressed against her stomach. Caressing her face, he urged her head back and began to nuzzle and kiss her lips. Just as the Christmas lights had burst on with the help of electricity, she came alive with brilliant need. Moaning as he kissed along her neck and around her collarbone, she let herself sink into his hold. He lowered her to the floor, lavishing her with his mouth.

Sprawled on the plush rug, she opened herself to him. He paid attention to every inch of her skin as he appraised her with hot, hungry kisses. As he worked on her jeans buttons, his tongue found her belly button, teasing. She arched up, wanting him to lick other, more delicate areas. She was wet, ready for him. Her clit pulsed with heady desire. Slowly, he pulled her pants down. She wanted to scream at him to hurry up. To get inside

of her. And she almost did, until she realized how far south his tongue was heading.

Holding her panties aside, his tongue delved between her folds. He licked her slowly, all the way up and down her length. She pushed her bottom in the air, allowing him more access. He used it thoroughly, nibbling at her clit.

“God, you’re sweet,” he murmured, causing a breath of air to tickle her sex. “Like the nectar of honeysuckle.”

Slipping two fingers into her sex, he fucked her with them as he licked her. Ecstasy flowed through her body, lighting her from top to bottom. His tongue stroked her so well, like he knew just what spots to hit, and when. She thrust herself up, wanting more, needing more as bliss built in her. Suddenly she burst, millions of little lights going off inside her. She released herself over his mouth as he continued to lick her, until she was lying exhausted from passion.

* * * *

“Chase!” Noelle called out, once again trying to lift the box. “Chase, I need your help with this one. It’s too heavy for me.”

They were almost done. Tomorrow was Christmas and this year, she wanted it to be right again. For two days they had covered the house, inside and out, with decorations. Everything from candles in the windows to wreaths and a waving snowman outside and even climbing elves on the trellis. The place once again resembled a winter wonderland. Only the train was left...

“Chase!” she hollered down the attic stairs.

Where *was* he? He should be able to hear her. She sighed and started down the steps. She supposed she had become used to having him glued to her side. They’d been like peas and carrots for almost a week now. He’d stuck with her through being sick, helped her heal in time for Christmas, and given her the best advice of her life. Talking about Dan, remembering the good times as good had helped. A lot. She felt like a new woman. Chase was like her very own personal angel. But real ... and sexy.

She took a second flight of steps to the first floor “Chase!”

Silence answered. Strange. She wandered through the rooms, but didn’t see him anywhere. He must have walked outside a moment. Going out the front door, she stepped onto the huge wrap around, snow-covered porch.

She gasped in shock, not believing her eyes. There he sat, in a simple white sleigh drawn by two beautiful white horses. She took a hesitant step down, unable to process it. “Chase?”

“The roads are clear now. I had an old friend do me a favor.” He stood, offering her his hand. “A ride, milady?”

Complete, utter joy bubbled up within her. Running, she crossed the distance between them and took his hand. He helped her up, placing his hand to the small of her back as he guided her to the seat. Once she was situated, he resumed his spot next to her and gathered the reins. With one light flick, they were off.

She could compare it to nothing but a dream, a scene in a movie. The farm was beautiful, but there was nothing like taking in ice-covered fencing, snow-laden trees, and sprawling acres of white fields from a sleigh. Maybe she had needed this to see the property for what it really was ... a treasure.

For awhile, they rode in comfortable silence. The view was too breathtaking to

peak. He drove over the upper field, the sleigh making a slicing, crunching sound against the thick snow. Once atop the hill, he reined in the horses. It was the perfect spot. The pond sprawled out beneath them in the valley, iced over and snow covered. Weeping willow trees surrounded it. Their condition reminded her of an old man's long beard. The child within her itched to run and play under them, to pretend she was an ice princess. But alas, she didn't have her boots on, so she was staying put. She did not plan to be sick for Christmas.

Instead she snuggled close to Chase, who wrapped his arms around her and drew her tight. His fingers stroked her hair, running its length.

"It's funny," he drawled in his deepest southern tone. As if he were trying to be seductive. "How deeply you can come to care for someone in only a short time. How they can change your whole life."

"Mmmm," she murmured. "I can't argue with that."

He planted a kiss on top of her head. "Good. Then you'll agree to come with me tomorrow. Meet my mother? Have Christmas dinner?"

For a moment, her natural inclination was to say no. She didn't do Christmas dinner. She didn't go anywhere but the store.

But now, her life had changed. Because of him. She slowly nodded. "Of course."

He let out a quick sigh, and cleared his throat. "And one other thing... Don't answer now, but I was thinking, and I know it's soon, but just hear me out. Don't you think Winters would make a good last name for you? You know, Noelle Winters?" He paused a moment, placing a finger to her lips when she opened her mouth to respond. "Just think about it. Let the idea sink in. Let me sink in."

She couldn't help but smile. It *did* sound good. And if she started planning now, this time next year, they could be having a grandiose Christmas wedding. Gazing up at him with a grin, she kept her answer to herself. For now.

When they returned to the house, Chase's friend who owned the sleigh and horses waited for them.

Chase gave him a nod, and lifted her from the sleigh into his arms, swinging her around. He sang, bellowing out "Jingle Bells" as they headed toward the porch. He swung her round and round, then stumbled up the stairs as his friend watched on with a smile.

* * * *

He was high. High on love. On life. On Christmas. It had finally happened for him. *Him*. He hadn't thought it possible at his age.

He pushed open the door, set her down and grabbed her hands. They danced the waltz as he sang, acting silly and laughing.

A strong feeling invaded him and instantly he realized they were under the mistletoe. Something in him told him to stop. He froze in place. Entranced, he stared up at the small sprig of greenery. A rush of warmth overcame him. Passion swept over him in a whirlwind, fierce, strong, and desperate.

Immediately his cock stood at attention, so hard it was almost painful. He groaned, pulling her against him.

He looked at Noelle, trying to read her. One glance in her blue eyes and he could tell she sensed the pull too. It was stronger than anything he'd ever experienced. Stronger

than humanly possible.

But unlike him, Noelle didn't look confused. Not one bit.

He wanted to question her, but words escaped him in the heat of the moment. He couldn't help but attack her mouth, kissing her like a starving man. She returned his passion with vigor, their tongues sweeping together like tidal waves crashing the shore.

But in the back of his mind, as he was enjoying the strong release of passion, he couldn't help the slow realization... This was why Noelle had collected so much mistletoe. She hadn't been crazy. She'd been haunted and relishing every moment. She loved her deceased husband. Had mourned for him and kept him near in the only way she knew how.

Now he understood. Her late husband was responsible. Dan was creating the whirlwind of sensation. Chase could sense him. He felt the same strange ambiance he'd felt while chopping down the tree. And in that moment, Chase knew.

Dan was giving his blessing. He was giving away his wife.

Could Noelle sense it to? She had to. Otherwise, she wouldn't be reacting this way, would she? No. If anything, he would expect her to be upset right now. Instead, she was wild against his lips. He wrapped her tight against him, softening his kiss to one of love as well as passion. She moaned, pressing for more as she spoke between kisses. "Merry Christmas, Chase. Would you like your present now?"

"Only if it's you," he murmured between kisses.

"Oh, yes." She pulled away from him, stroking her fingers against the shadow of stubble along his jaw. She held his gaze, her eyes overflowing with love. "I think Winters is the perfect last name for me. Noelle Winters."

The End

About the Author:

If there is one thing Alyssa Brooks believes, it is that the world is at her fingertips. She wants to touch, taste, and experience everything, from haunted castles to tropical islands, to skydiving or swimming with the dolphins. Knowledge is her power, and books are her escape. Everyday, writing takes her on a new adventure to wherever she wants to go. But wherever it may be, she likes it exciting and she likes it HOT.

Alyssa has multiple erotic romances e-published and coming soon in print. *Arrested* was her first in her hot idea for a 'Men In Uniform' line, and has been followed by erotic romances of all genres. Currently she writes for Liquid Silver Books, Loose-Id, Chippewa Publishing, and Whiskey Creek Press. When she isn't writing new fantasies for her beloved fans, her time is spent gardening, collecting porcelain dolls as well as snow globes and wind chimes, and hiking.

To find out more about Alyssa's books, visit her website at www.alyssabrooks.com. Readers can view free short stories there, and get more info on joining her ezine, Wicked Escapes. Wicked Escapes is a monthly treat in your inbox, featuring an escape from a featured erotic author, excerpts, and many extras.

She adores hearing from fans. To email her, send to admin@alyssabrooks.com

The Christmas Dagger

MacKenzie Reed

Dedication

A word of thanks to my friend and fellow author, Dee S. Knight. You're the best!

Prologue

Atlanta

Feet propped on the desk, Caryn leaned back in her leather chair and settled in. She switched the phone from her left ear to her right and sighed. “Professor, it’s almost Christmas. Why in the world would I want to go traipsing off to heaven knows where? And for what? A trinket that some rich old fool wants to add to his collection.” Caryn twirled a tendril of hair around her index finger as she listened. “You know I never take a job during the month of December.”

“Yes, my dear, I do know that. But Caryn, they will make it worth your while.”

“Hmm ... I don’t know.” She let her voice trail off as in deep thought. She loved to make the professor squirm. She loved the old man, period. If it hadn’t been for him she never would have discovered treasure hunting. Granted, it wasn’t a steady paying job, but she reveled in the danger, the hunt, and the discovery. Even now she got shivers when she thought about going on a trip. But during the Christmas holidays? She didn’t know about that.

As the daughter of two well-known professors of archaeology, Caryn had traveled to exotic places with her parents. She thrived on desert sands, sultry bayous, and dark, damp jungles. Her parents’ love for their field had brought about a joy in her that had never been quenched. The older she got the more fascinated she became. She loved the thrill of the chase, looking for and finding buried treasure, or a statue worth a fortune. Her parents hoped that she would follow in their footsteps, and as for Caryn, that was her plan.

Then she went to college and signed up for Professor White’s class on rare artifacts and treasures. The world he’d opened up fascinated and excited her. Right then and there, Caryn knew what she wanted to be: a seeker of lost treasures.

Breaking the news to her parents hadn’t been easy or fun. Her father ranted and raved while her mother patted his arm and smiled. In the end, though, they’d both embraced Caryn’s chosen profession with open arms.

And now here it was, only three weeks before Christmas and someone wanted her to go after something. Did these people not care that it was the holiday season?

“Caryn? Are you still there? Did you hear me?” The professor’s nervousness snagged her attention from her musings.

“Yeah, I heard you. I’ll talk to them.” With a quick goodbye, Caryn hung up the phone, rested her head on the chair and hummed *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. Oh, this was going to be fun.

Chapter One

“Professor White, when is this fortune hunter of yours going to be here?” The man glanced at his watch, impatience showing in every movement, a frown on his face.

“Soon.” White mopped the sweat from his brow and tried to look cool and calm, but to no avail. She was already thirty minutes late and he knew she didn’t care. No, Caryn Sinclair didn’t give a damn who she kept waiting. He couldn’t blame her really. She was the best in her field and knew it. His brightest and most favored student, Caryn had taken to treasure hunting like a seasoned pro. It didn’t matter where she had to go or what she had to do to get the prize; Caryn always prevailed.

Drawn from his thoughts by the suits moving around again, he tried to alleviate the agitation and frustration he could feel stirring in the air before it got worse. And it would get worse the minute Caryn walked through the door and these men realized Caryn was a woman.

“Would anyone like some coffee, or tea perhaps?” He rose from his desk, heading for the sideboard when a rumbling noise from outside caught his attention. Relief poured through him. Caryn was here.

Quickly he turned and headed for the door. “Gentleman, she’s here.” He grasped the knob and twisted.

“She?” A deep voice in the shadows replied. “No one told us Sinclair was a woman.”

“You didn’t ask.” The professor opened the door, a smile on his face.

“Caryn,” he said, admiration in his tone. “Come in, my dear. There are some fellows here who are anxious to meet you.” He lowered his voice so only she could hear. “You’re late.”

“Traffic,” she replied with a grin.

White chuckled and stepped aside, allowing her entrance.

Caryn placed a daughterly peck on his cheek, winked, and walked in. White shook his head, smiled and closed the door. This was going to be fun. From the look on Caryn’s face she was in a mood to play, which meant the gentlemen were in for one helluva ride.

* * * *

Caryn waltzed in like she owned the world, and maybe she did in some strange sort of way. Or at least little bits and pieces of it. She glanced around the room, nodded to the gentlemen and continued toward the professor’s desk, sat her helmet down and then plopped down in his chair.

Crossing her arms over her leather-covered chest, Caryn surveyed the occupants in the room. Two well-dressed gentlemen in dark navy suits hovered around a man seated in the shadows. Ah, so he was the rich schmooze looking for treasure. She mentally shrugged. Oh well, who was she to judge? She lived well and had money saved up for a rainy day.

“So what is it you want me to retrieve?” She addressed her question to the man in the shadows but wasn’t surprised when one of the suits opened his mouth to answer.

She stopped him with a raised hand. “I didn’t ask you,” she said, calmly pointing her

finger at the seated man. "I asked him." The look on the suit's face was comical. Bless his little heart, he didn't know what to say or do. She narrowed her gaze on the shadow man and wondered if he would come to the guy's rescue or leave him floundering. She wasn't disappointed.

"That's okay, Phil," the man replied. "I'll take it from here. Obviously Ms. Sinclair doesn't like to deal with lackeys."

Ouch! That stung. "I never said he was a lackey." Irritation burned in her gut.

"My mistake."

Caryn arched a brow and waited. "So, are you going to talk or are we going to sit here all day?"

"What would you say if I told you there was a treasure out there, hidden deep beneath the sands of Egypt that could tell the future?"

Caryn sat up. "I'm listening."

"I want you to travel there and retrieve this rare find for me. Of course, I will cover all your expenses and pay you ... say ... one hundred thousand dollars?"

Interesting. "Uh huh." She motioned for him to continue, uncaring if she ticked him off or not.

"My associate will travel with you and keep me informed of your progress."

A watchdog? Did this guy seriously think she was going to stand for that? This man was either stupid or he was playing her. She'd bet money on it being the latter. She'd also bet his *associate* was in the room. There was only one way to find out. She rose from the chair and picked up her helmet.

"I don't think this is going to work out." She headed for the door.

"Caryn Sinclair." A new voice called out and Caryn gasped. The voice was deeper, richer than the others and oh, damn, did it make her body stand to attention. She was glad she hadn't removed her leather jacket or else they'd see her tight nipples poking against her black tank top.

She knew that voice. Without turning, Caryn replied. "Yes?"

"What can it hurt to listen? Come on back."

She shivered. His words, though simple, were erotic and hypnotic. Why now, after all these years? Everything in her life was fine. Okay, so most of the time her lovers were toys. Really expensive, exclusive toys, but still satisfying nonetheless. *Really? Then why are your panties soaked and your nipples hard?* the voice in her head asked mockingly. "Oh, shut up," she grumbled.

"Excuse me?"

Shit! She closed her eyes. Had she said that out loud? Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes and turned around.

"Hello Rex." She smiled, all the while hurting inside. "Long time no see." *Six months to be exact, you jerk.*

"Same here, Red." He inclined his head allowing a small smile to grace his lips before turning all business again.

"Rex, do you know this woman?" the man in the shadows asked, his voice tinged with anger.

Caryn grinned widely. "Will you tell them or shall I?"

She watched his eyes narrow and his gaze roam over her leather-clad body before returning to her face. Her breath caught when his gaze lowered to her lips. She knew

what it felt like to be kissed by that mouth. Hell, every inch of her body knew and loved it, reveled in it. But that was in the past, this was now.

She'd given up on Rex St. James about six months ago when he'd left without a word, and with the artifact they'd uncovered. She wasn't about to fall into that trap again.

"Yeah, I know her."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and Caryn couldn't help but look at his groin. She wasn't disappointed. Evidently the sexual current between them was still strong because he was sporting a massive hard-on behind his black slacks. Unconsciously, she licked her lips, remembering everything about him. He tasted of darkness, earth and potent male. She'd never sampled anything like him before or since.

"Caryn always pays attention to the little things that make up the big picture, noticing things no one else does. Sometimes it gets us in trouble." His voice, raspy and deep, pulled her attention back to his face. Barely leashed desire swirled in his chocolate brown eyes. Eyes that even now drew her in with a mere glance. At one time his eyes had held her heart and soul, but he'd dashed that away when he'd betrayed her.

She remembered everything in vivid color and detail, from their early morning lovemaking to his kiss good-bye when he walked away with the prize. Oh, the prize didn't really matter to her, it was Rex that mattered. He'd seduced her, made her love him, and then stomped on her heart with both his booted feet. That day had sealed her fate. Never again would she fall prey to another man. Especially one like Rex, with his rugged good looks and a smile that could melt ice.

"Caryn," Rex hissed quietly.

Oops! Now was not the time for a trip down memory lane. Mentally shaking herself from the past, Caryn looked at Rex and waited for him to continue.

"Rex? I'm waiting."

Damn that pushy fool. Caryn looked over Rex's shoulder and glared at the shadowy figure. "Hold your horses, buddy. We'll get to you in a minute."

"Now see here, Miss Sinclair..."

She waved her hand. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Don't bust a gut."

"Will you stay and listen to the offer?" Rex's softly spoken question, in that voice she loved so much, drew her gaze back to him.

"Why? If they've got you they obviously don't need me." She shifted her arms, the leather of her jacket creaking in the silence of the room. "What do they need me for?"

Rex shrugged, the corner of his mouth lifted into a smile. "You're the best. And they want the best."

Rex always knew what to say to get under her skin. And dammit, he was doing it now. Except this time he wasn't trying to coax her into bed. She chuckled. Well, at least not the recreational "let's have sex" kind of bed, anyway. It pissed her off that he could stand there as though nothing untoward had happened between them.

"You're right. I am the best." She pivoted on her heel, and headed for the door. "Sorry, gentlemen, but I'm not interested. Find yourself another hunter. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got gifts to buy and a party to plan." With a jaunty wave over her shoulder, Caryn left Rex and the others gaping at her back as she walked away. Caryn allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction knowing that Rex would be interrogated about their relationship. No doubt, he would pay her a visit real soon and offer her more money. Would she take it? Hell no! Rejecting the job wasn't about the money, it was

about Rex. Why was he back? And most of all, what did that mean for her?

She reached the street, strapped on her helmet and climbed on her motorcycle. Starting the engine, she revved the motor and grinned. The power idling between her thighs was nearly orgasmic. Ah, yes! Rex would come knocking and she planned to be ready. She hit the clutch, gave the cycle some juice and off she went, riding through the streets and heading for home. It was a good thing she knew the way and there was no traffic on the bypass because her thoughts were on Rex and the men in the room rather than the road.

What could possibly be so important that they wanted it located and retrieved during the Christmas holidays? No whispers of anything of vital importance had reached her ears through the circles she moved in. If it had she'd know about it ... and found it by now. Was she smug? No! Caryn Sinclair was simply good at her job. The question was ... what exactly were these men after?

Caryn turned off the road and onto her driveway. Heading up the straight, long drive, her house came into view. Beautifully decorated evergreen swags filled with holly berries draped the windows and the door, a big red bow placed neatly in each corner of the garland. Through the front window she caught glimpses of the huge tree decorated with colorful ornaments and bright lights. Christmas was her favorite time of year and she went all out with decorating, partying, and such. Which reminded her ... tomorrow she had to call the orphanage and set a date for the annual Christmas party. The kids were going to love it this year. Caryn had big plans.

Pride filled her heart as her eyes roamed over her ancestral home. Her father and mother may have jetted all over the world, but when it was time to come home, they had this house. And since their passing three years ago, the lovely old home now belonged to her. She stopped and parked, then ran up the steps and through the opened front door.

"Good evening, Miss Caryn. How did the meeting go?" Giles asked, closing the door behind her.

"Not the way they expected, I'm sure." She tossed him her helmet and grinned. "They had no idea I was a woman. White never told them."

Giles nodded, set down her helmet and helped her out of her jacket. He hung it up and put it away before turning back to her.

"Ah, so what do they wish you to find? Buried treasure perhaps? A sunken ship?" Giles straightened his cuffs and waited.

Caryn had to smile. For as long as she could remember, Giles had always been there. As a little girl, she had vague memories of him taking her to the park when her parents were off somewhere that wasn't safe for her to go. Once he even snuck her in to see a baseball game. "It's our little secret," he'd whispered. To this day Caryn had kept that secret and without a doubt, so had Giles.

"I don't know what they want. I didn't ask." She pivoted on her heel, heading for the massive den and a stiff drink. "Rex was there."

"And?" Surprise and disgust warred with protectiveness in that one word.

"And nothing. We said hi, I told them I wasn't interested and left. End of story." She reached the mini bar, grabbed a glass, tossed a couple pieces of ice into it and then poured a little scotch. "Cheers." She raised her glass and took a long swallow. Instant fire burned her throat all the way to her stomach. But damn, it tasted so good.

"I take it we are expecting a visitor?" Giles knew her so well.

“Definitely.”

“And what are your plans? Will you accept the offer?”

“Absolutely not. I have no inclination to go traipsing around the world this close to Christmas. Which reminds me. We need to call Father Brown tomorrow and firm up our plans.”

“I shall make sure everything is in order, Miss Caryn.” With a slight bow, Giles walked away, his heels clicking on the ceramic tile.

She poured herself another scotch and then sat down at her desk, swiveling to watch the sunset. It was a beautiful thing and something she never missed. No matter where she was, Caryn always watched the sunset. In the window she could see the reflection of the brightly lit nine-foot tree in the corner by the fireplace. All the sparkling lights brought back fond memories of Christmas mornings, of running down the steps and into the den to rummage through the presents under the tree and discover what Santa Claus had left her. Shaking each wrapped package and trying to figure out its contents had been so much fun. Getting caught by her parents while shaking said packages had not.

God, she still missed them.

She knocked back her drink, sat the glass down and rose from the chair. She arched her back, stretching and twisting to work out all the kinks. The chiming of the grandfather clock told Caryn it was eight o'clock, time for a quick workout, a nice long shower and then bed. Tomorrow should be interesting. She hadn't lied when she told Giles about Rex's pending arrival. However, if Caryn knew Rex as well as she thought, he would be sneaking into her home sometime tonight.

Caryn strode from the den and made her way to her own personal gym. Once there, she shed her boots and socks, did a few breathing exercises and warm-ups, and then went straight into a hard workout routine. Anyone watching would have seen a determined woman putting her body through intense, strenuous paces. For those who knew Caryn, it was more than that. It was her way of working through her thoughts, processing and assessing everything before making a decision that could get her killed.

Her job wasn't the easiest by far, and she'd come close to dying a time or two. Well, not too close, but close enough. The last time she nearly bit the bullet, Rex was there to save her. Of course, it was that same mission that he'd betrayed her and run off with her find. Damn the man for his arrogance. And damn him for being unforgettable.

“Would you like something to eat before I retire?”

Caryn did a back flip off the balance beam, landing perfectly a few feet in front of Giles. He clapped in appraisal and smiled. Caryn took a bow and when she rose, Giles stood there holding out a towel to her. She took it.

“Thanks.” She wiped the sweat from her face and neck. Wrapping the towel around her neck, she moved to the tiny fridge and grabbed an ice-cold bottled water, screwed off the cap and took a long, healthy swig. After wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, much to Giles chagrin, Caryn replied to his earlier question about food.

“Thanks, Giles, but I'm not hungry.” She finished off the water and tossed it into the garbage can. “I think I'll take a hot shower and then go to bed.”

Giles nodded. “Very well, Miss. I will see you in the morning, then.” He pivoted on his heel and headed toward his rooms.

Caryn watched him go, wondering what she would do without him. Giles was everything to her ... butler, friend, and parent. He'd bandaged her scraped knees, scolded

her for sliding down the banister as a teen, and wiped her tears when her mother died. A thoughtful smile curved her lips when she thought of her gift to him this year, a trip home to visit his relatives. She couldn't wait to see his face on Christmas morning when he opened up the box and found the ticket.

Before retiring, she checked the locks one last time, making sure everything was secure before heading upstairs. She softly hummed *Silent Night* as she made her way to her rooms. Her bed was calling her name and she readily listened. After a quick shower to loosen her aching muscles, Caryn dried off, turned out the light and padded into her bedroom. Foregoing a nightgown, she slid beneath teal colored sheets that smelled of sunshine and flowers and smiled. Giles had changed the sheets today.

She snagged a piece of chocolate from the nightstand, took a bite and hummed in pleasure. Chocolate was her one vice. Well, the only one she indulged in anyway. As she put the last bit in her mouth, she wondered what she would do when Rex came knocking on the door the next day. Without a doubt, Caryn knew Rex would try to make his way into her life once more. How was she going to handle that?

Staring at the ceiling and fighting off her emotions, Caryn sighed. "I won't give in. No matter what lucrative offer he brings to the table, I will not take it." *Yeah, right! Her inner voice scoffed.*

She was doomed.

Rolling to her side and with her hand beneath her chin, Caryn drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Two

After Caryn left the office, Rex and the others weren't far behind. Once inside the car, Rex's employer started grilling him about her. How did Rex know Miss Sinclair? Was it going to be a problem for him to work with her? He glossed over the first question, skipping intimate details and answered the second one as honestly as possible. Now here he stood in the freezing cold on the balcony outside Caryn's bedroom with an offer he hoped she wouldn't refuse. He blew warm air into his hands and then went to work.

Quietly, Rex jimmied the lock on the French doors to Caryn's bedroom. He heard a soft click and smiled. No alarms. The door opened without a sound and Rex entered, pulling the door closed behind him. The room was dimly lit and he wondered at the source, then his thoughts shifted to the big four-poster bed in the center of the room and the woman sleeping in it. He shook his head and softly chuckled. Women! Why in the world they thought it was romantic to have such a big bed was beyond him. When he'd questioned Caryn about it, she simply shrugged and said, "I like lots of room."

That was all water under the bridge. Now he needed to talk, to explain the situation and get her on board. Otherwise he was in deep shit because without her, Johansen didn't want Rex. Damn! He never should have burned his bridges with Caryn six months ago. Taking the artifact they'd found together, making love to her and then leaving under the cover of darkness was probably the stupidest thing he'd ever done. No, it was *the* stupidest thing.

His only excuse was that he was scared. Scared of the feelings she invoked in him and the ones she lavished on him. He wasn't ignorant. He knew Caryn was falling in love with him, yet he still betrayed her trust. A soft sigh from the direction of the bed drew Rex from his reverie.

Silently he crossed over to the bed, his breath catching at the sight before him. Caryn lay on her back her arms beside her head, her naked breasts rising and falling with each breath she took. With her sleeping, Rex was able to study her freely, leisurely.

His mouth watered. What he wouldn't give to lean over and take a pert nipple into his mouth and suck it, gently biting the tip until it was stiff. Then he'd move to the other side and give that nipple the same treatment. Before he could stop himself, he circled the dusty pink tip with his finger, eliciting a moan from Caryn. Her back arched upward as though offering him the tiny morsel for his pleasure. That wasn't the case, he knew. She was probably dreaming about a lover caressing her body, bringing her to the heights of pleasure and then pushing her over the edge into a mind-blowing orgasm. He jerked his hand back as if burned, and stuck it in his jeans pocket. Maybe that would keep him from temptation.

He snorted. "Not."

"Would you mind telling me what you're doing in my bedroom in the middle of the night?" Caryn was awake.

"I came to talk."

"How the hell did you get in?"

He chuckled. "I'm a thief, remember? No locked door ever stops me."

He heard a click and then blinked at the light now permeating the room. Once his eyes adjusted, Rex gave a quick cursory glance around the room and found nothing had changed since the last time he'd been here. Well, one thing had. In the far corner stood a four-foot Christmas tree decorated with white lights and crystal ornaments. The simple elegance was stunning without being gaudy. It was Caryn to a "T." It also explained the illumination before she turned on the lamp.

The rustling of sheets drew his attention back toward the bed and Caryn's nakedness. Only now she was wrapped in a teal silk sheet, sarong style and looking mighty fine. Her long auburn locks framed her delicate features, accentuating her lovely skin tone and deep emerald eyes. Eyes that once shone bright with passion as he slowly made love to her. Now, though, they were the color of the Emerald Isle and quite riled. God, he'd missed her.

"Seen enough yet?" She asked, hands on her hips.

His mouth quirked at the corner. "Sorry, can't help myself." He nodded. "You're still beautiful as ever, Red."

An unladylike noise escaped her lips. "You always were a flatterer Rex." Her eyes narrowed. "Now tell me what's so damn important that you just had to break into my house at..." she stopped and glanced at the clock then turned back to glare at him. "It's three o'clock in the morning, you asshole." She advanced toward him stopping only when they were toe to toe.

This close he could smell her skin. Strawberries. Luscious, ripe juicy strawberries. He took a deep breath, inhaling her scent.

"You smell good, Red, like strawberries ready to be plucked and devoured." He opened his eyes and looked at her. "I've missed that smell, and the way you taste when I lick and nip your skin." He reached out and grabbed her, pulling her close. She struggled against his hold but he held on.

"You Neanderthal." She twisted and turned trying to break his hold. "Get your hands off me." She continued to struggle and Rex enjoyed the show. He didn't think she knew it but with each twist of her body, the sheet was coming loose. One more little tug and she would be totally nude.

"Keep struggling, honey. That sheet is just about ready to fall away from your gorgeous body and I, for one, can't wait." He grinned, knowing it would really piss her off. He was right.

Her mouth opened and closed but no sound emerged. Suddenly she stopped moving and stared up at him. "You are a jerk. A real, live, one hundred percent jerk."

That did it. He had to kiss her, to taste those full, ripe lips again. Without a second thought, he swooped in and captured her lips in a searing kiss. Desire exploded inside his body, traveling on nerve endings and through his blood straight to his cock. Fully erect, he pressed his lower body against hers, letting her feel him.

Caryn struggled for a moment more and then suddenly melted against him. Her mouth opened on a sigh and Rex took the opportunity, sliding between her parted lips. She tasted of mint toothpaste and a hint of Godiva chocolate; the finest, sweetest chocolate money could buy. He knew she ate a piece each night before going to bed. She'd once told him it relaxed her and helped her to sleep. He knew better. Caryn Sinclair was a chocoholic, plain and simple.

He widened his stance, pulled her closer and continued the deep, probing kiss. Her

hands rose against his chest and before his next breath Caryn shoved him hard. Rex stumbled backwards but caught himself before he could fall. He stared at her standing there, chest heaving, her nipples tightly beaded beneath the sheet and groaned.

"Come here, Red."

She shook her head, riotous curls billowing around her flushed face. "I don't think so."

Before he could say more, Caryn spun on her heel and all but ran for the bathroom, closing and locking the door before he could move.

"Damn!" He ran his fingers through his cropped brown hair and then down his face. What in the hell was he thinking? Barging in here, grabbing her and kissing her senseless? *You weren't thinking, you idiot. At least not with the head on your shoulders.*

He paced back and forth on the carpeted floor, waiting for Caryn to come out and calling himself every name in the book. "She's right! You are a jerk." He grumbled. "Now because of your stupid, asinine actions, she probably won't even listen to what you've got to say."

"I shouldn't." He stopped moving and turned, finding Caryn standing in the open doorway wearing a t-shirt and pajama bottoms, a silly grin on her face.

"How much did you hear?" He sat down in the wing-backed chair, crossing his left ankle over his right knee.

"Oh, the part where you called yourself a jerk."

"Well, you heard most of it then." He looked away for a moment to collect his thoughts and then turned his gaze back to her. "I'm sorry, Red. I shouldn't have come into your home and kissed you." He tried for a look of chagrin but when she arched a brow, Rex knew she'd seen through his apology. She didn't believe a word of it, which was okay since he didn't mean a single word.

She moved into the room, graceful and poised, like a lady. Only Rex knew that was a façade. When danger lurked, Caryn might appear the lady, but when she was close enough to her target ... wham! The lady turned into a deadly tiger, all teeth, feet and hands. When fighting, Caryn used her whole body. He loved watching her. She was smooth, precise and had a right hook that could fell a man twice her size. He knew that from personal experience since she'd done exactly that to him one night. He moved his jaw from side to side in memory. Yep, he'd learned awful fast not to sneak up on Caryn when she was soaking in the tub.

A smack to his cheek brought Rex painfully back to the present. He glared at Caryn. "Why'd you do that?" He rubbed his cheek.

She shrugged. "You seemed off in some other world. Or another woman's bedroom." Was that jealousy he heard in her words? Nah, it couldn't be. Must have been the slap.

"Nope." He grinned. "Actually I was thinking about that mean right hook you've got."

A slight flush crept into her cheeks. Rex shook his head, laughter bursting from his lips. "I can't believe you still blush when I talk about that."

She absently twisted a lock of hair around her index finger. "I can't help it. I didn't know it was you or I wouldn't have hit you."

Intrigued, he leaned forward. That was the first time she'd ever told him she hadn't known it was he. "Who the hell did you think it was? Santa Claus?"

She glowered at him. "Now you're being a jerk again."

"Sorry." He held out his hands, palms up.

"Apology accepted." She turned away. "Now why don't you tell me why you're here? I'm pretty sure it's got something to do with shadow man and his goon squad."

Rex chuckled. "You know, one of these days you're going to say that to the wrong people and your ass is going to be in a sling."

She wrinkled her nose. "Nah, I'm too beautiful for that."

"That you are, honey." He agreed wholeheartedly. "That you are."

"Enough chit chat," she said, climbing on the bed, grabbing a pillow and lying down on her stomach facing Rex. "I'm telling you right now, I'm not going on this expedition with you, but out of curiosity, what is it your client wants, and where is it?"

Rex inwardly relaxed. At least she was willing to listen. He rubbed his hands together and launched into his spiel. "Okay. You know the story of Cleopatra and Marc Anthony right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Supposedly, on the eve of their first anniversary after becoming lovers, Marc gave her a jeweled dagger said to have magical powers. The hilt of the dagger is encrusted with diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. Right in the center of all those precious stones is an opal the size of a half-dollar. Rumor has it that whoever holds the dagger and looks into the opal can see the future."

Caryn's laughter stopped him.

"What's so funny?"

"Are you listening to yourself? See the future? That's bullshit. If Cleopatra could have seen the future, she would have picked better lovers." Caryn shifted to her side, propping her head on her hand. Did she realize the view she was giving him in that pose? He could make out the hint of her plump breast. His mouth watered, wanting a taste.

"I mean, really, Julius Caesar? Come on. The guy was older than dirt." He focused on her words and the story once more, though it was awful damn hard.

"I'm serious here. Will you let me finish?" *So then I can kiss you senseless?*

"Fine, whatever." She appeared nonchalant but he knew better. There was a sparkle in her eyes, the same one she got every time she was excited about something.

"Like I said, supposedly whoever is in possession of the dagger can see the future."

"Okay, so? Why hasn't anyone discovered this little tidbit of news before now?"

Rex shuffled his feet. "Because no one but Cleopatra's sisters, Cleopatra herself, and Anthony knew about the magical powers the dagger held." Warming up to his subject now, Rex paced back and forth, words tumbling from his lips faster than lightning. "During his search, my benefactor came across a letter written by Marc Anthony to Cleopatra in which he explains the powers of the gift he gave her. He tells her the dagger is magical and that he found her because of it."

Caryn sat up. "Wait a minute. Are you telling me that the dagger showed Marc Anthony that Cleopatra and he were destined to meet? To be lovers?" He saw the spark ignite into full-blown interest.

Gotcha!

"Yep. So what do you think? Are you up for a little adventure?"

Chapter Three

Was she up for a little adventure? What a silly question. First, though, she had some questions. She slid from the bed and started her own pacing. “How far into the future does it reveal? Did he know they would have children together, or that he would die in her arms after being mortally wounded in battle?”

Caryn suddenly stopped pacing and turned around. “Did Cleopatra know what the future held for her?” Excitement rushed through her veins like a drug addict shooting up. My God! What a discovery this would be in her world. She hurried toward him and grabbed his arm. “Do you realize what a discovery like this could mean?”

But then she sobered. The dagger wouldn’t be hers to offer to the world, it would be Rex’s mysterious benefactor’s. Damn! She let go of him, her hands clenching into fists.

“Hell,” she grumbled.

“I wondered if you’d remember it won’t be ours to share with the world.” A heavy sigh escaped his lips and Caryn felt the heat of his breath against her cheek. Realizing how close they stood, she backed up a step and crossed her arms.

She fought to keep her breath steady. It was dangerous to stand so near, to take his scent in, to allow herself to get caught up in his enthusiasm. Taking on this job meant working with Rex, and she wouldn’t—*couldn’t*—do that. Her heart would never be put at risk again.

“Okay, finish it.”

“Finish what? There’s no more to tell.”

He was lying. She knew it by the way he kept looking away from her. He hadn’t always been this obvious. Before, when they’d made love, she’d believed he cared for her, but that hadn’t been the truth. How could she possibly believe him now?

“Liar.”

He whipped his head around and looked at her. “What did you say?”

“You heard me,” she said in a low tone. “You ... are ... lying.”

“Caryn, I’ve told you everything I know. There is nothing else.” His expression was tight with strain, his jaw clenched.

Despite the past, she wished she could go on this expedition. Right now, in the quiet of her room, highlighted by the twinkling lights on the tree, she tingled with excitement for the hunt. And, God help her, she burned with fire for Rex.

All she had to do was think about him and heat spread through her body like wildfire. Her nipples beaded, wetness seeped from her body. It had always been that way. Unbidden, their last job together invaded her mind. Working in close quarters, they’d brushed against each other. In silent agreement, they’d rushed back to their tent and torn at each other’s clothes seeking skin-to-skin contact. Wet kisses, tongues dueling, fighting for dominance and then—finally!—came the sex, hard and fast with both of them exploding like a supernova.

“Caryn?” Desire laced through his tone.

Oh, shit. She knew she must look like she was ready for sex right now. Her cheeks flamed with heat from her memories and she smelled the scent of her own arousal. Surely Rex did, too. In fact, he’d said her name in his hoarse voice and she *knew* he was

remembering the down-and-dirty sex. Making love until they'd fallen into an exhausted sleep. This was ridiculous and probably a mistake but she wanted him ... here and now. She looked up into his eyes and the desire she saw banked there was nearly her undoing.

"Caryn, this is a dangerous game you're playing."

She knew he was right. But she couldn't stop herself. Stepping forward and raising her hands to his face, she pulled his face down to within an inch of hers. Their breath mingled, swirling between them. His tongue traced her upper lip before he nipped it with his teeth. At the same instant, they groaned.

She gripped his bottom lip between her teeth and tugged. "Didn't you hear?"

"Hear what?" he asked. His mouth edged closer and closer.

"Danger is my middle name," she whispered into his mouth.

The rational side of her mind screamed, "Don't trust him! Move away and make him leave!" But months of being alone, with only memories to keep her company, suddenly fell away. She'd regret it later, but for now, feeling him hot and firm and tight against her was too sweet to give up.

"Damn, Red." His hand gripped her neck, holding her still for his kiss. His lips slowly descended to meet hers, giving her time to change her mind. Yeah right! Like she was going to do that.

"Kiss me, Rex," she whispered, just before his mouth covered hers hungrily.

His tongue demanded entrance and with a sigh she opened allowing him inside. This kiss was as hard and hungry as the first one, waking her body instantly. She wanted more. Much ... much ... more.

Fisting her hands in his hair, Caryn took control, fusing their mouths together hard enough that their teeth gnashed together. A coppery taste touched her tongue. She knew one of their lips was bleeding. Probably hers, but she didn't care. The only thought running through her mind at the moment was stripping Rex naked and attacking.

Without warning, he pushed her away. Their harsh breathing was the only sound in the room. In a haze of lust, Caryn moved toward him but he held up his hand.

"No," he said hoarsely. His hand shook, letting her know he was just as affected by the kiss as she was.

"What's wrong, Rex?" Her heart pounded and her pussy ached for him. She'd never been so crazed by a man as by him. She struggled to gain control, waiting for him to explain himself.

"I came here for more than sex." His eyes glowed with a savage inner fire, his desire banked for the moment.

"Oh, the job. Right. How could I have forgotten?" Walking across to the French doors, she flung them open, desperately looking for a way to cool down. Once again, she'd given in—given herself—to Rex and had her feelings flung back at her. Yes, she'd kissed him first, but the heat, the flames she'd felt in that kiss couldn't have been a ploy. Or maybe she was wrong again.

Idiot!

The cold seeped into her body quickly, making her shiver, and she rubbed her arms trying to regain some heat. Before she turned to enter the room, she sensed Rex behind her. When his arms wrapped her into a tender embrace, she relaxed against him.

"You broke my heart, Rex." Damn! She hadn't meant to say that.

He kissed the top of her head. "I know, Red. And I'm sorry." He hugged her tight.

“You don’t know how sorry I am. But, if you’ll let me, I’d like to make it up to you.”

“How? This job and its money?” She shook her head. “Don’t need it. Recognition? Could care less. What I did want once, you refused me, in the cruelest way.”

Letting anger take over, she jerked from his arms and rounded on him. “I fell in love with you, Rex.” She poked him in the chest. “And you threw that back in my face. You fucked me and then left while I was sleeping, with the priceless heirloom we found together. *Found together*, Rex.”

“I know what I did, Caryn. I’ve lived with that mistake for the past six months.” He ran his fingers through his short-cropped hair.

“Well, bully for you. It’s nice for you to realize what you lost right when you need me for another job. Where were you for the past six months while I...” Pressing her lips into a tight line, she stopped. Then, flipping him off, she stomped past him and into her room. She tried to close the doors to shut him out, but he pushed his way in, locking the doors behind him.

He needed her for the trip, so he wouldn’t give up easily. He was no fool. However, neither was she. What was the old saying? Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me. Rex had had his chance and blew it. She didn’t plan to give him another no matter how hot he made her, or how much she wanted his touch. This girl was totally in control.

So then why did it feel like a roller coaster ride?

* * * *

“Look, Red, I’m here about the job, yes. But not for the reasons you think. I’m so damn sorry for running out on you like I did. My only excuse is that I was scared of what was happening between us.”

She snorted. “Yeah, right. The mighty Rex scared of three little words.”

That did it. In two strides he was nose-to-nose with her in the center of the room. “Hell yes! I was scared shitless and still am.” He jerked away from her, walked to the bed and sat down. He rested his head in his hands and closed his eyes. No other woman ever made him mad quicker than Caryn. One jab from her and he was seeing red.

“You scare me, Red. You did then and you do now.” He looked up at her. “I knew you were falling in love with me and it scared the hell out of me. There you were, a sweet, beautiful intelligent woman telling me, a thief, that you loved me. How was I supposed to respond to that?” He dropped his gaze to stare at the floor beneath his feet. Long moments later, he raised his head and locked gazes with her. “But I swear, Caryn, if you’ll give me another chance, I promise you’ll never have reason to doubt me again.”

“Oh, Rex.” Her soft voice tugged at his heart. “Why didn’t you tell me this six months ago? We could have talked about it, figured it out together. Instead you left without a word. I thought I’d die, Rex.” The last words were spoken on a sob.

He raised his head and found Caryn kneeling on the floor, arms wrapped tightly around her body, tears glistening on her heart-shaped face. He groaned and went to her, dropping to the floor and pulling her into his arms.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he whispered, rocking her gently. “I’m so damn sorry.” What else could he say? No words were going to change the fact that he’d hurt this woman deeply. Would she ever forgive him, open up her heart to him again? He didn’t know, but he was damn sure going to try. He continued to hold her while she cried, her tears soaking his

shirt. Finally, her sobs turned to soft mews and her body no longer trembled. He kissed the top of her head, inhaling the sweet scent of her strawberry shampoo.

“Rex?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“You can let go now. I promise, no more waterworks.”

He chuckled. Leave it to Caryn to make a joke about crying. She was one special lady and when this was all over, he hoped and prayed she’d be his forever.

He squeezed her close again and then let her go. Her eyes were red and puffy from her crying jag and her nose ran. She was beautiful.

“Stop looking at me like that.” She rubbed her hands over her eyes, and sniffed. “I know I’m a terrible sight but you don’t have to rub it in.”

“Red, you are the most gorgeous creature I’ve ever seen, puffy eyes, runny nose and all.” He leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips, hope blooming when she didn’t pull away and punch him in the nose.

“You flatterer, you.” Her hands pushed against his chest and reluctantly he sat back. There would be time enough later to press his advantage, to show Caryn that he was in it for the long haul this time. No more running scared. He watched her walk away, hips swaying gently. Her walk was just like her, laid-back but with a hint of warning: *don’t mess with me or else*.

Fatigue held him in its grip, but he couldn’t give in to it. Not yet. Not until he’d finished telling Caryn the rest of the tale. The journey would be dangerous, and quite possibly unsuccessful. From what Johansen had told him, Rex knew that his researchers had narrowed the search for Cleopatra’s burial site to a few likely locations. Caryn seemed to have a sixth sense about choosing the correct search site, even when the place was the least feasible. Rex had never seen anyone with her intuition, and that’s how he’d sold hiring her to Johansen.

He glanced toward the bathroom, and heard water running. Most likely she was washing her face. He allowed himself a small smile at the image.

If there was one thing he’d learned about Caryn, it was that she hated to show weakness of any kind. A dull ache was beginning in his head and he rubbed his temple.

“Is your head hurting?”

He turned his head and met her gaze. Worry and curiosity warred within her deep green eyes. She knew all about his headaches, the incapacitation he got whenever one came on. A memory flitted through his mind of the first time he’d had a severe headache in front of her. Seeing the look of fear on her face was almost as debilitating as the headache itself. That night he’d nearly waited too long to seek his bed, to take the prescribed medication. If it hadn’t been for Caryn and her quick thinking, he could have died.

Gentle fingers massaged his temples, drawing him back to the present. “Oh yeah. That feels wonderful.” Rex groaned aloud when she moved to his back and kneaded the muscles in his neck. Her fingers hit a tender spot and he moaned.

“Am I hurting you?” Her hands stopped moving.

“No, don’t stop. You’re helping more than you know.” He dropped his head forward, giving her better access. Without a word, she resumed rubbing the sore spot and after a few minutes the pain eased enough for him to relax. She must have sensed this because her fingers stopped rubbing and she moved away. The loss of her touch hit him square in

the chest, like a deep ache that no pain pill could take away.

"Are the headaches getting worse or staying the same?"

Rex raised his head and looked at her before answering. "About the same." The worried look on her face was nearly his undoing. He focused his gaze on the tree instead of on Caryn's beautiful and expressive face. If he kept eye contact they would both end up in the bed, and it wouldn't be to sleep.

Her soft sigh reached his ears. "Come to bed, Rex. It's late and we both need sleep if we're going to figure out where this dagger is."

He jerked his head up and stared at her. She'd said *we*, meaning she planned to join the expedition. And she'd told him to come to bed. Or were fatigue and his headache playing tricks?

"What?"

"I said come to bed." She held out her hand.

He hesitated only a moment before taking it. The minute they touched, sparks shot up his arm and straight to his groin. Her startled gaze met his and he tightened his grip. Then he squeezed and let go.

"I think it would be best if I slept elsewhere." He leaned in and kissed her forehead. "Goodnight, honey." Before he could change his mind, Rex turned on his heel and strode for the door.

"Rex," Caryn's soft voice stopped him in his tracks. "Stay."

Oh, God! He should be stronger than this. She didn't trust him, and with good reason. It would take time for him to prove his love to her, and he'd come here prepared to give her that time. For her peace of mind, he should be able to walk out the door without thought, without hesitation. And yet, he couldn't move. It was like his feet were frozen to the floor.

"You know what will happen if I stay. I want you too much, Red."

"I know. I want you, too." Her voice was soft, almost pleading.

He turned around then and what he saw nearly drove him to his knees. Her eyes shone bright with heat and desire. He had to touch her, needed to kiss her. He found himself walking back to her, stopping when he was directly in front of her. Close enough to take her in his arms but not doing so. This was her choice. She had to make the first move. He just hoped and prayed she would.

She didn't disappoint him. He held perfectly still, his hands clenched at his sides. She moved closer, and closer still, her soft curves molding to the contours of his lean body. When she slid her hands up around his neck, bringing her mouth close to his, it was all he could do not to lower his mouth in a punishing kiss.

But he didn't. Instead he watched her with heated, hungry eyes.

Chapter Four

Caryn knew this moment was inevitable and had been since he'd snuck into her bedroom. The feel of his body pressed against hers sent warmth spiraling through her, coalescing between her thighs. She lifted her gaze and stared at his mouth with hunger and need. She wanted his kiss more than her next breath. And damn, if she wasn't going to take what she wanted.

"God, I want you, Red." Her lips smothered any further words. The touch of his lips initiated a delicious sensation that ran rampant along her nerve endings. His mouth caressed hers with a tenderness that brought tears to her eyes. But she wanted more. Wanted the fire, the undeniable heat his kisses provoked.

Parting her lips, she raised herself to his mouth and demanded more. She stroked her tongue against his lips, first one corner and then the other. His groan of pleasure filled her ears. Still he didn't deepen the caress. What was he waiting for she wondered silently. An engraved invitation? Fine, she'd give him one.

Pulling her mouth from his, Caryn leaned away just enough to look into his face. "Kiss me, Rex. Kiss me like you can't live without me." She moved in and grabbed his lower lip between her teeth, nipping it before letting go. "Kiss me," she whispered softly before stretching up on her toes once more and taking his lips.

His reaction was swift and decisive. His hands shifted, one moving down her back to cup her ass while the other hand gripped her neck, holding her still for his control. Finally! This was all-out seduction with mouth and tongue.

She couldn't move and didn't want to unless it was to lie beneath Rex's hard, hot body. The hand on her ass clenched and released the cotton of her pajama pants before sliding up to her waist. When he pressed his erection into the soft flesh of her stomach, it was her turn to moan. It had been so long and he felt so good.

His lips punished, hungry as he stoked the fires burning in her body. She cuddled his heavy erection and shifted back and forth, showing him without words how much she wanted this, wanted him. The strong hardness of his lips sent a wave of heat through her that threatened her equilibrium. Her body began to shake in arousal; wetness seeped from her body, coating the inside of her thighs.

His tongue stroked hers, stoking higher the fires that already pulsed through her veins. Still, she wanted more. She wanted him inside her, filling her with his cock until there was nowhere left for him to go.

Her insides clenched, her blood pounded in her brain, leapt from her heart and made her knees tremble. The need had never been this strong, this overwhelming. Her body began to pulse. Her pleasure button stiffened as it filled with blood with her impending climax.

Rex must have sensed she was close because suddenly his mouth left hers and his arms held her at arm's length, both of them breathing heavily. Mindless to anything except the fulfillment of her orgasm, Caryn struggled against his hold. *Closer*, her body screamed, *get closer ... ride him hard and fast*.

"Caryn, honey. Wait." She heard his voice but didn't understand the words through the fog of desire floating around her head.

“Again,” she panted, trying to get closer again. “More.”

“Caryn,” The sharpness in his voice finally penetrated and the fog lifted, her pleasure banked for the moment. “Stop.”

“What is the problem?” she asked in frustration. She walked away, pacing the room like a caged cat. He was bad for her—she’d been totally convinced of his untrustworthiness. But when he confessed to his regret in hurting her, she felt the truth of it. That’s when desire had overridden good sense. But why did he pull back? He’d pushed all the right buttons, only to let her down.

Suspicion of his motives assailed her. If he disappointed her again, she’d swear off men forever—especially Rex.

She stomped the room, waving her hands to keep track with her internal conversation, so lost in her thoughts she didn’t know he’d moved until his hands came to rest on her shoulders. His strong fingers massaging her shoulders would have eased the tension if she’d let them, but she still held herself apart, afraid to give in. Only after minutes of his perseverance did she sigh and lean back against him.

His mouth brushed her temple in a sweet, butterfly kiss. How did he do this to her? One minute they were ready to tear each other’s clothes off and have wild monkey sex on her big bed, and the next, he was handling her like a porcelain doll.

“Why did you stop me?” She raised her hand and laid it atop his. “I wanted you. Hell, I still do. So what’s the problem?”

“I want more than sex, Red. I want everything you have to give and then I want more.” He whispered in her hair. His words brought a thrill of joy mixed with sadness.

“I don’t understand.” She turned her head just enough to gaze into his eyes. What she saw there made her heart beat faster. There was banked desire and another emotion. But was it love or simply lust?

His gaze met hers and the beginning of a smile tipped the corners of his mouth. “Ah, Red. Don’t lie.” He brushed a gentle kiss across her forehead lingering for a moment. “I can see the look in those big beautiful green eyes of yours. And it’s not confusion or anger.” His voice trailed off as he kissed the tip of her nose.

“Yeah?” she asked in a breathless whisper. “What do you see, Rex? Tell me, what do you see in my eyes?” She held her breath hoping against hope that what he saw was what she felt ... love.

“I see...” he lowered his mouth to hers, stopping just shy of touching. She groaned. He chuckled. “Love, desire, and need.”

A nod from her confirmed the correctness of his answer. But what about Rex? What did he feel? She longed for him to say it, died for him to feel what she did.

“What about you, Rex?” Fear filled her, but she had to know. He said he wanted more than sex. What did that mean?

His smile made her insides melt. “I’m not so nervous about those three words now, Red.” With a smile he closed the distance and his lips came coaxingly down on hers. This caress was different than the others. Where before his kisses were hungry and demanding, this one drew a response from deeper within. This one begged for something more than plain sex.

This kiss tasted like the future.

When his lips left hers, Caryn felt bereft. She turned to him then, and with a quick brush of her lips against his, headed for the bed. There was time for talking later. Right

now, this very minute, all she wanted was Rex. When she glanced over her shoulder to see if he followed, they shared a smile. Feeling playful, she winked at him and licked her lower lip.

His eyes followed her movements and his grin turned downright naughty. "Be careful, Red. I might decide that's an invitation."

Slowly she lowered her gaze to his groin, licked her lip again and glanced back up to his face just in time to see his tether break. No more time for teasing. As the well-built man stalked toward her, wetness pooled, saturating her pants. Damn! If she didn't get it under control she was going to come the minute he touched her.

He moved closer and closer still, his steps light but hurried. His ruddy complexion and the bulge behind his zipper told her that she had a tiger by the tail and it was ready for action. Mentally rubbing her hands together, Caryn smiled wide and said, "Come on, baby. Give me that delicious and tasty treat between your legs. I'm very hungry."

* * * *

He stopped dead in his tracks and stared. Hmm ... it appeared his lady love had developed some very sharp teeth since the last time they'd met. The image that popped into his head brought a chuckle to his lips. "Red, you are one hell of a woman."

She grinned mischievously, pulled her top over her head and tossed it to the floor. Her nipples called to him, begging for his lips and tongue. When she lifted them in her hands like an offering, Rex couldn't wait any longer. In a few steps he had her breasts in his hands, kneading them, pinching the dusky tips. Her head fell back on her shoulders, her eyes closed, and her lips parted with a sigh of pleasure.

He plucked the nipple of one, his mouth covering the other one. He suckled and teased the rosy pebble, rolling it around before lightly biting the end. Caryn moaned low in her throat, and her back arched as she offered him more. He took what was freely given and sampled the delights before him. He swirled his tongue around and around the swollen tip and then sucked it hard.

"Oh, God, Rex." Caryn panted. "What are you doing to me?"

He lifted his head and looked at her. "I'm loving you, honey. Plain and simple." He licked a path to the other breast, giving it the same treatment as the first. When he'd gotten it as hard as the other one he moved back to look. "Do you know what you look like with your nipples all hard and wet from my mouth?"

"No, what?" By now her hands had made their way into his hair pulling him back to her chest.

"Like my favorite dessert." He nibbled kisses along her neck, moving to her ear. "And I just love hot, sweet, treats." Her body trembled, her hands clutching him tighter. His lady was aroused and about ready to explode. But she wasn't hot enough yet. No, he wanted her burning with need. He wanted her so hot that she'd beg him to slide into her tight sheath and fuck her all night long.

He slid his hands from her breasts, skimming along her stomach and around her back to rest on her butt. He rubbed his hands on her ass cheeks, feeling them tighten through the thin cotton barrier.

"I want you naked, now," he whispered hotly, his hands going to the waistband and tugging them down until they pooled at her feet. She didn't waste any time stepping free of them and kicking them out of the way. Now her naked body was pressed against his

still-clothed one and his cock grew even harder. His jeans grew a fraction tighter, and his shaft pressed insistently against the zipper, demanding freedom.

"You, too."

Rex wasted no time. Taking a step back, he slid out of his shoes, tore off his shirt, and had his jeans unzipped and sliding down his legs in less than ten seconds. He hadn't bothered with underwear and now he was damn glad. That was just one less piece of clothing to take off. Her low whistle of approval captured his attention, filling him with pride.

"My, my, my," she drawled. "What have we here?"

Rex grinned. "A yummy lollipop just for you, Red." He took a step toward her, his shaft bobbing up and down. "Want a lick?"

"Why, Sir, I believe I do." With a sultry smile, she crooked her finger at him and Rex had no choice but to obey. Well, he could have stood his ground, but what was the fun in that? This way he got a double treat.

His feet moved forward and before he knew it, he stood in front of Caryn, his cock pointing straight and tall, waiting for his lady's pleasure.

When she went to her knees before him, her eyes meeting his, Rex thought he'd died and gone to heaven. When her tongue flicked the very tip licking the drop of pre-cum nestled there, he nearly exploded. His body tightened, poised on the edge of oblivion. He didn't know how much more of her sweet torture he could take before he turned into a raging beast and took her fast and hard.

His eyes crossed and rolled back in his head when she opened her mouth wide and took him all the way in. "Damn, Red. You're killing me here." He pumped his hips once, then twice, and stopped. Stopped because if he didn't he would shoot his seed down her throat instead of inside her tight, hot sheath where he wanted to be.

His body shook with the need to give in to the pleasure she was giving him. But not yet, he cried out silently. Not yet. He enjoyed her lips, tongue and mouth for a second more and then pulled free. She reached to bring him back, but Rex grabbed her hands in his and held them away from his body.

"I want to be inside you when I come."

Her glazed eyes met his and he wasn't sure if she'd even heard him. Then she nodded and stood.

"Fuck me, Rex."

Her words splintered what little control he had left. With a soft growl he picked her up in his arms and strode quickly to the bed, where he deposited her none-too-gently in the middle. She bounced once and then he was stretched out on top of her, a smile on his face.

"Ah, Red. I'm going to do just that."

Her eyes glowed with enjoyment and her mouth curved into a beautiful smile.

"Are you now?"

"Damn straight," Rex growled, just before his lips covered hers. Before the night was through Caryn would learn that he was here to stay.

Chapter Five

When his lips covered hers, Caryn lost all ability to think. All she could do was feel. His hard body rested heavily on hers without crushing her. And Rex was a solid-built man. When he'd undressed in front of her, it was all she could do not to fall at his feet and plead with him to take her. His broad shoulders and muscled chest—with a light spattering of hair that narrowed to a point leading straight to his long, thick cock—sent tiny ripples through her body. She remembered how his shaft fit snug inside her, grazing all the sensitive nerve endings along her vaginal walls.

The touch of his lips was a delicious sensation, one she'd never forgotten even though she'd tried. When he'd left her, she'd nearly died. Each day proved harder than the last, and she had fought the need to crawl into bed, pull the covers over her head and simply waste away. If not for Giles prodding her along, she would have done exactly that.

"Hey, beautiful. I seem to have lost you." The brush of his lips jerked her back to the present.

She lifted her head and licked his bottom lip. "Sorry, just thinking about what I want to do to you later."

Liar! her inner voice screamed.

Oh shut up! she whispered back.

He must have believed her because his eyes turned a darker shade of brown. Like dark chocolate, her favorite treat.

"Oh, baby, I can't wait," he murmured. His mouth covered hers once again in a punishing kiss full of heat.

Caryn gasped, then groaned as her body burst into flames. Each stroke of his tongue took her higher and higher. When his mouth left hers to nibble at her earlobe she whimpered.

"Rex, please." She arched beneath him, succeeding in bringing his burgeoning shaft to the mouth of her femininity. The bulbous head probed, dipping inside her wetness and then back out. Frustration and want warred within her body. If he didn't make love to her soon, she was going to scream.

His hot breath tickled her ear. "Are you ready for me?" He slid in an inch and she moaned. Another inch and she was shaking. When he pulled back she wrapped her legs around his waist, grabbed his hair and yanked his head back.

"If you don't stop fucking around and make love to me, I'm going to kick your ass."

"As the lady wishes." In one hard thrust Rex slid in to the hilt and Caryn's climax hit out of the blue.

"Oh, God ... Rex ... don't stop," she ordered between clenched teeth.

"Yes ma'am." His hips moved, his cock sliding in and out in a rhythm that soon had Caryn climbing toward another climax, even before the first was over. His hardness filled her, throbbed within her, rubbing along the sensitized tissue, setting off another, harder orgasm. So hard that she saw stars. Her body shook with each tremor, her sheath milking his cock for all it was worth. As she touched down to earth once more, Rex picked up speed.

"Get ready, Red," Rex growled between thrusts. "I'm fixing to blow." Caryn

grabbed hold of his biceps, hooked her ankles higher on his back and met him thrust for thrust. Sweat poured from their bodies, the slap of flesh echoing in the room. Once, twice, and on the third stroke, Rex's body stiffened above hers. His head thrown back and eyes closed, he yelled as he shot his seed deep inside her willing body. So intense was his orgasm that it triggered another smaller one in her.

It was a few minutes before either of them could move. Caryn didn't mind, though. With Rex above her, inside her, she was right where she wanted to be. She watched him, waiting and wondering how he felt about what had just happened between them. She didn't have long to wait for her answer.

When his eyes met hers, she saw the heart-rending tenderness of his gaze. Tears flooded her eyes, threatening to spill.

"Caryn? Honey? Did I hurt you?" The concern in his voice touched her deeply.

Rex slid from her body and gathered her in his arms. Wrapping her arms around him, she held on tight. His hand rubbed up and down her back in soothing strokes.

"Come on, Caryn," he cajoled. "Talk to me. What's going on inside that beautiful head of yours?"

I love you. It was right on the tip of her tongue and yet she held back. What if he didn't feel the same, or still wasn't ready? What if his view of tonight wasn't the same as hers? Nope, better to keep her head on straight and the sex just that. Sex.

Pretending to yawn, she stretched and moved from the shelter of his arms and sat on the side of the bed. "Nothing. I'm just tired, really."

"Caryn?"

"I'm fine, Rex." She stood and turned slightly toward him, offering a small smile.

His eyes searched her face and she prayed nothing of her inner turmoil showed. She must have pulled it off because Rex gave a brief nod and rolled to his back, hands behind his head.

Quickly she made her way to the bathroom and closed the door before she lost it. She got a washcloth from the closet to clean herself up with and then got one for Rex too. While she waited for the water to warm, she let her mind wander to what had just happened. The images rolled in her mind's eye like a movie and suddenly a chill ran down her spine. They hadn't used a condom. Damn! She turned off the water and washed herself thoroughly all the while her thoughts running wild and rampant. What if she was pregnant? How did she feel about it? How would Rex feel about it?

"Caryn?" A soft knock on the door brought her from her chaotic thoughts. "Are you okay in there?"

She finished cleaning up, tossed the washcloth in the hamper and stared at her reflection. "You can do this. You can pretend its just sex, nothing more." But the face staring back at her didn't look all that convinced.

Another insistent knock on the door and Rex's "I need to clean up too, Red."

Shit! She'd forgotten about that momentarily. She ran the washcloth under the water, wrung it out, and carried it with her. The door swung open with a whoosh and Rex stood there in all his naked glory. She swallowed hard. He was so damn good-looking; there should be a law against it.

He crossed his arms over his massive chest and grinned. "Like what you see?"

Drat the man! He just repeated her earlier words to him. She tossed the washcloth at him and stomped out. "I'm going to bed." His laughter followed her all the way to the

bed. She jerked back the covers, slid beneath the silky sheets and turned off the light. She hoped he stubbed his toe, the big brute.

He switched off the bathroom light, leaving the white lights of the Christmas tree as the only light in the room. She heard him making his way to the bed and held her breath when the bed dipped and he climbed under the covers. She was rolling to her side when his arm snaked out, pulling her into the curve of his body.

His body spooned hers, his front to her back, his semi-erect shaft resting in the crease of her ass. His warm breath wafted across her temple and his hand rested just below her breasts. She started to move away but his arms tightened on her.

"No, please don't move away. Just let me hold you." He pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. "Just for tonight."

There was her answer. He wanted her close just for the night. She was a fool, but at least she'd be held by the man she loved for a few hours.

She let out a sigh. "Fine, but in the morning we talk." She closed her eyes then opened them again. "About the job." There, she said it. Put him in his place. This was nothing special.

Soft laughter rumbled from his chest. "Whatever you say, Red. Whatever you say."

She snuggled closer to his body and yawned. She'd stay here just until he went to sleep. But her sated body and the warmth of Rex's body pushed her into sleep.

* * * *

He didn't move. Having her in his arms again was heaven. The minute the tension left her body and a soft sigh escaped her lips, Rex knew she was asleep. He let out the breath he'd been holding since he'd pulled her into the curve of his body. Beneath his hand he felt the rise and fall of her stomach as she breathed. He turned his head, burying his nose in the luxurious thick hair and inhaled her scent. She thought she was smart by tacking on that little phrase about the job but he knew better. They were going to discuss more than the job tomorrow morning over breakfast. He knew exactly what was going on in that pretty little head. "*It's just sex, Rex. No harm, no foul.*"

"Like hell it is," he whispered hotly. When Caryn shifted in her sleep, he stilled. Had he woken her? Did she hear his last words? She breathed his name on a sigh and stopped moving.

He let out the breath he'd been holding and closed his eyes. The grueling trips, the argument, the emotional upheaval, and the hot sex had taken its toll. Rex was dog-tired and couldn't stay awake another moment. As he drifted into sleep Rex hugged Caryn closer and smiled. His woman was finally in his arms and he intended to keep her there for the rest of their lives.

Rex looked around, confused by what he saw. Desert and lots of it surrounded him. What the hell was going on?

He was standing on the threshold of something big; he could feel it. Whispering a silent prayer, Rex walked through the doorway and everything vanished. The place was pitch black. He couldn't see a damn thing. He put his arms out to his sides and felt for the walls. Thankfully he found them. Moving to one side he hugged the wall and followed it forward hoping to find a doorway, some light or something.

Nothing! He continued to walk slowly down the tunnel, his hands feeling along the walls. He came to a corner and stopped to feel which way it was going. Satisfied, he

started walking again and after a few steps saw a pinpoint of light up ahead. He moved faster now, eager to find out what was going on. The closer he got to the light, the bigger it became until he found himself standing in the doorway of an elaborate, beautifully decorated room.

Sheer fabric panels hung from ceiling to floor, and lit candles were placed all around the room. A huge bed covered in gold held pillows of all shapes and sizes. But more than that, it held an olive-skinned woman with long raven locks and heavily painted eyes. She wore a long white gown with a gold ring holding it on her left shoulder. Something about her looked familiar, but Rex couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"My, aren't you a handsome man. What are you called?" Her voice was velvety smooth and a jolt of lust knotted his stomach before sinking lower.

"Who are you?" Something about her was so damn familiar. Where in the hell had he seen her before?

"I am Cleopatra," she replied. "And this is my resting place." She waved her hand in the air around her.

Rex's mouth dropped open in shock. "You're Cleopatra?" Of course! That's why she looked familiar to him. He'd seen her picture and studied every bit of information on her while searching for the dagger.

She straightened and looked down her nose at him, although he towered over her in height. "You question me?"

He shook his head. "No, Your Highness, I believe you."

She bowed her head in acknowledgement. Gliding toward a table, she picked up a pitcher sitting there. "Would you like some water?"

"Uh ... no thanks." He couldn't believe it. Cleopatra was offering him water.

He didn't want anything to drink, but he did want answers. "Why am I here?"

"You are here because you wish something from me." Cleopatra shrugged and took a sip of water.

"Did Marc Anthony really give you a magical dagger?" he asked.

"Yes, he did." Her voice grew soft as she spoke. It was apparent she truly loved him.

"Where is it?"

She threw back her head and laughed. "Now if I told you that, it wouldn't be mine anymore, now would it?"

She had him there.

"I will tell you this. The stories circulating about my jeweled dagger are true. If the person holding it gazes into the giant opal in the center of the hilt, the future will be revealed."

"But..."

She raised her hand halting his words. "That is not a blessing, but a curse." Her eyes took on a sad, faraway look.

"Did you glimpse your future, Cleopatra?"

Her eyes cleared. "Let's just say I saw something that I now wish I had paid closer attention to." She stepped closer to him. "Is there someone you love?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"How much do you love her?"

"With all my heart."

She gazed into his eyes. He wondered what she was searching for. Evidently she

found it, for she put down her glass and beckoned him to follow her. He did so and she led him to a golden chest at the foot of her bed. Kneeling, she opened up the chest and drew out a cloth-covered object. He peered over her shoulder to see what it could possibly be and gasped. It was the dagger.

She rose and turned to him. "Do you wish to know what your future holds?"

Rex hesitated. Did he want to see the future? Would he be able to stand it if Caryn kicked him out on his ass after the job was done? Hell, for that matter, would they even be able to find the dagger? Still, he had to know.

"Yes, I want to see."

Cleopatra handed him the dagger. It weighed very little and felt like nothing against his palm. He admired the jewels embedded in the hilt and especially the giant opal in the center. He squinted his eyes. Was the opal swirling? He pulled the dagger up close and looked again. The mist parted and he saw Caryn standing in front of him and in the next instant a red stain appeared on her chest and she fell into his arms.

"No," Rex screamed aloud and dropped the dagger. No, it couldn't be. Caryn was going to die protecting him? He gazed wildly around looking for the exit. He wanted to wake up, to hold Caryn in his arms, to keep her safe.

"Remember. The future isn't fully formed. It can be changed."

He barely heard Cleopatra's parting words as he ran from the room screaming Caryn's name. He had to find her, had to save her.

"Caryn." He yelled out in his sleep, unaware that Caryn was awake beside him.

"Rex," her soft voice called to him, pulling him from the heavy dregs of sleep. He woke with a start, his gaze seeking and finding her. He groaned deep in his throat and pulled her into his arms.

"Rex, baby. You're hurting me. Let go." Her words penetrated his terror-stricken brain and he eased his hold without entirely letting her go.

"God, Red. I thought I'd lost you." He hugged her close and peppered kisses along her cheek, her nose and then he pressed her lips to his, caressing her mouth more than kissing it. The dream had scared the shit out of him and he wasn't going to go another minute without telling her how he felt. "I love you, Caryn. Do you hear me? I love you."

Her eyes softened. "Rex, it was just a bad dream." She pulled free of his embrace and stroked his hair.

"Listen. I walked into this dark temple, and continued walking until I spotted a light ahead. And when I walked through the door into the lighted room, I met Cleopatra."

Her hand kept smoothing his hair. It felt so damn good to be touched by her.

"Really? Cleopatra, huh." Her lips tipped up in amusement. "Don't you think this dream was brought on by the expedition?"

He considered that. It made sense. "Maybe," he admitted. "But it felt so real. I talked to her like I'm talking to you right now."

"Oh?" Caryn's brows arched. "She was lying naked in bed with you?"

He chuckled. "No." Then he turned serious. "But she showed me the dagger. I held it, hefted its weight. I could swear it was real. And..." he shot her a glance. "I saw the future."

"Oh? Did it show us making love again? Because I think that's a future I could make come true."

"No, it showed you dying."

She sat back as though struck. "So... You had a bad dream where I died. You're probably feeling some guilt subconsciously for bringing me onto the team, that's all. But..." She glanced away and bit her lip. "Is that why you said you love me? Because your dream convinced you I was about to die?"

"No, Caryn, I do love you. That's why I took this job when I found out Johansen wanted you. I knew this was my one shot at telling you how I felt." He tried to pull her back into his arms but she resisted. "I know I hurt you and I'm sorrier than you'll ever know." He slid his hand down her arm wrapping his fingers lightly around her wrist lifting it to his lips. "I came here hoping to spend Christmas with you."

"And after that?" He felt her hand tense in his, but kept a firm yet gentle grip on her.

"Well, that's up to you." He turned her hand in his and kissed the center of her palm, never losing eye contact. "If it were up to me though, I'd stay forever."

She stared at the bed, plucking the sheet with her free hand. Whether she knew it or not, she held his heart in her hands. With one word she could crush it or keep it safe. Would she give him another chance? He looked to the heavens and said a silent prayer. *Please God, let her give me another chance.*

Finally her gaze returned to his. "I would like that, Rex. But let's get through the job and see how we both feel then."

He nodded. "I understand. After the job we'll talk about us." She still didn't trust him. That was all right. They were here together now and he'd find a way to stay. He'd prove to Caryn on the trip that he could be true, that he'd love and protect her. He frowned, remembering the dream. It wouldn't come true. He'd give his own life first.

Her lips formed a lopsided smile. "Right now I need sleep."

"I agree. Sleep now, talk later." They settled, spoon fashion, his arm over her hip.

"Night, Red."

"Night, Rex."

Within moments they were both asleep.

Chapter Six

Rex woke with a start. He searched the room looking for Caryn and didn't see her. He moved to look for her when he heard the shower start. The tension eased from his body and he reclined on the pillows, his mind on the dreams. He'd had the same dream again right down to the last detail. Why? He tried to figure it out and couldn't come up with a viable explanation except that this trip was going to be dangerous.

A quick glance at the bedside clock told him it was early yet and that neither of them had gotten much sleep. He turned his head toward the closed bathroom door and thought about joining Caryn in the shower, but decided against it. Before they made love again, they had to talk.

First things first. He needed coffee and food in that order. Grabbing the sheet, he was about to toss it aside when a soft knock sounded on the door.

"Miss Caryn? Are you awake?" Giles low voice asked from the other side.

Rex was about to answer when Caryn entered the room, wrapped in a fluffy white robe, her hair wrapped up in a towel. She paused in her steps giving Rex a strange look, then continued toward the door, opening it wide.

"Good morning, Giles."

"Miss Caryn. I thought you and Mr. Rex might enjoy some coffee and fresh croissants this morning."

Rex scrubbed a hand down his face feeling the beginnings of stubble. How had Giles known he was there? Ah! No way could he think through that now. He needed to shower and shave before they left. But first he needed that coffee. Now!

"Thanks, Giles, I'll take it." Caryn took the tray and whispered something that Rex couldn't quite make out. However, the look Giles gave him was crystal clear. *Don't hurt her again or you will answer to me.*

Giles pulled the door closed and Rex turned his attention to Caryn. She set the tray on the bed and climbed next to him. She poured a cup of coffee and handed it to him before pouring one for herself. Rex took a sip, savoring the strong chicory flavor and moaned.

"Damn, that's good coffee." He took another sip and then picked up a croissant and took a healthy bite. Before long he felt ready to tackle the day.

"Do you want more?"

He smiled. "Nope, I'm good." He settled back against the headboard and looked at her. God, she looked beautiful. "Ready to talk about the job?"

She licked a piece of butter from her lip and Rex's shaft went from semi-hard to hard in nothing flat. Then another urge hit him.

"First I need to use your bathroom and then we'll talk." He rose from the bed and strode to the bathroom, totally comfortable in his nudity. Why shouldn't he be? If all went well, she'd be seeing him naked all the time. He closed the door and did his business. Once he was done, he washed his hands and splashed water on his face. As he looked at his reflection Rex's dream came back to him, or at least the part where Caryn died. He gripped the counter. No way in hell was he going to lose her now. No way!

Picking up a towel, he dried his face and hands then went back into the bedroom.

They had a job to do.

“Rex, I’ve been thinking about where Cleopatra might be buried.” She glanced up as he entered excitement clearly written on her face.

“Oh?” He picked up his jeans, slipped them on and pulled them up, zipping but not buttoning. He sat back down and poured another cup of coffee.

“Rumors have been floating around for years about several places, but there’s no conclusive evidence as to where her actual resting place is.”

“Yeah, I know. Johansen checked into all that before coming to you.”

“Yes, but did he know that one possible place is about forty miles south of Cairo on the Nile. There’s a little-known burial area of the Pharaohs?”

He’d just taken a sip of coffee and nearly spewed it, when Caryn uttered those words. He coughed, trying to catch his breath.

“Where...” He cleared his throat and tried again. “Where did you come up with that?” He plucked a napkin from the tray and wiped his mouth.

“It’s just a guess really. I don’t have any concrete evidence or anything.” She shrugged a delicate shoulder and picked up her coffee.

“Damn lucky guess, Red.” How in the hell did she know that? It had taken Johansen and his researchers six months to figure that out and she’d done it just by guessing. He frowned. Did she know something he didn’t?

“What do you mean?”

He focused his attention back to her. “I mean, that’s where we’re going.”

The cup shook in her hand and she sat it down. “I guessed right?” She clapped her hands and laughed. “I don’t believe it.”

“Yeah,” Rex muttered beneath his breath. “Neither do I.”

“What time do we leave?” She glanced from him to the clock and back again.

“Johansen has a plane ready to go in an hour.” He hid a smile, waiting for the explosion. He didn’t have long to wait.

* * * *

Caryn shrieked and jumped from the bed. “Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?” She scurried around the room, grabbing things from drawers and tossing them on the foot of the bed.

“You didn’t ask.”

“Smart ass. Get up and get dressed. I don’t want to be late.” She pulled an overnight bag from the closet shelf and stuffed everything on the bed in it before zipping it closed. She rifled through her drawers and found black thong panties and a bra to match, throwing them on the bed. Then she searched the other drawers for a black knit tank top and a pair of black jeans. She donned her clothes in record time, brushed and braided her auburn locks, packed a few toiletries and was ready in nothing flat.

She hefted the bag on her shoulder glanced at Rex, who stood by the bed still in nothing but his jeans and sighed.

“Why aren’t you dressed?”

“I got distracted watching you. You’re like a tornado when you get going.” He picked up his shirt and pulled it over his head. After he’d put on his socks and shoes they were ready to go.

Caryn walked out the bedroom door with Rex close on her heels. She all but skipped

down the steps and called for Giles.

"Giles? I'm leaving. I'll be gone for a few days." As she reached the bottom step, Giles was there waiting, her leather coat draped across his arm.

"Yes, Caryn." He nodded to Rex who nodded back. He held out the coat and she slipped into it, turning to give him a peck on the cheek.

"Tell Father Jerome that I'll be home in plenty of time for the children's party."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Children? What party?" Rex asked.

"I'll tell you later. Let's go." Caryn waltzed out the front door, down the concrete steps and straight to her bike, strapping her bag to the back. After putting on her helmet, she slid her leg over the seat and started the engine, smiling when it rumbled to life. She turned to tell Rex to get on and found him shaking his head.

"I'm not getting on that thing."

"Ah, come on, Rex. I promise to be gentle." She gave him a cheeky grin.

He chuckled and pointed his finger at her. "You are a devil woman."

"Yeah, and you love it."

"You're right." He grabbed the other helmet, put it on his head and then climbed on behind her, his hands looping around her waist. Caryn's heart did a little pitter pat at the feel of his large hands touching her body. Even now she could feel the heat from his body warming her. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

"Okay, I'm on. Let's ride." He squeezed her waist and then relaxed.

Caryn nodded, gunned the engine, popped the clutch and they were off.

They arrived at the airport in less than twenty minutes and found the plane on the tarmac, engines running. Caryn brought the bike to a halt, turned it off and waited for Rex to climb off before doing so herself. Caryn grabbed her bag and headed for the plane.

"Are you in a race, honey?" Rex caught up to her in a few steps.

"Just eager to get started." She slowed her pace a little and grinned sheepishly.

"Sorry."

He draped his arm across her shoulder, pulling her into his side. "No problem."

"Hey, where's your bag?" she asked, realizing that he didn't have one.

"It's on the plane."

"Ah, Rex. I see you persuaded the lovely Miss Sinclair to take part in our little adventure."

Caryn looked up and found a man standing at the top of the stairs. *This must be Johansen* Evidently he had already been on board. She took the opportunity to get a gander at the man they were working for and instantly disliked him. He had the look of a smarmy salesman and she hated the type. His charcoal gray pinstripe suit fit him perfectly, making him look dapper. Other than that, the man was a complete mess. His salt and pepper hair hung in a ponytail down his back; his eyes were dark and dangerous looking. Killer eyes! That's what they reminded her of. His lips were puffy like he just had collagen injected into them. She shivered at the thought. That was simply disgusting.

"Caryn, are you alright?" Rex's soft voice beside her ear succeeded in distracting her from the man who awaited them.

"I'm fine. Just a little cold." Only a small lie.

"Come on then," he urged her up the steps. "Let's get on the plane where it's warm."

By the time they reached the top, Johansen had disappeared back inside the plane

and Caryn breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't like the man and didn't trust him. She had a bad feeling about this trip; a very bad feeling.

Caryn entered the plane and found Johansen and a couple of other men sitting off to the left. They appeared to be in deep conversation. Yet the minute she walked close by they all turned their gazes upon her. The two others gave her a cursory glance and then went back to the papers in their laps. But Johansen continued to stare at her in a way that made her stomach queasy. He was looking at her like a starving man and she was the meal.

"Keep going. We're over there." Rex nudged her from behind and pointed toward the section on the other side of the plane. Thank God! She wouldn't have to be close to Johansen or his lecherous thoughts. She reached the seats, stored her bag and sat down in the window seat. Rex sat down beside her and stretched out his legs.

"I love private planes. Lot's of leg room."

Caryn nodded absently, her mind moving ahead to Egypt. She knew the Pharaohs were buried in the Valley of the Kings or Abydos, The City of the Dead, both located near the Nile River. Abydos would be her guess, but she'd bet a dollar that the two men with Johansen knew the exact location of Cleopatra's resting place. They were researchers and probably the best money could buy. Her fingers were itching to get a gander at the papers they were engrossed in.

A nudge against her leg drew her attention to the man beside her.

"What are you thinking about so hard over there?"

She didn't answer right away, wondering how much of her thoughts she should share with Rex. Just how entrenched in Johansen's organization was Rex? Would he laugh her off or really listen? Only one way to find out.

"Rex, how much do you know about our employer?" She kept her voice low, glancing every now and then across the plane to where the man in question sat.

"Why? Is there something bothering you?" He leaned in closer, his hand resting on her thigh.

Was there? Yes! The hand on her thigh was driving her crazy. No, he meant Johansen. "I don't know. I just have a feeling that this is a bad idea."

"Yeah, me too. Do you remember the dream I told you about?"

Oh, dear. She would have tried to distract him, but Rex squeezed her thigh.

"Stop that. I'm serious here." He shifted until he was facing her and spoke earnestly.

"There's something going on here that I can't quite put my finger on and the damn dream last night has made me edgy." He glanced away then back again. "I want you to promise me something."

"What?"

"Promise me that if we find ourselves being held at gunpoint you won't step in front of me." His hand lightly caressed her cheek. "Please?"

She smiled into his palm. "Whatever you say."

"I love you, Caryn." He whispered. "And I'd rather go to my grave knowing you were alive and safe than to live on this Earth without you."

She couldn't stand it anymore. She had to tell him and now. "I love you too, Rex. And the same goes for you." She leaned forward and kissed his lips, pouring all her love into it.

A throat clearing pulled them reluctantly apart. It was the stewardess.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but the seatbelt light is on. If you’ll put your belts on then we will be ready for take off.” She smiled apologetically and then walked away, finding her own seat, and strapping in.

The plane moved forward and Caryn reached for Rex’s hand.

“Here we go.”

Yeah, she thought silently. But the question is where?

The flight was several hours long and Caryn found herself snuggling against Rex and sleeping through most of it. Her rest was anything but peaceful. She dreamed, and in that dream she found Cleopatra’s resting place and held the dagger in her hands only to have it snatched away by Johansen and his men. Just as he ordered their deaths, Caryn woke up, her body soaked in sweat and shaking with fear.

Beside her Rex, still slept peacefully so she kept her dreams to herself. Why give him one more thing to worry about? Her body ached from sitting for so long, so she decided to get up and walk around the plane for a bit. Without waking him, Caryn carefully climbed over his outstretched legs. She looked around the cabin and found no one there besides herself and Rex. Curiosity had her wondering where Johansen and his men were. Silently, she crept toward the rear of the plane and heard murmurs coming from the conference room. The door was ajar so she decided to listen in and see what she could find out.

What she heard scared the shit out of her.

“Thompson, once Miss Sinclair and Mr. St. James have found the dagger I want them dead.” Johansen commanded. “I don’t care what you do with the bodies, leave them in the tomb if you want, but I want them dead. No one will know about the existence of this dagger or who is in possession of it. Once we return stateside, I will gaze into the center and see what the future holds for me.”

The men laughed and Caryn figured that was her cue to leave. She made her way back to where Rex slept as quietly as possible, and after sitting back down shook him awake.

“Rex, wake up. I need to talk to you.”

Chapter Seven

Rex woke slowly, disoriented and unsure of where he was. When his eyes began to focus he saw Caryn staring at him with a look of trepidation on her face. His mind cleared in an instant.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“That son-of-a bitch Johansen is planning on killing us once he has the dagger.”

Shit! His nightmare was already starting. He rubbed his hands over his face and tried to wake up.

“What are you talking about?”

“I just overheard Johansen and his men discussing what to do with us and I’m sorry to say it seems the only solution those dunderheads came up with was killing us and burying us right alongside Cleopatra.”

“That bastard.” Rex clenched his fists. After all he’d done for Johansen and this is how the man repaid him. A quick and disturbing thought flitted through his brain. It was all his fault. The vision of Caryn’s death was going to come true and he was to blame. Anger burst through him like a ball of fire. He turned toward Caryn.

“I’m so sorry, Red. If I had known any of this was going to happen I never would have suggested you.” He leaned his head back against the seat. “Now as it stands, I’m the reason you’re going to die.”

Slap! “Oww!” He jerked his eyes open. “What the hell was that for?” He rubbed his aching jaw.

“That’s for being an ass. Neither of us is going to die.” She looked toward the back of the plane and her eyes widened. He started to turn, but Caryn’s words stopped him.

“NO! Don’t turn around. They’re coming back.” Rex nodded and didn’t move.

“Ah, I see you are both awake. Come, I want to show you something.” Johansen motioned for them to follow. With no other choice if they didn’t want him to know they were onto him, both rose from their seats and followed him to the conference room.

“As you can see, we think we’ve located Abydos, The City of the Dead.” He pointed to the spot on the map covering the table and continued. “There are several places where Cleopatra’s body could be buried, but I think we’ve narrowed it down to two. Here and here. Personally...” he pointed to a different location, “—I think she is here.”

Caryn leaned over to see where he indicated and so did Rex. She arched a brow and looked up at Johansen. “You think she’s there? Why?” Rex was wondering the same thing.

Johansen shrugged. “It’s just a hunch.”

“Hmm...” Caryn replied. He could just imagine those wheels turning inside that head of hers, pondering Johansen’s choice. Johansen had chosen a spot right along the banks of the Nile. Rex knew she was surprised by the choice and he wondered what hers would have been. The Royal Tombs, or one of the other temples, maybe? She put her finger on the spot he’d chosen and then on one closer to the Temple of Osiris.

“Red?” His smooth voice whispered against her ear. Was she onto something? She shook her head and gave him a look that said, *I don’t know yet but give me a minute or two and I’ll figure it out.*

He nodded, letting her know he understood.
She nibbled on her lower lip and continued searching the map, looking for something.

"Sir, we will be landing in a few minutes. If you would all take your seats."

* * * *

Egypt

Caryn felt Rex tug on her arm and with one last glance at the map she went with him. Something niggled in her brain but she just couldn't grasp it. At least not yet, anyway. Eventually it would come to her.

The plane landed without a hitch and they all exited the plane, gasping at the stifling heat that met them. Egypt was a dry, dusty place with sand and more sand. Caryn shielded her eyes and looked around. This was definitely not somewhere she wanted to live but she did love to visit.

"Come," Mr. Johansen said. "A car is waiting to take us to the campsite."

Caryn turned to Rex and mouthed *campsite?*

He shrugged his shoulders. *I don't know.*

She followed Johansen reluctantly down the steps and into a waiting Hummer. The drive to the campsite was uneventful and by the time they reached it darkness was closing in.

"Rex, I have put you and Miss Sinclair in the tent closest to the water. I figured you might want to get an early start tomorrow and take a look at the location."

"Thanks." Rex replied and picked up both their bags. "I think Caryn and I will say goodnight."

"Very good. There is a tray of fruit and some beverages in your tent. If you require anything else just give a yell. Goodnight."

Caryn followed Rex toward a tent sitting in semi-darkness wondering what the hell kind of surprises were in store for them. She watched Rex enter the tent first and followed closely behind. Upon entering she sighed in pleasure. There was a double bed; a table laden with fruit and drinks, and in the far corner was a steaming tub of water.

"A bath." She whispered, stripping out of her clothes and climbing in. The water felt good on her tired, aching body and she sank beneath the surface, immersing her entire body. When she rose up and wiped the water from her eyes, she found Rex standing there buck naked, his shaft standing at attention.

"Care if I join you?" He looked from her to the tub, his brow arched in question.

"Sure. Come on in." He motioned for her to slide forward and she did, waiting while he slid in behind her. His legs rested along side hers and his cock poked her in the back.

"Rex, you're going to have to do something about that. I can't relax with your cock poking me." She wiggled against him.

"I can fix that." His hands grabbed her under the arms and lifted her, setting her down on his throbbing shaft. She slid all the way down and groaned with pleasure.

"That's not exactly what I had in mind, but it works."

He flexed inside her, eliciting another moan.

"Grip the sides of the tub and ride me, Red." He didn't have to ask twice. Already her body pulsed with need. She grabbed the sides and lifted herself almost all the way off

before sliding back down.

"That's it, Red." When she moved upward again, his hands grabbed her waist and showed her the rhythm he wanted. Fast and hard. Not a problem, she could do that. She picked up speed with each downward thrust, drawing her climax closer and closer. Beneath her Rex's body tightened and flexed, his muscled thighs doing most of the work. Sweat dripped down her face and her breasts heaved with each stroke. *Faster*, she chanted silently. *Faster, deeper, harder*.

"Deeper ... faster ... harder." She cried out. "Oh God, Rex. Now! Now! Now!"

Rex increased the pace, nudging Caryn right over the edge. She threw back her head and screamed his name as her climax hit hard. Wave after wave of pleasure rippled through her body as she continued to ride him. Her vaginal muscles clenched and unclenched around his cock. She felt him swelling even more inside her and knew he was close. She tightened her inner muscles and felt his seed spurt into her.

"Don't stop, Caryn." He cried out hoarsely, continuing to pump inside her. His body shook beneath hers and she relaxed, leaning against him. His arms moved from her waist to her breasts, where he gently squeezed each globe.

"I think half the water is now on the floor."

Caryn chuckled. "You're probably right. Good thing it's a dirt floor."

His chest shook behind her, his chuckle tickling her ear. "You are something else." His lips grazed her shoulder.

"Aren't I though?"

"Time to get out. I'm starved and we need to formulate a plan."

Caryn hated to move. She enjoyed being in his arms, but knew he was right. With a disheartened sigh she rose from the water and stepped from the tub, careful not to step in the mud. She spied a bathing sheet and wrapping it around her body headed for the table. She eyed the spread before her and smiled when she found apricots. Picking one up, she bit into it and closed her eyes in bliss. It was heavenly.

Rex cleared his throat. "You know if you keep that up we're going to be in the bed making love instead of figuring out a way not to get killed."

She opened her eyes and looked at him, an embarrassed look on her face. "Sorry. It's been a while since I've had apricots." She finished off the last bite and wiped her hands on the damp towel at her elbow.

"Okay, so what's the plan St. James?" She propped her elbows on the table, giving him her undivided attention. How could she not? The man was absolutely gorgeous. Water dripped down his body absorbed by the towel knotted at his waist. Watching one rivulet work its way slowly down his bronzed skin, through the spattering of hair on his chest, made her hot. She wanted to lick that droplet, to follow it all the way beneath that towel where it would reach his...

"Caryn," Rex barked. "Are you listening?"

She fumbled for words. "Huh? Yes, listening."

"It would help if your eyes were on my face instead of staring at my crotch."

Amusement flooded his voice.

Caryn jerked her head up. "Then you better put some clothes on if you want to talk."

"Fine." Rex pivoted, walked toward the bed, letting the towel fall just as he reached his bag. His ass flexed as he bent over, rummaged through his bag and pulled out a pair of shorts. She all but drooled when he bent over, giving her a view of his nice ass and his

other package as well. She sighed in disappointment when those jewels disappeared inside the shorts. Oh well. She did tell him to cover up.

“Better?” He rested his hands on his hips.

She nodded.

“Good.” He walked back to where she was sitting, pulled out a chair on the opposite side and sat down.

“Now tell me everything you overheard and don’t leave anything out.” She repeated back the conversation. The whole time she talked, Rex listened intently. When she got to the part where they talked about killing them, his eyes flashed with anger and his hands closed into fists. By the time she finished Rex’s anger was palpable.

“So what are we going to do?” She heard the tinge of fear in her voice but didn’t care. She was scared as hell and wanted Rex to know it. His hand reached out, covering hers, giving her some comfort, but it wasn’t enough. She wanted to go home and curl up in her nice soft bed with Rex’s arms wrapped around her. Unfortunately, that wasn’t likely to happen unless they found a way out of their predicament.

“First off, we’re going to find the dagger, and then second, get the hell out of Dodge.”

She waited for him to say more and when he didn’t she frowned. “That’s it? That’s your big plan?” She threw up her hands in defeat. “Fine, then. I’m going to bed. Might as well get a good night’s rest since I’m going to die tomorrow.” She made it two steps before she was whirled around and staring into the eyes of a very angry man.

“Don’t ever say that again. You are not going to die. I forbid it.” The tension rolled off him in waves and Caryn realized for the first time Rex was really and truly pissed off. But more than that, he was afraid. She regarded him with somber curiosity.

“Caryn, promise me you won’t take any chances.”

She reached up, pulled his head down and kissed him. “I will if you will.”

“Deal.” He kissed her hard, once, twice and then let her go. “Let’s get some sleep. We have to be alert tomorrow so when the opportunity to escape presents itself, we take it.” He kissed her again softly and tugged her gently toward the bed. After she climbed in, Rex extinguished the lantern and climbed in beside her, pulling her into his waiting arms.

He nuzzled his chin on her head and whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She whispered back and snuggled in his embrace, safe and secure for now.

Chapter Eight

The next morning dawned bright and early and the heat was unbearable. Neither Rex nor Caryn had gotten much sleep and the heat was starting to take its toll on them both.

"I think we need to go this way, Caryn." Rex suggested warily. She had woken crabby and with a temper. It was true what they said about redheads. They had a fiery temper and weren't ones you wanted to cross paths with when in a bad mood. He thought to coax her out of her mood by playing around. All it got him was a scowl and a few choice words. The woman had learned quite a few words in the six months they'd been apart.

"I know where I'm going," Caryn grumbled and continued trudging along the well-worn path.

"Of course you do, darling." He muttered beneath his breath. "That's why we're no closer than we were half an hour ago." He adjusted his pack and grabbed the canteen of water clipped to his waist. Unscrewing the cap, he raised it to his lips and took a swallow. The cool water slid down, soothing his parched throat. He wiped his brow, put the cap back on and then looked at his watch. Already noon and it was hot as Hades. If they didn't find the cave soon, they were all going to get heat stroke.

He chanced a look at Johansen and his goon squad and didn't like what he saw. They were talking low, casting furtive glances at Caryn, and then whispering again.

He glanced toward Caryn and found her studying the map once again. Enough was enough. He stalked over to her, jerked the map from her hands, and ignoring her rather loud protests, took a look himself. He looked at the map, then glanced down the path and nodded.

"Only a couple more feet that way and we should be at the temple's opening." He handed the map back to Caryn, smiled smugly and headed in the direction of shelter.

"Smart ass," he heard her whisper behind him. "You're wrong, you know."

He looked over his shoulder and winked at her.

A few minutes later Rex decided she was right. He trudged back to her and gave a wry smile. "Okay, lead on."

With a curt nod, she marched off toward the river. Twenty minutes later, they stumbled upon the entrance.

"Here. It's here." Excitement filled her voice.

Rex checked to see they were unobserved and squeezed her hand. "I told you you're the best!" As Johansen and his men straggled up to them, panting with exertion, Rex dropped his pack, rummaging through it for his flashlight. He grabbed it in his hands, turned on the switch and headed into the dark cave. For a moment he experienced déjà vu, but shook it off. His dream would not come true. He wouldn't let Caryn die.

Feeling a presence behind him, he turned to find Caryn standing there, flashlight in hand, ready to go forward. Making sure the others were out of earshot, he spoke.

"Remember. Keep your eyes and ears open for an opening. Dagger or not, we are out of here. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Caryn grabbed the back of his pants and held on.

"Smart thinking. No matter what, don't let go. Got it?"

She nodded.

Satisfied with her answer, Rex took a deep breath and started walking deeper into the cavern. As they walked along, he could hear the scurrying of tiny animals far off, probably rats, and he could feel a cool breeze wafting along his face. Everything about this reminded him of his dream. He stopped abruptly, causing Caryn to run into his back and Johansen to question him “Mr. St. James. Have you found anything yet?”

“Yeah. Darkness and more darkness.” He replied sarcastically. Stupid asshole. What did he think Rex would find in the pitch black surrounding them? A golden fleece or maybe a torch or two?

“There’s no need for sarcasm. I simply asked a question.” He heard shuffling and then Johansen’s voice reached him again. “Carry on.”

Carry on, Rex mouthed silently. I’ll carry on, right outside the door without finding a damn thing for you if you keep messing with me.

Caryn nudged him from behind and Rex started moving again. They walked and walked for what seemed like an hour when a tiny pinpoint of light appeared ahead. Rex’s stomach tightened in knots. This was the same thing that happened in his dream. Deep down he knew going on was the only choice, but he sure as hell didn’t like it. If they continued on and entered a room like the one in his dreams then they would be trapped. He didn’t remember another exit, only the one he’d gone through when he entered the room.

“Rex?” Caryn asked. “Am I going crazy or is that a light up ahead?”

“It’s a light.” He replied grudgingly. “I don’t like this.”

“I know you don’t, but it’s not like we’ve got a whole lot of choices here.”

She was right, of course. Going forward was the only option open at the moment. But he would wait and watch, biding his time for the right moment to escape.

The light grew larger and soon Rex found himself on the threshold of a brightly lit room. When he entered the room he immediately searched out an alternate escape route and cursed when he didn’t find one.

Caryn rested her hand on his back. “We will find a way out of here, Rex. I know it.”

He nodded, too angry to speak. God, he hoped she was right. They moved out of the way so Johansen and the others could enter.

“My God! I can’t believe we’ve actually found Cleopatra’s burial place.” Johansen whispered in awe.

Rex said nothing, just gazed around the room. Everything was the same in the dream except this time there was no Cleopatra. His eyes roamed along the room, taking in everything when a sparkle of something caught his eye. Motioning for Caryn to follow, Rex moved cautiously so as not to draw attention to the two of them. When he reached the spot where he’d seen the sparkle, he leaned down and moved a piece of golden cloth out of the way and what he found underneath made him catch his breath.

It was Cleopatra’s dagger.

“Rex, is that what I think it is?” Caryn whispered excitement in her voice.

“Yes,” he replied and leaned down to pick it up. The moment he touched it, the opal began to swirl and a picture formed. He watched as his and Caryn’s images coalesced in the mist. What he saw next rendered him speechless. Two children, a boy and a girl sat in front of a big fireplace, joyful looks on their faces as they emptied their stockings. The mist swirled and the image vanished leaving Rex with more questions than answers.

Which was their future? He glanced over at Caryn and saw questions in her eyes as well.

“NO! Give me that dagger. It’s mine.” Johansen screamed, walking hurriedly toward them with his hand outstretched.

Rex reached to push Caryn behind him, but she struggled to stay beside him, and reached for the dagger. He held it out of reach. Behind Johansen, one of his goons trained a gun on her. Rex began to panic as he saw his vision take shape.

“Caryn, get behind me.”

“Rex, let me see the dagger again. Please! I want to see our...”

There was only one thing to do, one way to keep her safe.

“Here, Johansen,” he said, holding out the knife and forcing his body between Caryn and the gun. “I told you I’d get you the dagger, and I have. Now come on. We can leave her here. There’s no need to kill her—she’ll die anyway before she reaches any town.” He shrugged, willing Johansen to concentrate on him and trying to ignore Caryn’s sharp breath. “She did her job. I’ll take her pay and we’ll be square.”

“Rex!”

“It’s best this way, Caryn. Remember your promise on the plane. Remember what I told you. This is it, baby.”

“I thought you...”

Before she finished mist rolled across the floor, wrapping around Johansen like a mummy. Then ... he was gone. Vanished! Disappeared! And in his place stood a woman Rex recognized immediately. Rex glanced at the goon squad to find them frozen in place.

“Queen Cleopatra.” He murmured bowing his head to her. Caryn gasped.

“We meet again.” She inclined her head toward Caryn. “Is this the woman you spoke of when last we met? The woman you love?”

Rex wrapped his arm around Caryn’s waist and drew her to his side. “Yes, this is the one. I thought for a minute the future you showed me last time would come true. I thought she’d die.”

“I told you the future could be changed. I’m happy you found a way to do so.”

Cleopatra smiled. “She is very beautiful.”

“Uh, excuse me,” Caryn spoke hesitant and wary. “What happened to Johansen? And what’s up with his men just standing there? Is this for real or are we all dreaming?” She waved her hand in the air.

Cleopatra chuckled. “Let’s just say it’s unexplainable. How is that?”

“Sure, fine. Whatever.” Rex knew Caryn was confused and would be asking a lot of questions later. He didn’t mind. He would answer every one. They had a long time ahead of them to do it.

He squeezed her tight and kissed her temple. Then he held out the dagger, hilt first, to Cleopatra. “I believe this belongs to you.”

She took the offering and inclined her head. “Thank you for protecting my treasure. I will never be able to thank you enough.” She started to turn away but stopped. “Perhaps you would like a glimpse of what the future holds?”

“No,” Rex and Caryn said at the same time.

Rex smiled down at Caryn. “I think we will just let the future unfold on its own, without any help from us.” He kissed her lips lingering for just a moment. When he pulled back and glanced toward Cleopatra, she was gone.

“What? Where?” He searched the room and found no sign of her.

Caryn's fingers slid over his cheek, nudging him back around to face her.

"It's over, Rex. The dagger is where it should be and we're safe." Her lips lightly touched his, her tongue darting into the tiny crevice at the corner of his mouth. "You worried me for a minute. But I shouldn't have doubted you."

He smiled. "Let's go home. I want to make those babies." She nipped his chin and then soothed it with her tongue. Rex groaned and jerked her into his arms, hugging her body tight against his.

"I love you." He kissed her lips and held her with one arm while he reached into his pocket for the tiny box resting there. He let her go then, flipped open the box, dropped down on one knee. "Caryn Sinclair, will you marry me?"

She squealed and flew at him knocking him flat on his back with her on top. "Yes," she said showering his face with kisses. "I'll marry you."

Rex laughed out loud and slid the ring on her finger. "Merry Christmas, Caryn."

"Merry Christmas, Rex."

The End

About the Author:

McKenzie Reed just loves to create characters, put them in sticky situations and watch the sparks fly. Writing has been a life-long dream for MacKenzie, and when she was in high school, she wrote a continuing story and her mother thought it was good. Looking at it now, MacKenzie laughs and says, "What was I thinking?"

She enjoys writing, taking care of her family, and chocolate. Strange list to be sure, but that's the way it goes. Her first title was a short story called The Magic of Passion in Liquid Silver Books' AFTERNOON DELIGHTS Anthology. Her first novel was Haunting Melody with several other stories following.

She loves to hear from readers! Email her at MacReedWriter@aol.com

Cleopatra's Legacy

Rae Monet

Dedication

To my Yahoo group and my own Rick Masters

Chapter One

“Dragon Twenty, requesting clearance for landing.”

Jordan Fare opened her visual portal as she approached the station. Ships of all shapes and sizes greeted her; it was a montage of confusion. *Oh man, could I have hit a busier spaceport?*

“Stand by, Dragon Twenty, you are not cleared. I repeat you are not cleared. Port traffic requires you to circle for a five-quarter click before landing.”

Jordan slammed her fist on the control panel. “Zephyr, I hate Christmas.”

She should have known better than trying to land on Earth in the height of the Christmas season. The planet was famous for the best thrift bargains and the spaceport was jam-packed with holiday shoppers. But she wasn’t here to shop for Christmas, she was here to claim a relic from history, one that would pay for the release of thousands of slaves, maybe more and finish the upgrades to her ship so she could hold more passengers. Hers was purely a mission of greed. Or at least she kept telling herself that. Never mind the whole “freeing the slaves” part.

The jeweled dagger of Cleopatra. Given to her by Marc Anthony on the eve of their first anniversary as lovers. The hilt of the dagger was said to be encrusted with diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. And the piece de resistance, right in the center of those precious stones was an opal, small, about the size of a kable coin that could, of all things, show the holder of that little dagger the future. She rubbed her hands together in glee. She couldn’t wait.

The artifact would bring over twenty million rubles on the black market and she needed that money. All she had to do was find the dagger at the site she had researched, and it was all hers.

She had been studying the legend of Cleopatra for over a year, when she stumbled upon a clue, a huge clue. The journal of a treasure hunter named Rex St. James and the possible location for that treasure: Earth, Egypt to be specific and the Temple of Osiris. Only problem was, the stupid Temple was a museum now, but she had a plan, a way to get to where she needed and lift that little baby.

“Dragon Twenty, acknowledge our instructions.”

Jordan growled. “Acknowledged.”

She was impatient, she wanted to claim her treasure, because that’s what space pirates and thieves do, they steal.

She hit the auto pilot button and set her short-range scanner and security sweep, then unstrapped from the Captain’s chair. If she had to wait so damned long to land, she had some basic repairs to do.

* * * *

Rick Masters had her now. He’d been trailing Jordan for over three months, wondering what she was up to. It was always fruitful to keep tabs on her. Although, he wasn’t sure he could ever really turn her over to the Intergalactic Police. In his position as an undercover enforcer he usually pulled in good Intergalactic smuggling cases, but he

was following Jordan Fare for purely personal reasons. He met her in the seediest bar on Eikes to exchange illegal cargo data, and a month later he made her his in the most expensive penthouse suite on Reim.

God that night had been incredible, until, when he was sleeping, she discovered his undercover chip, and ran. He never thought anyone would notice the small biochip implanted behind his ear. Leave it to her to spot the damned thing. He'd been chasing her ever since, and it was time to stop pursuing and start catching. Positioning his ship besides hers, he prepared to beam aboard. He was able to bypass her security system with his universal enforcer code. He smiled as he programmed in his destination coordinates. She was in for a surprise.

Chapter Two

Jordan hit the metal hydroponic pipe with a resounding “clunk”.

“Damn it.”

The thing wasn’t budging. She repositioned her body under the wrench and set all her weight into breaking the clamp seal. She needed to fix that crack just inside the pipe.

“Need some help with that?”

Jordan screamed, sat up, and promptly hit her head on the top of the hydro tube.

“Ouch.” She fingered her forehead as she reached for her gun, coming up empty when she realized she had removed all her tactical gear to crawl into the tube.

“Looking for this?” Her laser gun dangled from his fingers, in two pieces. He had dismantled the thing.

“Rick.” She spat out his name like a swear word.

“Hey, baby.” He leaned forward, clamped onto her ankles and pulled her out of the tube. She landed with her back against the wall, her feet anchored to the ground. He tossed her gun aside and caged her in with his arms. She glanced up at his face. She would never forget it. Light blond hair was tied in a ponytail, falling down his back. His green eyes flared with interest and another emotion she could easily identify; anger. His arms were bare, veined and muscled as he locked her to the wall. She remembered running her fingers over those hard muscles, exploring every inch of his skin, taking his cock deep into her mouth and worshipping it.

He was the most beautiful man—soft in some places, hard in others.

He’d caught her off guard from the first moment she had seen him on Eikes. He gave her the most predictable pick up line. *What’s a beautiful woman like you, doing on a crappy planet like this?* She had taken one look at him, his sexy leather armor leaving bulging, tattooed arms visible, his ice green eyes, the face of a god, and made a decision; she wanted him, and any way she could have him. Laughing, she had made a place next to her at the bar. That was when it started, the heat of attraction, the fire of want. She discovered he was her smuggling contact. On that trip, she was trying to gather data on stealing a high-capacity fuel cell and Rick gave her the data. It had been a worthwhile theft. She had sold that fuel for three times what it was worth and freed over three hundred slaves.

They didn’t actually act on their attraction until Reim, after a month of meetings, the closest thing to dating a man she had ever had. Wow, what a night that had been. He was supposed to find a contact for an Intergalactic transaction to purchase some slaves, and instead had seduced her into the most memorable night of her life, full of lots of naked skin and even hotter sex. Just looking at him now was making her cream. Discovering the enforcer chip behind his ear really ruined a beautiful night. She couldn’t afford to be taken into custody.

“I’m not going to jail.”

“I’m not here to take you to jail.” He leaned closer, his scent wafted over her. God, she loved his smell, manly, spicy, unique to only him.

“Why are you here, then?” She brought up her hands and placed them on his chest to keep him from getting any closer. She could feel the pounding of his heart. He wasn’t

totally oblivious to her.

“You shouldn’t have run out on me. You should have let me explain, given me a chance.”

“Rick, you’re an enforcer, you work for the Intergalactic Police. What’s to explain? You were running a sting operation, that much was clear, and I have my doubts you were on vacation. You were supplying me with illegal information. By the time we met in Reim, you would have had a pretty good Intergalactic smuggling case against me. What did you expect me to do? I can’t go to jail.” Her voice trailed off as he ran his finger along her jaw.

“I do have a good case against you. Solid, without question. But I don’t want to take you to jail.” He pushed against her hands and leaned in, his mouth just a hair’s breadth away from hers. Oh, oh man did she want to kiss him. She craved him so bad. He had been the only light in a lengthy list of dark deeds, a long night of pure passion she could easily repeat, over and over.

“I want to take you, all right, anyway I can get you.” He quickly spun her around, forced her against the wall, and raised her arms. He kicked her legs apart and laid his hands on her formfitting spacesuit.

“Before I take you anywhere, I need to do a thorough body search,” he whispered against her ear as his fingers began traveling.

It was strangely arousing, having him take control of her. He pressed his body against hers, blocking her in so she couldn’t move, his arms bracketing her against the wall. She could feel his erection against the small of her back. He wasn’t the only one on fire.

“That wasn’t a nice thing to do to me, just up and leave.”

“I’m not nice. So how’d you locate me?”

She could only see him out of the corner of her eye. He was intent on his purpose, but a small line of perspiration blanketed his forehead.

“I placed a tracker on your ship on Eikes. Didn’t expect me to lose you did you, babe?”

She shook her head. He betrayed her and she was having a hard time drumming up anger about it. If she had to get caught, at least it was by him. He seemed fair.

“So you always intended to take me in, from the beginning?”

“This isn’t about me or my job; this is about you leaving without telling me, Jordan.” In his anger, he nearly flattened her against the wall with his body. She knew him; she was familiar with every bone in his body. He was an enforcer, and he would never harm her. She counted on it.

“It is for me, Rick.”

“Why do you have to do that, make this about something other than the two of us?” He struck the wall next to her head. She flinched. “Give me a chance.” Her gut clenched in fear. She couldn’t deny him.

“Why, so you can explain, then cart me off to jail?”

He unzipped her uniform and pushed his hand into it, the coolness of his palms warmed from her body heat. Running his hands up her stomach, he crowded in on her, bending to lean his head beside hers. She loved the scent of him. She would remember it long after he was gone from her life. He moved as if he hadn’t heard her.

“Do you have any idea how angry I was, waking up without you beside me? Do you

even care?” His voice broke; the tenseness in his tone made her wince. She did care. That was the problem—she cared too much. She felt defeated, like his words stabbed her in the heart.

“I care, Rick.”

“Are you sure?” He asked as his hands traveled, cupping her breasts and gently tweaking her nipples. She sucked in a breath. She was getting hot, so hot. She was wet in excitement. Slowly, Rick dipped his knees and thrust his hard cock against her, she moaned, sighed and dropped her head in shame at her own reaction.

“I’m sure.”

“Want me to show you, babe, how good it is between us? Again?” His hands moved. He peeled her suit down her body. His hand dipped into her heat, his fingers separating, massaging her clit. She arched against him, the weight of his body against hers preventing her from moving away. God, he was so big, he surrounded her with his body, his essence. She was lost in him, in the moment; it felt so damned good, he was so good.

“Yessss,” she cried out to no one in particular. As his fingers delved into her wet channel, she rode them and moaned in pleasure. His other hand left her, she could feel him fumbling behind her, then he was there, his shaft replacing his finger, easing in from behind. He leaned forward and thrust.

“Ahhhh,” Jordan moaned, so full, so wonderful, so right.

“See,” he said as he moved, again and again his hips slid forward. She could feel him, every hard inch of him, push in and out of her. The danger he posed made her climb higher than she ever had. She was going over, fast. He must have felt it; he moved quickly, hard, grabbing her hips to steady her.

“Jordan,” he groaned. She recognized his tone of voice. He was close.

“So good,” he said, his hands tightening on her hips to the point of pain.

“God,” her head fell back onto his shoulder. She was panting, her heart racing, need clawing at her. With him it had been this way from the beginning, a want so hard it hurt, an excitement so thick it nearly stopped her dead every time he was inside her, with her. Two more quick thrusts, and their cries mingled. She went with him, climaxing hard.

He buried his head in her shoulder, panting against her neck. Sometimes she was so tired of the fight, of playing the outlaw for her people, but she didn’t have a choice. She didn’t want to push him away, and she didn’t want to see him hurt.

“Don’t make me take you in, Jordan. Talk to me, tell me what’s going on.” He was pleading now, his earlier threat gone. He turned her, took her into his arms and cradled her close, his hands soothing her hair. She tried not to let his affectionate words get to her, but they did. She wasn’t going to cry, then felt the wetness on her cheek. He pulled back and framed her face with his hands. “Babe,” he said as he wiped the tears away with his thumbs.

Could she afford to trust him? She desperately wanted to. He kicked his shoes and pants away and lifted her into his arms.

“Your quarters?”

“Around the corridor to the right.”

He moved like a panther, all sinew and muscles, a relaxed, powerful gait that was so arousing. He was tall, nearly two heads over her—she liked that about him. He made her feel feminine. She loved to watch him. His hair had come loose and it fell into his face. She smoothed it back. His light green eyes made contact with hers.

"I missed you," she said as she ran her hand behind his head and released his hair. She combed her fingers through it; it was so soft, so different from the hard planes of his body. His expression widened, his brows rising in question.

"Really?" He smiled. He had the most gorgeous smile, softening the serious lines of his face.

She sighed and rubbed her thumb along his bottom lip. "Yes, really."

"Despite my job, despite what I represent, you missed me?" He grinned like a cat who had eaten all the cream. She shook her head.

"Yes, wise guy, I missed you."

"Well hold on, babe, I'm about to give you a Christmas present you won't forget."

He paused at her door.

"Open" The door glided open on her voice recognition. He carried her into her quarters and laid her on her bed. She had purchased a large, comfortable bed from the planet Nigel. She never expected to share it, but now she was glad she paid the extra rubles for the biggest size.

"Nice bed."

"Thanks."

He removed her boots and finished peeling off her flight suit; he spread her legs wide, leaving her naked and totally open to him.

"Don't move," he ordered as he quickly divested himself of his remaining clothing, his leather vest, and sleek, sleeveless shirt underneath it. She smiled and rose to her elbows to watch him.

This should be an interesting show.

Chapter Three

Rick finished undressing. Jordan watching him like he was dinner didn't help. He was hard and ready again, ready to take her.

"Thank you for not moving." He threw the last of his clothes in the corner and crawled up her body. He closed his mouth over her nipple, laved, and licked. Her breath caught and her hands buried in his hair as she clutched his head to her breast.

"Oh God." She bowed into his body. He enjoyed her clear pleasure. Taking his time, he gave equal attention to each breast until she panted his name.

He lifted his head and took in the entire package. God, she was something, long auburn hair curled wildly around her incredible face, alabaster skin, the dark beauty mark above her right lip contrasting with the white. Her light blue eyes completed the striking package. Her body was luscious, curved in all the right places, breasts large and full, nipples peaked in arousal, hips curvy and smooth. Her pink lips were well kissed, wet, and trembling. He saw the glow of desire in her half-lidded eyes, and his entire body throbbed with need. He had been lost from the first moment he laid eyes on her.

Suddenly, he couldn't go slowly. His control had eroded with the touch of his lips to her skin. Now all he wanted to do was take.

He went back to tasting, her belly, her hipbone. He had her where he wanted, naked, spread out before him like a feast.

He wanted to taste her.

He lifted her legs over his shoulders and proceeded to do just that. She tasted incredible. He licked, sucked, nibbled, their combined juices arousing beyond belief. Using teeth and tongue, he worked on taking her up to the first level.

She gasped, her head falling back against the bed. He ran his hands under her ass and brought her closer and teased, sampled. He wanted everything she had to give. She was going to come; he could feel her tightening against him, pushing her mound into his mouth.

Good, he wanted her mindless, thinking of nothing but him, his body, his cock buried deep inside her. She cried out and climaxed. He worked her until the last spasm died. Then he released her legs, letting them slide down his arms.

"Do you want me?" He wanted her consent and some acknowledgement he wasn't the only seducer on this ship, that it wasn't just him hot with need.

"Yes." She reached forward and touched him.

His cock dipped in acknowledgement. He gritted his teeth and tried to hold onto his control as she stroked him. She ran her hand up and down, pumping him, making him harder than he'd thought he could get. He overlapped her hands with his and stopped her. She looked at him.

"I think you better stop or this show is going to end, real quick."

"Real quick would not be good."

He leaned forward and plunged his hands into her hair. It was like the softest saly fur, so incredible. He tilted her back against the blanket and followed her down. His mouth mated with hers, his kiss almost feral. He was desperate now, desperate to have her.

“Open your legs wide for me.” He ran his hands down her sides and back up to her breasts. Kneading her, arousing her, he slid into her. She sucked in air.

He filled her completely; she was tight, and he was big. He edged into her inch by inch until he was fully seated. Then, he buried his face into her neck, took in her smell, enjoyed the moment in her body. It was heaven. She caressed his ass, and he reveled in her touch.

“So good, Rick.” She sighed out his name. Against his chest, he felt her heart trip in excitement.

“Yes.” He took charge and began moving inside her, his lips nibbling on hers. *Such pleasure.*

“Rick,” she cried out as she climbed close to her release, her muscles tightening on his cock. He married their palms as they moved together in unison. Their bodies gleamed with sweat; the breath he was holding puffed out and fanned her neck. She leaned forward and licked his throat, tasting him, and he felt his balls draw up in arousal. She clutched at his hands. He stayed with her, until she was so close, a whisper away from her climax, small wordless cries coming out of her mouth.

“Come with me, babe.” His voice was rough with need, yet he held back. He wanted them to come together again.

“Yes.” She bowed against him, her body clenching, her heat milking him. His hips strained toward hers, his back arching him closer. He could feel the veins in his neck pumping in unison with his pounding heart as he emptied himself in one final, hard thrust.

They both collapsed. She released his hands and ran her fingers up his chest, and slid them into his hair. Cupping the back of his neck, she brought his lips to hers. She took them like he wanted to take her, completely. Lifting her head, she panted against his cheek.

“Wow.” She smiled. He adored the cute tilt of her mouth, the dimples in her cheeks.

“Wow, was right. You want thirds?” He hardened inside of her. He couldn’t believe she could arouse him again so quickly, but she did.

She arched an eyebrow. “Thirds?”

With a tilt of his hips he started to stir again, showing her what he meant. She moaned and moved with him. He ground his teeth in need.

“Oh, thirds...” She released the sentence on the tail of a whimper. His heart sped, tapping against his chest. He wanted to dance like this with her all night. She ran her hands down his body and cupped his ass as he plunged into her. He liked having her hands on him. Heck, he *loved* it.

“Yeah, let’s do thirds...” Sweat dripped down his cheek and onto her collarbone. He grinned as he slid in. Then he flipped around and pulled her on top of him.

She laughed. “That was something.” He grinned and squeezed her ass. “Stick around and I’ll keep showing you something.”

She smiled and leaned forward to kiss him. The feel of her body covering his was nearly his undoing. She was perfect. He reached up and fingered her nipples, taking pleasure in the flare in her eyes. Her skin was a beautifully light color; it made her seem vulnerable. He ran his hand along the softness of her waist.

“Keep showing me, huh?” She rotated her hips. He growled as she raised herself off him, then slid back down. He wasn’t going to last long. The position was so right.

She moaned and closed her eyes when she rotated her hips, and he gasped.

“Ahhh huh.” That was his only response, as she got serious about riding him. He couldn’t think with anything but his cock anymore. She kissed his jaw, his cheek, then latched onto his lips. He groaned into her mouth, her aggressive lovemaking turned him inside out. It didn’t take long for both of them to fall. He thrust his hips off the blanket and they flew.

Jordan draped herself over his body. His thumping heart slowed. He ran his hands up and down her back. He could get used to this, he thought, her body over his, touching her at leisure. It was the strangest feeling. Like he wasn’t in control of his life anymore. He didn’t care about his job right now.

Her breathing evened as she snuggled her chin under his. He shifted her body next to his, then he flipped the blanket over them and cuddled her close. He buried his hand into her wild hair and held her against his chest. She yawned.

“I might end up regretting bedding the enemy.”

He laughed. She swatted his shoulder. He captured her hand and kissed her palm.

“I’m not your enemy.” He kissed her cheek. He could feel her smiling against his face.

“Yeah, whatever you say.” She kissed his jaw, then slid toward his lips. He took what she gave, a long, sleepy kiss. He opened his mouth and offered more. She accepted, her tongue mating with his. His heart kicked back into gear, speeding up. He broke the kiss, panting, and laid his forehead against hers.

“Get some sleep.” He wrapped his arms around her and tangled their legs. He wanted her again—God, this woman made him insatiable. He was content to hold her for a couple of hours.

“Sounds good.”

“Okay, Jordan.”

“Need to talk about this.”

He laughed. She was talking in her sleep now.

“We’ll talk in a couple hours, shut it down for a click. Everything is going to be okay.”

His assurance seemed to calm her. She sank deeper into sleep, her breath puffing in and out against his neck.

“Okay,” was her last remark. He frowned. He had to think of some way to save her.

Chapter Four

“Program notification—Planet Earth landing clearance has been approved.” The mechanical chime of the ship’s computer woke him. Moaning, Rick threw an arm over his eyes.

“Program notification—Planet Earth landing clearance has been approved,” the voice said again.

The groan next to him made him smile.

“Computer voice recognition, Captain Jordan Fare. Notification acknowledged, disengage warning.”

“Acknowledged, Captain Fare, warning disengaged.”

Rick rolled over, pinning Jordan under him. She smiled around a yawn.

“Hey, sexy.”

“Hey, beautiful.”

Taking advantage of her drowsiness, he ran his hand down her leg, anchoring it behind him. He entered her slowly, taking his sweet time with the first initial thrust.

“Ahhh, Rick.” Gasping, she curved into his body.

He loved her responsiveness. The need to have her hadn’t lessened in the three months he chased her. They had an incredibly passionate connection.

Her vaginal walls clenched his erection. His heart kicked up a beat and began racing. His body on fire, he nuzzled her neck as he rode her. He licked the corner of her mouth when she panted.

“Marry me,” he said, driving in.

She rotated her hips against his. “Huh?”

“Marry me.” God, he loved the feel of her. She made him crave everything. From her smell, her skin—so soft and smooth—to those arousing mewling noises she made. She drove him crazy. After she left him, he’d yearned for her every minute of the day.

Her hands clutched his biceps. “Rick,” she cried out.

He pulled out almost all the way, teetering on the edge, waiting for her to join him. Slipping in, he felt as if he was home.

He groaned when she tightened her legs around him.

“Come for me, join me.”

Pushing her hips into him, she changed the angle, taking him deeper. His breath hitched, a tingle starting at the base of his spine and crawling its way up. He slid his hands under her, lifting her into his thrusts, trying to hold back until she reached her peak.

Sweat dripped down his temple.

Kissing her, he tangled his tongue with hers, sliding in and out, mimicking the movements of his hips. She came with a long moan, tightening around him. Only then did he let the fire take him.

“Jordan!” he cried. Panting, he sank into her body one final time.

He sprawled on top of her, his racing heart slowing, his breath deepening. She wrapped her legs around his thighs and her arms around his back, as if wanting to hold him forever.

He lifted his head an inch. "Hello," he said.

She smiled and rubbed her chin against his cheek. "Hello."

"Marry me?"

She sighed and slid her hand down his back.

"Stop it," she said. She didn't think he was serious.

He rolled them over so she lay on top of him. He ran his hands over her ass, caressing, kneading.

"Come on." This was the right thing to do.

She caressed his face. "Are you serious?"

He puffed out a breath of annoyance.

"Marrying me will provide you immunity from prosecution."

She stiffened.

He tucked a hair behind her ear. "It's the only way."

She frowned and kissed him. "It's not the only way, Rick. I can simply run again."

He buried his hand in her hair and took the kiss deeper, mingling their breaths. When he finally lifted his head, she was panting and he was ready to spend the day in bed.

"Running means we're separated."

"I know," she whispered as she lined her lips with his tongue.

"Separated is not acceptable to me, is it to you?" He furrowed his brow and waited for her response

What was it going to take to make this woman stop running?

Chapter Five

Jordan gave Rick one final kiss then got up out of bed. She slipped on her robe and took a seat in the lounge across from him.

He was so incredible, naked and sprawled out, his body covered with an array of intricate tattoos. Obviously part of his cover. He was all muscle, lean and large, particularly his... Her thoughts trailed off as she watched his cock rise. The man had a greedy hunger for her. She had never made love as many times as she had with Rick or climaxed as much. She thoroughly enjoyed her time with him and didn't want to be separated, but she had a job to do here.

It was time to talk to him.

She needed a cigarette for this discussion. Grabbing her pack off the table, she lit one of her specially made brands and sucked in a deep, deep breath. The nicotine helped; calmed her. In those first few seconds after that initial drag, she was almost problemless.

"There's a method to my madness," she said. He shifted, propping his head on twined hands and stretched out his body. She wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed, take that cock into her mouth and suck him until he lost control, arched up, growled and came.

"Tell me, babe. I might be able to help."

She rolled her eyes and laid her head against the back of the chair. He was such a do-gooder. Would he really understand why she did the things she did? Screw it.

"I buy slaves." She took another drag of her cigarette and tried to stop her rapidly beating heart at her admission.

He pulled out of his casual stance and sat up in the bed.

"Excuse me?" He scooted to the end of the bed and plopped his feet on the ground. His legs spread, he leaned forward. She tried not to look at that bobbing cock, so large and ready—she really wanted to have her way with him. He didn't miss her perusal.

"Jordan, tell me." As his voice rose, his cock began to shrivel. *Damn.*

"I buy slaves, Rick, then I free them." She shrugged as if it didn't mean anything.

"Why do you do this?" Her manner wasn't fooling him.

"Because I was a slave as a child and I don't abide by the practice. So I steal, rob, and lie to raise money." She felt her eyes water with the horrible memories. She was trying to keep it matter of a fact, but it was difficult to talk about her past.

"The marks on your back..."

"From a slaver." She crushed out her cigarette and met his gaze. She hated the pity she saw there.

"Babe..."

"I won't marry you Rick, because I don't want to involve you in my fight. I'm not going to stop, this is what I do, so you can forget trying to reform me." She stood and walked away from him.

"Jordan." The anger in his voice stopped her. He rose and approached her. Wrapping his arms around her, he leaned her back against his chest.

"I would never try to change you. I love you just the way you are."

She groaned and dropped her head back against his chest. He would have to say that.

It made it really hard to refuse him. But she didn't want him caught up in what she had to do. This last theft could free so many slaves. She needed to do this.

"You don't understand."

"Then make me," he said as he unknotted the sash of her robe and pushed it off her shoulders until it pooled at her feet.

"Let's go shower," she moaned when he leaned forward and sucked on her neck.

"I have the wet shower, with actual water." She grabbed his hand and led him into the opaque enclosure.

She barely turned on the water before Rick had her back flush against the wall. He knelt between her legs. Steam floated around them and drops of water glistened on his skin. He began loving her.

"Rick." He sipped from her, taking her up and up again, loving her heat with his mouth and tongue.

"Ahhh!" She climbed. The contrast of his mouth and hands on her body made her shift against the wet wall. "Please." She was frantic with the need for relief.

He gave it to her, sucking her clit into his mouth. Arching, she screamed and went over the top.

She still shook with the aftereffects of the orgasm when he got to his feet and turned her against the wetness. With her back to him, he began touching her. His hands were everywhere, almost desperate. He kneaded, kissed, then bit her shoulder. She jerked, so aroused she couldn't think in sentences. He cupped her breasts, tweaking her nipples. She moaned his name. Her body was on fire for him.

"I can't get enough of you." His erection pressed into the curve of her back. Strong and proud, he rubbed against her and she couldn't take it anymore.

"I want you." She needed him so bad.

Running his hands up her arms, he raised them above her head, positioning her palms onto the wall. He stretched her onto her toes, bent his knees and entered her from behind.

The position took him deep, so deep. She cried out. His lovemaking awakened something sleeping inside her, a passion that consumed her. A passion he reciprocated. She was almost happy she could reduce him to such primitive levels.

"Rick, God!"

"Yessss." He clutched her hands, moving, slipping in and out. His chest pressed against her back, his heart pounded, his breathing ragged in her ear.

It was so good. Together they were so good.

"Babe, come for me. Come again." He drew back and slipped in, over and over, the sensation building, her control slipping, near gone. She moaned.

"Yeah, moan for me." He sucked on her neck, traveled along her shoulder, then, using his tongue, he dipped down and lined her ear. The feeling was incredible, shattering her, and she came, hard.

"Yes!" He pumped in faster and faster then jerked against her. Reaching his own orgasm, he groaned, panting against her neck.

"Damn, that was..."

"Fantastic."

"It's always fantastic."

He turned her around and began washing her body. She returned the favor, their

hands tangling as they tried to rinse each other.

She laughed at their battle. But her laughter fled when he picked her up, set her back against the wall and wrapped her legs around his ass.

"Are you always like this?" She was amazed by his stamina; he seemed ready to go again.

"Only with you," he said, claiming her lips, mating them.

Jordan wrapped her arms around his shoulders and took what he offered.

"The water."

Reaching over, he shut off the spray.

Smiling, she caressed his shoulders and ran her lips down his jaw to his collarbone.

He sucked in a breath when she tongued the area.

"Take me to bed, Rick. I want to worship you, every inch of you."

He moaned. With her legs wrapped around him, he stepped out of the shower.

Setting her on the bed, he followed her down. She pushed him onto his back and straddled him. Her wet hair fell around her shoulders and onto his stomach.

"I care, Rick, I care too much. I just don't want you to get hurt." She kissed his chest, running her tongue around his nipple. He fisted a hand in her hair.

"Don't worry about me; I can take care of myself."

Smiling, she kissed the corner of his mouth, rubbing her body against his.

"You're not thinking straight," she said against his skin. She licked her way down his chest to his stomach. He tensed against her hands as she trailed her fingers to follow her tongue. His erection was hard and veined against his stomach, standing straight and straining toward her mouth. She slowly ran her tongue down him, then back up.

"God, Jordan."

"Can you think when I do this?" she asked as she worked around his head, then took him full into her mouth. She sucked, bobbed down and up. God she loved this, loved hearing his moan, his pleasure. She raised her head and watched him, poised to take him into her mouth again.

"I can't hear you." His eyes were half-mast with a sexy, slumberous look and she smiled. She ran her tongue over him and watched him stare at her. His eyes flared, his arousal clear as he moved himself against her tongue, following her.

"Huh?" she said as she took him in again for a deep suck.

"You're right; I'm not thinking straight right now." He hissed as she pulled him in and out. She placed her hands on him and went to work on his hardness, sucking, licking, her hands pumping while working together with her mouth. He arched into her.

"Jordan, I'm going to come, stop." At his command she lifted her head, then ignored him and went back to work; she wanted to taste him.

"Ahhhh." His voice was rough with need.

"Yessss." She pulled him in and sucked hard. He pushed into her in final release. She took all he had to offer. Licking her lips, she looked at him.

"Thinking better?" she asked. He smiled.

"Yeah."

"Good."

"Go to sleep, I'll wake you after we land." He nodded and closed his eyes.

She shook her head. She had no intention of taking him with her on this mission.

Chapter Six

Rick woke with a start. When he tried to move, he thought his arm was going to pull out of its socket. He glanced up. His own immobilizer cuff was fastened to the bed at his wrist.

“Jordan!”

He pulled on his arm and winced. Swearing, he fell back against the bed.

Great, just great. He should have known she’d pull this crap. Her admission about being a slave affirmed his own thoughts that he was never going to haul her in.

He wanted to help.

He too had felt the sting of a slaver’s whip. That’s why he had become an enforcer. He wanted to stop the smuggling of people like commodities as much as she obviously did. Unfortunately, he had gotten so wrapped up in her; he hadn’t revealed his own dark past, didn’t like talking about it.

And right now, he knew something she didn’t; he had placed a tracker on more than just her ship. Once he was released, he would know exactly where she had gone.

Reaching with his free hand he touched the chip behind his ear.

“Riker, acknowledge transmission, Captain Masters.”

“Riker acknowledging communication, Captain Masters, please transmit.” The answer of the pre-programmed voice of his ship made him sigh in relief.

“I need you to beam a droid to my current location. And make sure he has an immobilizer release key. Oh, and also bring my tracking device”

“Understood Captain, complying.”

Thank God he had one of the most sophisticated ships in the galaxy. He’d be out of here in no time and in pursuit of one hot woman who wouldn’t stop running.

* * * *

Jordan gritted her teeth as sweat dripped in her eye. She was dangling right over the entrance to the tomb. All she had to do was ... she released her floating cable and dropped straight down, landing in a crouch. The light beams around her didn’t stir; no alarms went off. She had done it. It was late, maybe three a.m., Earth time. The guards only rounded this entrance every seven minutes. She had already cyber-cracked the key codes on the door before she left her ship. Reaching up, she punched the code into the fingerpad.

“M E R Y X M A S”

Leave it up to the idiots at the Museum to have such an easy to crack code. It had taken her password program about sixty seconds to spit it out.

A mechanic hiss followed by the slow sliding of the metal door made her smile.

Yes.

She’d done it.

Entering the tomb, she waited as the door slid closed. Pulling out her light and a piece of paper from her suit, she studied the hand-drawn map from Rex’s journal. According to it, if she went down this hall, left, then left again, she should be at the actual

worshipping area of the temple. That was where she would find the dagger.

Running, she followed Rex's drawing until she came into a large, open area—it was surely the place. In the middle of the room was a tomb with a carving of a woman, her hands folded around a curved object, arms crossed in front of her. It had the markings of ancient Egypt. It had to be Cleopatra. Unfolding her map again, she searched for the X; he had marked the location of the dagger with an X. Finding it, she followed the tomb around until she found where she thought it might be, then started digging.

It didn't take long.

Wrapped in what appeared to be an ancient cloth was exactly what she had been praying for; opening the cloth, she sighed in relief.

There it was, just as Rex had described it. Slowly, she lifted the dagger, fingering the stones. It was stunning. She wrapped her hand around the hilt as she fingered the opaled center. Suddenly, a mist swept up and surrounded her. She glanced from left to right in confusion. What in the hell was happening? Then the opal lit up, and the picture of a child strapped to a bed, face down, appeared. The child was crying as he was whipped. She cringed as he screamed. A woman materialized in front of her. Jordan dropped the dagger and her light.

"Hello, Jordan." The mist swirled around the woman as she spoke.

Jordan replied, her heart tripping in her chest in fear. "Ummm, hello ghost lady." What the heck was she supposed to say to an apparition?

"Please, look into the dagger." The woman swept her hand to the ground, the dagger rose on its own and reseated itself in her hand. The opal lit back up, showing her the same child, the same scene.

"Sometimes the dagger can show the past as well as the future."

Her hands trembling, Jordan stared at the woman.

"I don't understand."

The woman made a formal bow then faded. Her voice tapered off. "You will," was all she said. As soon as she disappeared, alarms rang so loud Jordan released the knife. Immediately, the ground came up and swallowed the dagger. It simply disappeared. She started digging, her fingers nearly bloody with the effort to find the dagger in the hard dirt.

"Jordan." A voice stopped her.

"Jordan!" Startled, she turned her head to the left. Rick was there, in full enforcer gear, the glint of his gold badge nearly blinding her. She raised her hand to her eyes to ward off the glare.

"Jordan, there's no time, I have to take you into custody. You have to trust me now." He rushed forward and jammed her hands behind her back, clamping them together with the same immobilizer she had used on him.

"Ouch. Damn it." She struggled, the clamps tightening on her wrists. They did exactly what they were designed to do.

"Shut up and stop struggling," he growled in her ear. Then a dozen local enforcement officers poured into the room, in full riot gear they pointed their blasters straight at her, multiple red laser lights landing on her heart.

"Stand down. Intergalactic Police. She's in my custody."

The red lights disappeared; the men nodded and began to file out. Rick grabbed her arm and roughly dragged her after them.

“Your time is up, Jordan Fare, you’re going where all the Intergalactic smugglers I capture end up.”

As they trailed back to the front of the tomb, a couple of the locals snickered. Jordan swore, kicked, and tried to make it generally hard on Rick to take her.

“Your struggles will get you knocked out.”

Why was he being this way? He said he wanted to help her.

“Screw you,” she screamed when they stepped into the museum. She immediately drew a crowd. Rick pushed her onto the ground, his knee in her back, his hand grinding her face into the shiny floor.

“Shit.” She tried to catch her breath.

He leaned very close. “This is for your own good, babe.”

Then she heard the puff of a hydraulic needle, felt an initial sting. Everything went black.

Chapter Seven

Rick cringed when Jordan moaned. Her eyes blinked open, then immediately closed. He set his hand on her forehead. No fever from the drug, she was fine.

"Jordan, can you hear me?"

"Rick?"

"Yeah." He sat on the edge of her bunk. She laid a hand over her eyes and groaned. She was going to feel like shit for several hours.

"I'm sorry babe, I had to make it look good."

She raised her hand and bared her teeth. "Where am I?"

When she tried to sit up, he pressed her back down.

"Just lay there for a while. Your head is going to hurt, bad."

"Why did you do that?" She placed both thumbs against her temples and pressed.

"I did that because you wouldn't come peacefully. I did that because I had to show the locals I was legitimately taking you into custody."

Despite his warnings, she sat up.

"How did you find me?"

"I placed a tracking chip, a very small one, under your skin when we were last together."

"Great."

"That chip might have very well saved your ass. Why..."

He stood and went over to the med cabinet. Putting together a tamer drink that would soothe her headache. He tried to stamp down his frustration and disappointment.

"Why won't you trust me?" He handed her the drink. She gulped it down, then sighed and lay back on the bed.

"Damn, I needed that dagger." She punched her fist onto the sheet.

He picked up her hand. *What was it going to take to get her to trust me?* He really hated talking about his past.

"Jordan," he willed her to meet his stare. She opened her eyes and made contact with his.

"I wasn't going to arrest you; I was just making it look good. I want to help you. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Her expression went wary.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I want to help your cause. I want to team with you. I want you to marry me and be my partner in every way. I love you. What do I need to do to prove it to you?"

"You want to help me steal, then free slaves?"

"Well, I'd like to try a few legitimate trades, I have my own business, you know? But yes, if we have to steal, lie and cheat, then yes, I'm with you."

"Rick, that's crazy, you're an enforcer."

"I'll give up my job for this, for you."

She narrowed her eyes and studied him.

"You were a slave, weren't you?" The amazement in her question had him dropping her hand and walking back to the sink.

“That’s what she was trying to show me. It was you. You were beaten as a child too. You were a slave. That’s why you have all those tattoos.”

He nodded, not wanting to voice the horrors of what he had been through.

“That’s why I became an enforcer, mainly to stop the intergalactic slavery rings.”

“Christ, I’m an idiot.”

He spun around. The blue of her gaze met his. He shook his head and approached her. She sat on the edge of the bed. Moving in, he stood between her legs. She caressed his face. He leaned into her hand.

“I’m sorry, Rick. I’ve been so blind. I should have known.”

“Yeah, you should have.” He smiled. “I should have told you earlier. It’s not something I like to talk about.”

She leaned forward and kissed him, a soft touch of her lips to his cheek. He shivered in response. He wanted her; just the simple touch of her kiss on his cheek nearly drove him crazy. He hardened in response.

“I understand.”

He moved his head and took her mouth. The aggressive meeting of their lips told him how desperate he was. He pulled back.

“Now, will you stop being an idiot and marry me?”

She laughed and nodded.

“I’ll marry you, I’ll partner with you, I’ll even try to go legit so you don’t have to quit your job. For a while anyway. I love you, too.”

He rolled his eyes and lowered her to the bed. Following her, he worked on getting off her spacesuit.

“What more can an enforcer ask for? Merry Christmas, by the way.”

She moaned when he took her breast into his mouth.

“Merry Christmas, Rick.” He lifted his mouth and moved to her lips. He was done talking; it was time to start celebrating.

The End

About the Author:

Rae Monet writes sensual romance novels for Liquid Silver Books. See her site at www.RaeMonet.com

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