



Her Christmas Prince

By

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Chapter One

Claire Sansfield stared at her computer monitor, unable to focus, not even seeing what she just typed. The deadline for her article hung over her head like a dark cloud threatening to rain yet she couldn't think of one word to write. Besides, what did she know about luring a man for a Valentine's date anyway? She hadn't had a date in months.

How could she instruct savvy females on how to nab a man and make him say "I love you" just in time for the lovers' holiday? Hard enough to get into the Valentine spirit when it was almost Christmas. The types of females who read *Mod Chicks*—the leading magazine for twenty-something sophisticated women—were a different breed. Claire was nothing like them. Too wrapped up in her work lately, she hardly ventured outside of her tiny high-rise apartment except for food and menial supplies. She didn't wear the latest designer fashions, didn't bother to apply makeup to accentuate her features, and didn't even know what the latest and coolest designer bag was.

Well, that last part was a lie. Because she wrote for *Mod Chicks*, she read the magazine every month from cover to cover, and since they happened to focus on the latest and greatest in designer purses, she *did* know which celebrity was carrying what bag, sending it to instant covet status. She just didn't buy the coveted designer bags. She didn't buy any of it.

Claire could blame Rod. Oh, yes, it would be very easy to blame her ex-boyfriend for all of her current troubles. What a jerk he'd turned out to be. She'd met him almost exactly a year ago, during the Christmas holidays, and fallen instantly in love. She thought he had, too. Turned out that had been far from the case. He'd wined her and dined her, made love to her (not very well, she might add—Rod's *rod* was not that impressive), and even declared his love for her after much prompting on her part. Then three months ago he'd suddenly dumped her with hardly any explanation.

"You just don't do it for me, babe," he'd said. How she hated it when he called her *babe*.

"What do you mean I don't do it for you? I wash your clothes, I help you with your bills, I cook your dinners, I let you stay at my apartment all day when you should be working, and I have sex with you whenever you want. What more could I do for you?" she'd asked.

Rod had shrugged his wimpy shoulders. Why, until that moment, had she never noticed how wimpy they were? The man looked downright frail, slumped over like an old man. “You don’t turn me on, Claire. Yeah, you take care of me, but my mama took care of me, too. I guess you’re more like a mother-figure to me. Hard to find a mother-figure sexy, let me tell you.”

Okay, that had done it. She’d escorted him out of her apartment as soon as the words left his mouth, slamming the door behind his scrawny ass. What the hell? She reminded him of his *mother*? That was like the least sexy thing she’d ever heard.

She’d been down in the dumps ever since. She definitely didn’t feel sexy—far from it—wearing sweats and t-shirts every day, if she had any inclination to change out of her pajamas at all. Ate ice cream straight out of the carton. Drank enough Diet Coke that if someone cut her open she’d bleed brown. Gained a solid ten pounds that she didn’t even care about trying to lose.

Next thing Claire knew it was Christmas again, a holiday she dreaded this year because it only brought back memories of meeting Rod the year before. How wonderful she’d thought he was. How sweet and kind and romantic. She realized now that he’d acted that way because he’d been looking for a sucker to take care of his loser self until he got bored. She’d fallen for his lines like a woman drowning, too blind to see the real man.

With a sigh Claire pushed away from her desk and stood up and stretched. She yawned and crossed the room to her tiny kitchen. Well, it was more like a box, but at least it had a functioning stove, oven, and refrigerator. Little counter or cupboard space, but how could she complain considering how much her rent was? She could deal.

Grabbing another Diet Coke out of the fridge she went to the hall closet and threw the door open, eyeing the box that sat on the very top shelf. Her feeble attempt at keeping Christmas decorations. It was December twentieth—Christmas was five days away. She should go ahead and set up what she had. Maybe it would make her feel better; put her in the holiday mood.

She jumped up and hit at the box, hoping she could budge it from its spot and make it fall forward. She did it again, moving it a smidge. Yet again, this time with more force, slapping at the corner of it with her fingers, and it went crooked, closer to the edge of the shelf. She sipped from the soda can and set it back down on the floor, rubbing her hands together, ready to jump a couple of more times. Why she didn’t just grab a chair and use it as a ladder she didn’t know, but whatever.

Another jump, more force behind her hand and this time the box slid forward, teetering on the edge and she jumped, both hands out, pulling on the box until it fell off the shelf and into her arms.

“Humph!” The box landed heavily against her chest. It could’ve really hurt if there’d been more stuff in it.

Claire walked over to the couch and set the box down on her beat-up coffee table, then ran back to the hall and grabbed her Diet Coke. Had to keep the nectar of the gods close by while she went through her decorations, she thought with a goofy smile. Might take the depressing edge off.

She opened the cardboard box and peered inside, looking at the newspaper wrapped items lying before her. She could barely remember what she had in there and it kind of felt like Christmas already, anticipating the surprises that waited for her inside.

Hah. Who was she fooling? Alone in a big city, her family all back at home in Nebraska ready to celebrate the season together. Her poor parents had been too broke to offer her a ticket home and so had she. Besides, she had too much work to do to leave for long.

Spending Christmas day by herself. Something she’d never done in all her twenty-five years. She didn’t want to admit it, but it kind of freaked her out.

Pushing aside her worrisome thoughts she pulled out a wrapped object and tore off the year-old newspaper, revealing a Santa Claus figurine her mother had given her when she’d first moved out. A few starters to get her holiday collection going, her mother had said. Claire had been so full of hopes and dreams when she first moved out to the big city. So ready to thrust herself out into the big bad world and make something of herself.

So what happened? When had she become such a wimp, hiding behind her computer and not really living her life?

Claire set the heavy figurine onto the coffee table with a loud thump and continued unwrapping. A pile of newspaper grew at her feet, miscellaneous decorations, and even a wreath she’d forgotten she bought on clearance last year scattered across the table. She reached into the box and pulled out the last item, surprised at its weight. Unwrapping it slowly, anticipation filling her as it was revealed.

She sighed at the sight of it. A gorgeous snow globe with an intricately carved wooden base. A gift from Rod last year. How could she even forget she owned it? It had taken her breath away

when she saw it the first time and it did so again right now. Claire turned it this way and that, staring at the tiny details inside. A scene from The Nutcracker Ballet, right after The Nutcracker turned into a prince and guided the girl into the land of the Sugar Plum Fairy. The two were holding hands, the girl's eyes wide with wonder, a smile on the handsome prince's face. Ballerinas in frosty white costumes surrounded the couple in the middle of a forest filled with pine trees, giant snowflakes in between the dancers.

"The Waltz of the Snowflakes," Claire murmured, trailing her finger down the cool thick glass of the globe. She cranked the knob at the bottom of the base and tinkling music from the ballet filled the air. The Overture, if she remembered correctly.

She stared at it, watched the ballerinas dance, captivated by the handsome features of the prince. So silly to look at a figurine and be filled with longing, but she couldn't help it. His hair was dark, as were his eyes. Black slashes for eyebrows, a firm nose, sharp cheekbones, full lips.

With a shake of her head Claire stood and went to her bookshelf, placing the globe in the front of the center shelf. A place of honor, she told herself as she walked back towards the coffee table and grabbed the wreath. Not wanting to admit she had set it there because she could see it perfectly from her computer desk. As if her prince were watching over her. Foolish.

She hooked the wreath on a nail above the peephole left there by a tenant long gone by. She wouldn't dare hang it on the outside of her door. It would be stolen by the morning. Such a great building she lived in.

For the next half hour she decorated her small apartment, even hanging a few ornaments on the potted palm tree growing in the corner of the living room. She contemplated the box of white lights sitting on the table and shrugged. *Why not?* She yanked out the short string and wrapped it around the fronds of the palm, dodging the ornaments. Realizing the electrical outlet was behind the bookshelf, she tugged at the bottom of it, hoping she could pull it out just enough to slip her arm inside and plug the lights in.

Damn this thing is heavy. She pulled again, barely moving it, and she back on her haunches, wondering why she was going to so much trouble just for herself. Who would appreciate her efforts anyway? No one. She didn't even know why she tried.

Claire got down on her hands and knees and pulled again. The bookshelf moved just enough for her hand to get behind it.

“Hah!” She was just about to plug in the string of lights when something hard landed on her head, sending her sprawling onto the floor.

“Ouch!” She gingerly touched the top of her head. Had to have been the snow globe. She hoped it wasn’t broken. And why was her hand wet?

She pulled her hand away from her head and gasped in horror when she saw it. Covered in blood. Getting a little blurry, even. Her head started to swim, her eyes grew fuzzy, and she hoped she hadn’t killed herself with a knock to the head.

And then she slipped away into nothingness.

Chapter Two

Claire's head hurt so bad she could barely open her eyes. She tried to, but her eyelids were so heavy she gave up, a low moan escaping her lips. Warm fingers suddenly brushed against her temple, soothing in their touch, and her moan turned into a sigh.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?"

At the sound of the deep male voice her eyes flew open to find an eerily familiar handsome face looking down at her, his dark eyes filled with concern. A lock of black hair fell over his forehead and his full lips were parted, his tongue sneaking out to lick at them. Her panties grew wet at the sight of it.

How had this handsome man gotten into her apartment? She knew the door was locked; there would be no way he could get in unless he had chopped it down with an ax. Oh gosh, she hoped it wasn't the fire department. They would probably do something like that to rescue her, right?

"Who—who are you? How did I get here?" Her voice came out a husky croak. She wondered how long she'd been out.

"I have no idea. One minute I'm here by myself and the next thing I know you're on my floor, bleeding from the head."

She immediately reached up and touched the top of her head. Big mistake. She could feel the lump, the gash on top of it and she nearly passed out all over again.

He must have noticed, because he grabbed her by the shoulders. "Oh, no you don't. Wake up, sweetheart."

Claire opened her eyes, looking around, trying to figure out where she was at. Certainly not her apartment. No, it looked more like a one-room cabin, a giant fire roaring in the river-rock fireplace, a few wooden chairs placed in front of it. No couches, no kitchen, no television. Very rustic.

She glanced about her, realized she was in bed and gasped, lifting up the covers. Oh geez—she only had her bra and panties on! How had that happened?

“Your clothes were damp when I found you,” the man said in explanation. “I figured you must have been out in the snow for a while. I was outside in the back gathering wood for the fire when I found you here. I put you in my bed to keep you warm.”

“Who are you?” Claire asked again, eyeing him. Why was he so familiar? Something about the tilt of his chin, the slash of his cheekbones, he truly was the most handsome man she’d ever seen.

“I’m whatever you wish me to be.” His voice washed over her like the finest whiskey, deep and smooth and sensuous. Her body tingled at the sound of it, at the words he said.

“What are you talking about? Look, I was in my apartment, a snow globe fell on my head and it must have knocked me out...” The snow globe. Her handsome prince. Yes! That’s exactly who he reminded her of. The handsome Nutcracker Prince in her snow globe!

She *had* to be dreaming. There was no way at all any of this was possible.

Then why did it feel so real? The soft cotton of the sheets and the thick blankets rustled against her body, the warmth of the fire radiated towards her. The man watched her, his expression revealing his confusion, and when he shifted on the bed, she felt it. Felt his hard thigh brush against her leg.

Oh, yes, she definitely felt that. Wanted to continue feeling it, too. What had come over her?

“A snow globe?” he asked. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but that must explain the cut on your head. I washed it off as gently as I could. Does it still hurt?”

“A little bit.” Claire touched her head again, still pondering his earlier remark. “What did you mean that you’re whatever I wish you to be?”

His warm gaze roved over her, causing gooseflesh to break out all over her body. From the look in his eyes, he seemed to like what he saw. Not the usual reaction she caused in men.

Of course, she also didn’t meet men while she lay in bed with just her undies on. So maybe that had something to do with it.

“I am yours for the taking. Or rather, if you want me to take you, I’m yours. Whatever you want, you can have.” He reached out, brushing the hair away from her shoulder and bent his head. Firm warm lips pressed against the spot where her neck met her shoulder, the slightest grazing of teeth against her sensitive skin.

Claire’s head dropped back, her eyes closing. The back of his hand brushed against the spot where his lips had been, knuckles moving across her shoulder, down to her collarbone. She

shifted, the sheet sliding down her body to land in a puddle at her waist, revealing her bra-clad breasts to him. His hand skimmed down further, long fingers drifting across her lace covered nipples, and she gasped at the contact.

What had come over her? This had to be a dream. No man offered himself up to her like he just had. And she didn't even know his name! She hadn't had a raunchy dream in far too long. Hell, even her vibrator had cobwebs all over it. Maybe a fantasy dream of anonymous sex with a stranger was just what she needed to get herself out of the doldrums.

"What do you want, Claire? Tell me what you want me to do to you. For you."

She opened her eyes. How did he know her name? She hadn't told him. Proof again that she must be dreaming.

"I want you to kiss me," she whispered. If this was her dream, then she was going to go for it. She lifted her head to find him watching her, looking at her as if she were a delectable treat and he suddenly had a yearning for sweets. She knew right then he wanted her. Bad.

"Your wish is my command," he said with a tiny smile just before his lips captured hers in a searing open mouthed kiss, his tongue thrusting inside, mating with hers.

Large hands came up to cup her cheeks and she clutched at his shoulders, pressing herself against him. How did he know she loved being kissed like that, her face cradled in the hands of her lover? His fingers stroked her cheeks, his thumbs brushing against the corners of her mouth and she moaned.

"Do you like that?" he whispered against her lips. His husky voice did amazing things to her insides, made heat radiate throughout her body, made her pussy ache to feel him inside. She hadn't been this turned on by a kiss since—well, she didn't know when. Hell, yes, she liked it.

"Would you like me to continue? Or do you want me to do something else?"

"What do you want to do?" she asked shyly, her hands fluttering around his bare chest. When had his shirt come off? Last she remembered he'd been wearing a flannel shirt. Ah, the magic of dreams. They got rid of all the minor details and went right to the good stuff.

"Don't worry about what *I* want to do. I'm yours, Claire, and I'll do whatever you ask me to." He moved until his lips hovered close to her ear, his breath hot and moist against it. "Do you want me to suck on your luscious nipples? Or maybe kiss you all over your delectable body? How about I eat your eager wet pussy? How does that sound?"

Oh, wow, all of it sounded spectacular. His words conjured up all kinds of images, naked bodies wrapped around each other, smooth legs shifting against hairy ones, his dark head buried between her legs. Yes, yes she'd take all of it and then some.

"I think I'll kiss your breasts and suck on your nipples first, since you haven't said anything yet," he said, his mouth against her neck.

His lips moved across her upper body, blazing a trail where his fingers had just been, raining kisses along the tops of her breasts. He breathed against one lace covered breast, his breath so hot she shivered beneath him, and he smiled. He drew her nipple into his mouth, lace and all, and sucked. Licked and sucked so hard she felt the pull deep inside her womb.

Warm blunt fingers moved between the valley of her breasts and he unclasped her bra, shoving the lacy cups to the sides. His mouth was greedy as he continued to suck and lick, moving from nipple to nipple, fingers pinching lightly on one while his mouth sucked the other. Claire writhed beneath him, felt his erect penis bump against her lower body, and she filled with anticipation. His cock felt big, so big and she couldn't wait to see it—see it, touch it, suck it, and feel it move inside of her. She wanted to do it all, and as fast as possible. She only had one night.

"You're so responsive," he murmured, moving down to kiss her stomach, his tongue dipping to swirl inside her navel. "You liked that? You liked the way I sucked on your rosy nipples?"

"Oh, yes," she said, excitement welling inside of her as he pushed away the sheet and blankets with hasty fingers so she was completely bared to him, clad in only her thin, extremely wet panties.

"I think you'll like this, too." His voice was a low growl as his fingers crept around the waistband of her panties and yanked. Tugged so hard that they ripped apart in his hands.

Her throbbing pussy flooded with moisture at the sound of the fabric tearing and she lifted her hips so he could pull the now ruined panties off her. That had always been one of her secret fantasies—to have the clothes ripped off of her and be made love to by a handsome stranger. A master with his hands, with his lips, with his cock. A man who would make her come again and again until she couldn't take it anymore.

It looked as if her dreams were about to come true.

"Beautiful," he murmured, his fingers threading through the thin strip of dark curls that covered her sex. Claire was glad she still waxed down there, a practice left over from her time

with Rod. He'd always preferred a nicely trimmed pussy. She figured her naturally hairy bush was probably too unsanitary for his picky tastes.

Okay, right now Rod was the last person she needed to think about. Especially his odd sexual habits and preferences. When it came right down to it, the man had been boring. Vanilla sex, *Mod Chick* deemed it. And at the moment she was getting anything but vanilla sex.

His hands went to the insides of her thighs, pushed on them slightly, and she spread her legs for him, eager for him to continue. Unembarrassed, she left her legs wide open as he shifted his big body to rest between her legs. She could feel her juices dripping down the crack of her ass, could smell the scent of her arousal in the air. She could feel the heat of his gaze upon her, knew that his eyes feasted on her before his mouth was about to. Her legs trembled; her entire body trembled with anticipation.

"You smell delicious. I bet you taste good, too," he said just before his dark head dipped and his tongue snaked out to lick her pussy. A long, slow movement that made her moan in ecstasy.

Oh, yes. His tongue was long and wide, searching her folds thoroughly, diving deep inside her. His big hands pushed her legs open even wider, his tongue driving inside her again and again, then gentling, lapping at her slowly, flicking over her sensitive nub.

Claire moaned and writhed beneath him, overcome with sensation as his skilled tongue circled her clit over and over, his mouth latching on it to suck. She very nearly lifted off of the bed.

"Don't stop," she murmured, her fingers clutching at his dark hair. She looked down, watched him as he continued to eat her pussy with such intense diligence, his eyes meeting hers, his entire mouth covering her. She shattered at the sight of it, the feel of it all, her body convulsing with her orgasm over and over, her shouts echoing in the otherwise quietness of the cabin.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd experienced an orgasm so strong. His lips and tongue still moved over her pussy, softer now, bringing her down as she still quivered from the climax. She threw her arm over her eyes, concentrated on controlling her breathing and his body slid up and over hers, his humongous cock pressing against her belly.

"I know you liked that," he whispered in her ear with cocky confidence. Not that she could blame him for feeling cocky—no one had ever made her come like *that* before.

“Well, aren’t you astute? Of course I liked it,” Claire whispered, kissing him. His tongue tangled with hers and she sighed against his open mouth, trailing her fingers down his muscular chest, his ridged stomach until she stopped right where she wanted to be. She wrapped her hand around his thick erection and it pulsed against her palm.

He sucked on her tongue as her hand began to move up and down his cock, her thumb swirling over the mushroom shaped head. It was sticky with pre cum and she tore her lips away from his and brought her hand to her lips. With what she hoped to be a saucy smile she sucked her thumb deep into her mouth noisily, tasting his essence.

His gaze warmed and his nostrils flared at the sight of her and he surged his lower body against hers. His cock came awfully close to her pussy and she ached to know what it would feel like inside her. “Do I taste good enough for your liking?”

“I’m not sure. I think I need to sample more.” Claire pushed at his chest and he rolled over, his cock standing at attention, waiting for her. She licked her lips in anticipation.

Oh, he was so *big*. She eyed his cock for a moment, hovering above him, suddenly afraid she wouldn’t be able to take him all the way into her mouth. Who was she fooling? There was no way she could take him all the way. Sucking in a deep breath, she bent her head and licked at the tip of his penis.

A hiss sounded above her and she smiled, still licking, her tongue slow and lingering. He tasted amazing, like no man she had ever tasted before. Slightly salty, a bit musky, and so very *male*. She wrapped her lips around the head of him, sucked on him gently and he moaned, thrusting his hips towards her in the subtlest of movements.

Claire took her time, lubing him up with her mouth, gripping the base of his cock with firm fingers. Farther and farther her mouth slid down, working it slowly until he bumped the back of her throat and she almost gagged. She released his cock quickly and gulped, needing air. With determination she began to lick at the tip of him again, reveling in his taste, but disappointed with her lack of ability.

She’d always prided herself on her blow job skills, the one thing that the men of her past had consistently complimented her on. It was one thing to suck the average dick but this man had the largest dick she’d ever seen. She shouldn’t beat herself up for not being able to get him all the way in her mouth. No woman could do it—probably not even the trickiest porn star in the business.

The mere size of him, though. It scared her to think how he was going to even fit inside her.

“You’re licking me like I’m a lollipop,” he murmured, knocking her from her thoughts.

She gazed up at him, smirking, trying to play the confident seductress while she worried deep inside. “You taste even better.”

He smiled at her and the sight of it took her breath away, easing her fears. She had to admit she’d conjured up the best dream lover ever. His dark eyes sparkled, his yummy mouth curving in a way that made her want to nibble on it all night long. His undeniably masculine scent surrounded her and she breathed deep, amazed at how realistic the entire experience was. She didn’t want it to end.

Hmm, if she started thinking about reality she’d probably wake herself up, ending what was sure to be the best sexual dream of her life. Best to shove all that reality stuff to the back of her mind and continue on with her escapades.

Out of nowhere, he grasped her shoulders and hauled her up so she lay sprawled on top of his big body, her breasts rubbing against his lightly furred chest. His hands moved to her hips and he ground himself against her, showing her just exactly how much he wanted her.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard you’ll never forget it. Or me,” he whispered, his fingers coming up to trace at the curve of her bottom lip.

His words sent a little thrill up her spine and she bit the tip of his finger lightly. She’d never participated in much dirty talk before with her past boyfriends. She’d always found it a bit cheesy and when she had tried it, she always felt uncomfortable. But the way he said it, the deep timbre of his voice—well, it turned her on. Made her want to say something naughty to him.

“Fuck me,” Claire said, bending to kiss him, her tongue tracing along the softness of his lower lip. “I want you to fuck me so hard I won’t remember my name.”

He thrust up against her, his cock barely sliding in and she gasped at the fullness of it. “Go slow,” she said, squirming against him. “You’re so big...”

He smiled and eased his way into her, guiding his cock with his hand as she sank down on top of him. She looked down, watched his thick member disappear inside her and she almost came again at the sight of it.

“You’re so tight,” he said through clenched teeth as if he were controlling every impulse he had to not just throw her down onto the bed and fuck her senseless.

It made her feel good he had to sustain such control, and she liked the thought of him losing control and fucking her senseless, besides the fact that he felt amazing so deep inside her. “And you’re so—huge.”

He smiled and reached out, squeezing her breasts in his hands. “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

Claire couldn’t believe it. She’d just begged the man to fuck her senseless, had his huge dick buried deep inside her, and she could feel her cheeks heat at his compliment. Blushing right in the middle of an outrageous fuck. A dream fuck, of all things! Unbelievable.

“You’re even prettier when your cheeks are pink.”

She blushed harder and swatted at his firm chest. “Stop it.”

“Hey! I was talking about these cheeks.” He spanked her ass, leaving a stinging slap and she jumped, causing his cock—she didn’t even know how this was possible – to go even deeper.

It was the spanking that spurred her on and she began to move up and down, his hands guiding her as he grasped her hips. She’d always been secretly fascinated with S&M, had never understood the turn-on behind the pain. The sound of his hand hitting her flesh, the numbing sensation of his palm smacking her flesh made her clit burn with yearning.

A little spanking was something she definitely wanted to pursue—with the right man, of course.

Too bad her dream prince wasn’t real. He’d be perfect...

Their breathing grew faster in tandem as they moved, straining against each other. She pressed her hands against his chest and stared down at him, watching the myriad of expressions cross his face as he pumped within her. He was moving so deep inside her she felt as if they shared a connection, were fused together. As if they were one person and she couldn’t tell where she ended and where he began.

Claire had never felt like that before.

They moved faster, their grunts and groans mingling together, the smell of sex permeating the room. Their bodies were slick with sweat as she rode him, his cock bumping against her womb again and again. All of it was so erotic and felt so good her orgasm came upon her out of nowhere, crashing into her, making her strain against him, her throbbing clit pressing against his cock.

He came then, too, shouting her name as he shot off. His semen gushed inside of her, filling her, completing her and she marveled again at the wonder of dreams. *No condom*. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had sex with a man without one.

She collapsed against him, resting her head on his chest, his cock still throbbing inside of her and she sighed, satisfied. It felt so good to just lie there in his arms, his heart racing beneath her ear. His chest moved up and down with his breathing, the rhythm of it like being in a boat out in the middle of the ocean, and she realized she'd never felt so content.

"I can't believe that just happened," she finally said.

"What?" He ran his fingers up and down her arm, tracing lazy loops on her sensitive skin and she shivered against him.

"You just fucked me senseless and I'm ready to do it again."

His cock became hard inside her, just like that. She smiled against his chest. "I can fuck you many more ways. Things that'll make you come like you've never come before."

"Promises, promises," she teased.

And then he set out to prove to her it was more than just a promise.

Chapter Three

Claire opened her eyes slowly, noticed how cold it was, and shivered. She forced her eyelids open to find herself staring up at the ceiling of her tiny apartment. *Damn it.* It had all been a dream. Her fantasy lover had been just that—pure fantasy.

A brief glance told her she still lay on the floor of her living room, the electrical cord at the end of the string of Christmas lights clutched in her hand. She sat up slowly, her head pounding with pain, and looked down to find the snow globe lying beside her.

Completely shattered. The glass lay in large chunks on the floor, the wooden base cracked open. The little forest and snowflake ballerinas lay in a battered sad pile. The little girl was cast off to the side, her open hand extended out towards nothing.

The nutcracker prince was nowhere to be found.

Claire stood, her entire body screaming in protest, and searched around the bookshelf looking for her lost prince. Where could he be? He couldn't have gone that far. She hunted under the couch and the coffee table, peeked inside the box where the snow globe had been packed. She even looked in the kitchen, but she came up empty handed. Her prince had simply disappeared.

Just like her fantasy lover.

Disappointment filled Claire and she suddenly had the urge to cry. With a quick shake of her head, she stalked off towards the bathroom and shed her clothing from the day before, throwing it into a heap on the floor. She turned on her shower and stepped under the spray, not even noticing the water still hadn't had a chance to warm up yet.

The tears came then, flowing endlessly, big sobs racking her body. She didn't know what had come over her. She hadn't even cried like that when Rod left her. So why the big production now? Over an imaginary man, of all things? She was foolish, silly, and stupid for being so upset that the entire experience of last night hadn't been real.

So why did her whole body ache with fatigue, why did her pussy feel sore? As if it had received way too much action? In her dreams it certainly had, but in reality? Not so much. Not even an intense session with her trusty vibrator made her feel so raw.

She soaped up her tender body and cried it all out, finally shutting off her tears just like she shut off the water. Drying her body with a fluffy towel—her one true indulgence—she noticed the telltale bruises on her inner thighs. They were faint, but they were definitely there.

A pattern of fingerprints, as if hands had pressed against her thighs, holding her open to a skilled and generous mouth showed against her skin.

She growled in frustration and threw the towel onto the floor, something she *never* did. She couldn't help herself, though. Everything that was happening, none of it made any sense! Had she been ravaged in her sleep and missed the entire seduction? Did her dream mirror what had happened to her, only in a much more pleasant and sexy atmosphere? There was nothing sexy about what she had been wearing last night, and there was certainly nothing sexy about doing it on her threadbare carpet. Maybe she'd imagined the entire thing to make it a better experience?

But who was she kidding? Who the hell would bust into her apartment after she'd knocked herself unconscious and have his way with her? Some freaky pervert? There were no signs of anyone breaking in. She shook her head and slipped on a fresh pair of panties, glaring at herself in the steamy mirror. Her thoughts were ridiculous, out of control. The entire experience had been a *dream* and she needed to leave it at that. End of story.

After blow drying her hair she dressed quickly, anxious to get out of the house since she was beginning to feel a little creeped out. She couldn't quit thinking about what had happened. Last night's dream had seemed to so real, and when she discovered the prince from her snow globe had gone missing...

What did it all mean? Had she been fucked by the Nutcracker Prince—in human form? There was no denying he looked just like the carved figurine from the snow globe, though much more handsome.

Oh, all of this was just way too freaky to deal with. With a shake of her head, Claire threw on her heaviest coat, grabbed a scarf, and hightailed it out of her place. She probably needed to be around other people, needed to escape the solitude of her apartment. Maybe she'd been spending too much time by herself. So much time she was starting to believe that figurines came to life and made love to her multiple times throughout the night.

Claire had always heard of people going crazy during the holiday season because of all the stress and misguided spirit. Maybe she was going to join the statistics.

She walked among the crowds on the sidewalk, the city full of shoppers hustling and bustling to get their Christmas shopping finished. Only four more days, Claire thought as she meandered into her favorite bookstore. Not like she had to buy presents for anyone—she'd already sent off the box full of small gifts for her family members weeks ago to beat the mail crush. No, she was in the store merely for her own pleasure.

Taking a deep breath, she instantly calmed amid the rows and rows of books in the store. *This* was a place she felt most comfortable—among some of her favorite things in the whole world. She bought a gingerbread latte from the tiny coffee shop tucked in a corner of the store and began browsing the shelves, looking for a couple of new reads to keep herself company through the remainder of the Christmas season.

Claire found herself studying the romance titles the hardest, looking for a few good old fashioned romances to make her feel good about love. Every back cover blurb she read, though, only reminded her of her dream lover. How sure his touch had been on her body, the wondrous magic of his mouth. She shivered, staring at the row of books that sat face out, admiring the many handsome heroes on the covers. Yes, they were gorgeous men with perfect bodies and perfect faces, but none of them had anything on her fantasy man.

With an irritated sigh she snapped up a few new releases and stuffed them under her arm, mad at herself. What was the point of mooning over a man who didn't even exist? Just a big waste of time, no matter how wonderful the experience had been last night. She needed to get over it. She needed to get over herself and move on. She had an article to write and more deadlines looming on the horizon. She had a few work friends she'd been neglecting since the breakup with Rod. Maybe she should get in contact with them after the holidays. They could probably help her get out of her funk. Maybe they could even introduce her to a couple of their single male friends...

She rounded the corner and ran smack into a solid wall of human flesh, the impact knocking the books in her arms all over the floor. She set her gingerbread latte on a display table nearby and stooped to pick them up, wondering who in the world she had run into. Had to be a man—he'd felt as solid as a rock, and so tall, too. She heard knees creak as the man bent beside her, watched as large hands moved in front of her, helping to pick up her books.

They both stood and Claire lifted her gaze to find the man watching her, holding the books she'd dropped in his outstretched hands, an amused grin on his face.

Her breath caught and held, trapped in her throat, and for a moment she forgot to breathe. He looked exactly like her dream prince! How could this be? He didn't exist!

"I think you dropped these," he said, his voice smoothing over her like sweet warm honey, causing her to feel all warm and gooey inside.

"Um, thank you." She flustered about, not knowing what to say or do, and a little embarrassed at having been caught holding such hot titles. She liked her romance reads to be a lot on the spicy side.

"Sorry I ran into you," he continued, his gaze still locked with hers. His dark brown eyes sparkled with—interest? She checked him out, didn't know how it could be possible, but the luscious man standing before her was even better looking than her fantasy lover. The added bonus being that he was flesh-and-blood real.

"I wasn't watching where I was going, I'm the one who should apologize." Oh, could she sound any lamer? She glanced down at herself. Could she look any lamer too? At least she had jeans on and not her normal everyday sweatpants. She actually wore her hair down today, too, versus the standard ponytail she threw her hair into because she was too lazy to style it. But the kitschy Christmas t-shirt with Mr. and Mrs. Claus hugging each other in a passionate embrace? Super lame.

"Are those authors any good?" He flicked his chin towards the books she clutched in her hands and her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"Um, yes, I think so." She clutched them harder, holding them in a way so he couldn't stare at the sexy covers anymore.

He leaned towards her, so close she caught a whiff of his scent. He smelled even better than her dream lover last night—unbelievable but true. "Don't tell anyone, but I have a secret yen for the occasional romance novel."

"No way," she breathed, unbelieving. He had to be teasing her.

"Oh, yeah." He nodded, his smile growing. Her heart nearly stopped at the sight of it. "You learn a lot about what a woman wants from these books. I recommend all men should pick one up at least once in their lives and read it. At least the good parts."

Claire didn't know what to say. A big handsome man admitting he liked to read romance novels so he could better please a woman? A dream come true!

Which in fact, he was.

“I guess if we’re going to talk about such personal subjects I should introduce myself. My name’s Mike.” He held out his hand and she disentangled hers from the books to shake it.

His long fingers, warm and firm, held tight to her hand, his thumb caressing the top of it, slow and sensuous. “Claire,” she said weakly.

“Nice to meet you, Claire.” His smile faded, his eyes growing even darker, and his expression became hungry.

Reminding her instantly of last night and the way her dream man looked at her, telling her he’d give her what ever she wanted. Her panties grew wet at the memory, grew even wetter at the way the very real, very sexy man was looking at her right now.

“Nice to meet you, too, Mike.” She smiled, joy filling her.

He shuffled his feet, stuffed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “Maybe we could get together sometime and talk about romance novels.”

He actually looked embarrassed. Too cute. “Actually what I’m about to purchase falls under the erotica category. Talk about teaching you what a woman wants.”

A crooked grin curved his beautiful mouth and Claire had to hold back the urge to lunge at him and kiss it. “Erotica, huh? I’ve heard that’s pretty—hot.”

She nodded, took a step closer to him. His body heat radiated towards her, drawing her to him but she held herself in check. “Oh, yes, it’s very hot. If you like it that way, I think you might find erotica very interesting.”

Claire held her breath, waiting for his reaction. She couldn’t believe she’d just said that, what her words implied. Propositioning a stranger in the middle of a bookstore on a Tuesday morning—she’d never done such a thing before! She couldn’t resist though, and she had to know if he was interested.

“I definitely like it hot.” Strong emphasis on the word hot, she noticed. She suddenly got so hot she was afraid she might burst into flames. “And I would definitely be interested in reading your new erotica books—with you.”

She smiled, relief surging through her body. Mike offered his hand and she took it, her nipples growing hard beneath her bra, her entire body tingling at his touch. “I guess I should go and buy my new books, then.”

“I think you should.”

They walked through the store hand-in-hand, Claire's latte long forgotten on a display table, both of them casting veiled glances at each other when they thought the other wasn't looking. Women turned their heads when they walked by, eyeing Mike appreciatively, and Claire had never felt luckier.

"Where do you suggest we go to read your new books?" he asked as they stood in the long line at the cash registers.

"I was hoping we could go to lunch first, get to know each other better," she suggested. She didn't want him to think she was easy, just running off with the first handsome man she saw. She would with him, of course, but not anyone else.

"I think that sounds like a great idea." He lifted their entwined hands and kissed the back of hers, his mouth open and lingering, and the feel of his mouth went straight to her pussy.

"I have a feeling you're going to be my early Christmas present," she said, her gaze never leaving his as they moved through the line.

"I had no idea Santa really read the letters I sent him," Mike teased, his dark eyes twinkling. "For once I think he sent me exactly what I wanted."

Claire couldn't agree more.