



# **ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS**

**By**

**Kally Jo Surbeck**

**Elaine Charton**

**& Brenna Lyons**

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Eternity  
By  
Kally Jo Surbeck

## Chapter One

He'd seen her every day at approximately four-thirty. Weekends too. She stopped outside of his shop, but never came in. She stood outside in the cold New England winter, grasping her coat tightly around her thin body. Her wild, blond curls always shoved up under a different cap--every day a different cap--looking. Always looking.

The view afforded him from behind his antique cherry wood desk caught the hazy afternoon glare. He frowned, blinked, and shoved his chair back. He moved slowly so as to not draw attention to his movements. It was a foolhardy gesture really. With the sun reflecting off the glass, and her attention squared on the box, she wouldn't realize a living soul watched her. Still, he took care. He was too close now to frighten her.

Behind the jewelry display, he stopped and pulled up a hand-tooled stool. He rested his chin in his palms and stared out at her, drawn by her beauty, entranced by her spirit. The familiar chemistry tightened in his stomach, balling it into a fixed knot. His mouth grew dry. His heart pounded. Every day his body physically reacted to her nearness.

She had to know he was there. She had to know it was his store.

It didn't matter. She was there. Close enough to see, but not to touch. If she knew he was there, then maybe that was how she needed it to remain...at least, for now. For now it was enough.

Light refracted off the different cuts of glass and jewelry in the display window casting the room in an iridescent shadow of rainbow. Brilliant and surreal. Beautiful and false. He gave a low, humorless laugh. It seemed so apropos for his life.

She moved.

It was like a movie. One of the first in Technicolor. The one's where the heroine's lipstick is a luscious shade of red. The red of strawberries. The red of a brand new '64 'Vette. The gray clouds swirled around her, the white snow, all neutral shades that enhanced rather than shielded her brilliance.

She pulled her coat tighter. It was long. Looked to Heath like it might have been a man's coat. It didn't fit her, but somehow she made it feel like home. But that had always been his Simone. She made everything right.

Yes, just like a movie. She was there and real, yet unattainable and perfect, just the other side of his window display.

*How did she find me?* It didn't matter. She had. His heartbeat tripped. Years. He'd searched for years. He'd catch her trail, then she'd disappear. He'd feel her. Feel close to her, but before he could make contact she took off like a bird in frightened flight. Her fragile wings spread, and she soared away from him. Away from his love.

Seven hundred years of chasing the dangling carrot.

It was the same thing, every day. He knew what she came to see, to look at. A small, handcrafted jewelry box. Gold encrusted, real gold mind you, not paint. He ran a reputable antique shop after all. It wasn't a pawn haven or a knockoff outlet. He looked for each piece with loving care and due diligence. His customers deserved the best, but this piece was not for sale. It never had been. Not since he'd gotten a hold of it again.

The jewelry box he'd found at an estate auction in Germany, not far from its original home. He'd had the piece authenticated to the early fourteenth century, but it was unnecessary. He knew every twist and turn the blacksmith had made. He knew every jewel, every scratch. It came from the area near the Black Forrest. Tiny rubies and sapphires created a design on the top. It looked almost tribal. He knew it down to the last detail. He should, he designed it.

The piece was headed for the auction block when he'd finally located it again. The estate planner said that the family had miraculously managed to hold on to the piece through both world wars, only to be lost to the ravages of illness.

His parent's had kept it all those years, protected it, passed it down through the many generations. They'd seen to his one solid joy.

The estate planner said she believed there was family in the states, but no one had been able to track them down. She expressed her happiness to hear that he had the same family name. She said it made her feel less guilty selling the heirloom.

He'd placed a sealed bid for the rare and delightful box, offering much more than it was worth to most people. Then again, he wasn't most people. He knew the estate planner cut him a

deal on duties, but it didn't matter. He would've paid any price to get the jewelry box back into his possession. .

Heath gazed out the shop window. This was his last hope. He'd tried everything else he could think of. Nothing had worked. The box was their last shared memory. It had to work. He'd chided himself for raising his hopes. But he had to. He had to do something different, or give up completely, living an empty and unfulfilled life. He couldn't do that, so he reasoned he needed the box to draw her. It had worked.

Every day she came.

Everyday, she stood for five minutes, no matter the weather, entranced by the little box.

"You really should go talk to her, instead of sitting there droolin' on the counter, Heath. It's pathetic."

He cocked a brow, but didn't shift his attention. "I don't want to frighten her. I've searched so long."

"Oh, and leering at her is best? I can't believe you've succeeded in business with a mind like this." Brigit had worked for him for five years. She was more family than employee, now. Her warm, loving nature made him feel like a part of her massive Irish clan. Brigit had become like an aunt. A bizarre aunt. The one you only saw on Holiday. The one you loved so much her eccentricities didn't even matter, mostly.

He wished he could tell her the whole truth of the situation and Simone, but he couldn't. All Brigit and her family knew was that he had a love from his youth. A woman who meant everything to him. A woman from the old country. They knew that and that he had pursued her and hoped to, one day, rekindle the flame. "If she wanted conversation, Brigit, or to even purchase the box, she'd come in here herself. I must be careful. This is a delicate situation."

"Yer chicken! That's what you are."

"Am not." He pushed back from the counter and turned toward his accuser.

"Heathclif Michael Denton, don't ya dare lie to me. I know more about you than you know about yourself, young man. And I can't believe my own ears. All this time. All this hunting and searching and yet you sit on your duff and watch her."

He leaned back on the stool and examined Brigit. Her whole demeanor said she truly believed she knew more than he did. Oh the joys of certainty. She thought she knew, but she didn't. She didn't really know a blessed thing. He cocked a brow at her use of his full name and

her rarely used temper, but refused to rise to her bait. Resting his chin back in his palms, he leaned on the counter. “Sooner or later she’ll come in.” Then in more of a whisper added, “She just has to.”

Brigit dropped her dusting cloth and wedged her hands on her narrow hips. “And just how many sales are ya going to refuse before that happens?”

“It doesn’t matter. I always have something else they need.”

“Oouch! It doesn’t matter, he says.”

“Brigit, I already told you. It’s not for sale anyway.”

“Then why have it in the window?”

“It brings customers into the store. Once inside, they’re hooked. And don’t give me that look. I always have something else they need, or I know how to get it for them. You know I’m right. It might take a little time, but I have it taken care of.”

“You can’t pass up on sales. No one can afford to do that forever and forever is where you’re heading sitting here, your chin in hand, watching her through the window. If it’s just a box, sell it. Make some money. You can have another one made or find a new one for your pleasure. Heath, this obsession without action, it isn’t healthy.”

“The box is not for sale. Drop it, Brigit.”

She shook her head, her corkscrew curls popped free of the loosely clasped barrette. “You talk like you’re made of money. This little adventure you’re on called life, it takes funding, Heath. Christmas is just around the corner, you know?”

“I have never failed to pay you your bonus.”

“I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about you and this way of life you’re leading.”

He let her ramble. Interrupting wouldn’t help. She was set in her ways. She could work herself into quite a storm if he fed the fire. He didn’t even glance in her direction; he’d already spoken his piece. So, instead, he watched the woman through the window. Finally, when there was a lull in her lecture, he said. “It’s fine.”

“It’s fine, he says.” Brigit stomped off still mumbling something just under her breath.

In his extended lifetime, Heath had managed to set himself up quite well. Through some small investments and a hidden treasure or two he’d tucked away, he’d done well over the years. The sale or nonsale of one scratched jewelry box would not make or break him, but scaring her away might. He couldn’t take it anymore.

She looked up.

It was the first time in years he'd been close enough to see her eyes. He caught his breath. The same. Beautiful. Haunted. Timeless. A blue, the shade nearly as deep as the sapphires encrusted on the small box. 1384, spring, the stones were chosen to match her eyes. He'd carefully hand-selected each and every one. The sapphires for faithfulness and loyalty. The rubies for undying love. To get both, he'd traded several precious amethysts, family heirlooms, for the stones. But the gold, the gold was from his own property. She should have known word would leak. This horrible mess was his fault.

Just looking at her, he knew the terrible price she had paid for his vanity in preparing her wedding gift. By all the gods, he wished he could take it back. He wished for so many things. Even if he had to be cursed for his arrogance, he wished she had been happy. The sag of her shoulders told him she wasn't. She blinked, darker eyelashes than one expected from a blond framed them, turning the corners of her eyes up at an exotic angle.

His elation plummeted.

Tears. There were tears in her eyes...just like the last time he'd seen them. Seven hundred years could not erase that gut-wrenching pain he'd felt then at seeing them in her eyes. If anything, it had magnified, sanctified, and immortalized their last meeting. Her tears, her pain, her terror were frozen pictures in his mind. He couldn't do anything about it then, not that he'd thought he could anyway. But this time, maybe this time, he could dry her tears.

Health, jumped off the stool, grabbed his wool jacket and charged through the door.

Simone looked at her watch. Her shuttle would be there in ten minutes. That was if it was running on schedule. The harsh winters often had the drivers working to their own tune and not the posted lists. Ten minutes. It didn't give her much time. Time. There was never enough time. It continued on at a droning pace, but never enough for the joys.

Every day she passed the store and stopped. Everyday she was scared the jewelry box would be gone. But it wasn't. It sat centerpiece in the display, regal and alone, slightly tarnished by the hands of time, but perfect to her eyes.

The jingling of bells startled her, as did the warm hand on her shoulder.

She jerked away as if scalded.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Are you okay?"



She looked up into the most gorgeous hazel eyes, soft and gentle. Golden flecks darted around emerald green. They were cat's eyes, knowing and seeing. Her heart stopped. Eye's she never thought to see again stared down on her. They looked exactly the same, full of compassion and concern. More than a little worried and full of love. She glanced to her watch. Six minutes to catch her shuttle.

Even though she'd put distance between them and separated from physical contact, something akin to energy hummed between their bodies. For a moment, the bitter cold that encapsulated her heart--was gone. For that split-second, she felt complete, whole, and happy. Bitter tears replaced longing. She was certain she could see it, the energy, as if she were attuned.

He reached for her again.

Cursing herself for lack of study, she stuttered. "I'm fine. I--I've gotta go." She spun on her heel and fled. The piercing wind ripped at her coat. Her tears froze to her cheek, but she didn't stop. Simone kept running.

Those eyes. She knew those eyes, knew them as intimately as she knew her own features. Silent eyes. Caring eyes. Compassionate eyes. Eyes that saw things she didn't want them to see. Her true self. They looked deep in her soul and remained. They saw the dark emptiness, but stayed. A shiver coursed down her spine, his eyes scared her.

"He's not supposed to be alive." Tears muddled her vision, but she knew her path just as well as she knew Heathclif Michael Denton. She stumbled, but recovered without losing her speed. On she ran. "I should've known he'd have the box. He'd do whatever he could to hold on to it. Has he always had it?" The thought caused a sharp pain in her heart.

"I'm just out of shape. It's just the cold. Just the run. A muscle spasm." She muttered as she took the stairs two at a time. She could lie to herself all day. It wasn't her muscles. It was him.

The shuttle pulled out of the depot right after Simone deposited her token in the toll shoot. She stood, chest heaving, arm bracing her against one of the Corinthian pillars. "Terrific. Beautiful. Perfect. This sums up my life in one fell swoop. Oh but I'd trade my immortality for wings."

A kindly old janitor looked up from his sweeping.

"Ignore me, please." She tried to smile, but was sure it looked more like the grimace she felt. Wasn't his fault she never got anywhere on time. Not even her own wedding. If she'd

been there on time, none of this would have happened. She sank onto a bench, ignoring the biting cold. She knew colder. She lived colder. A big storm was blowing in. Even if her joints didn't warn her, the gray, ominous sky forecast an ugly night.

## Chapter Two

The shrill whine of her cell phone made Simone sigh, loudly. Only her employer used that ring. It was as abrasive as he was. He'd heard it and ordered her to keep it as his special herald. The tone fit him. It embodied him. Music was supposed to be beautiful and captivating, not astringent. The French were supposed to be beautiful and captivating. In this case, neither was true.

It was his third attempt to contact her in five minutes. Another *catastrophe*. She pressed her lids shut. The contact burnt, more so than her tears and that surprised her. The surprise surprised her. Nothing was new anymore. The ring droned on. The wind howled down the tunnel to the tracks. The janitor's broom swished with each push. Simone rubbed her forehead and looked up at the Plexiglas dome over the tracks. The design supposedly allowed light into the underground recess. It should liven up the dark space. Today it capped the burrow. Dark clouds, almost purplish in hue, swirled in sickening circles.

The damn phone!

By Tyr, she was tired. Exhausted, to tell the truth. Weary to the bone. She just wanted to sit, silently, alone. Relax a moment. Pull herself together and make some decisions. Face to face with a ghost. A seven hundred-thirty-three-year-old ghost to be exact. It would startle the most stout of heart. More so, she'd thought him dead. She'd envisioned him happy, in love with a new woman, again as he should. Finally, in her mind, she saw him falling ill to old age and decay.

Instead of her masterfully crafted scenario, she sees Heath in perfect form. Sad, but perfect, standing tall and proud and looking to her with concern. By Wotan, she left him all those years ago and he still looked at her with love. It was too much to ask a woman to bear. She shook her head as if by doing so it would clear her mind and erase the pain and confusion just like an Etch-i-sketch.

The damn phone!

Simone didn't want to talk about work and she certainly didn't want to talk to Stephan. She'd worked her shift. Now was her time. Private time.

She picked the phone up and looked at it. She tried to compile all of her hatred and bitterness and put it into her glare. If she looked at the piece of plastic with enough disdain

maybe it would stop ringing. Maybe the phone would disappear. *Yeah right, just like if I could only go to sleep and not have to wake up in a chronic state of hell.*

The kindly janitor stopped his sweeping, resting his hands on the top of handle he looked at her expectantly. After a beat of two breaths he asked, “Been a hard day?” He had a comforting accent. From all of her travels, Simone pegged it as Austrian.

The ringing phone stopped.

She nodded. “Yes. It has.” *Not just day, mister. It’s been a hard life.*

“I understand.” He stroked his small, well cared for mustache.

She nodded, but thought: *You have no idea.*

“Still, bad day or not, it’s Friday evening, a pretty young thing like you...you should be readying for a night on the town. See a show or have a nice dinner. Have yourself a date with a handsome young man that adores you.”

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she answered him as truthfully as she could. “Maybe for some. Not for me. My chance for those nights have long passed.”

Her cell chimed that Stephan had left a message. Surprise. Surprise. She frowned.

He leaned his broom against the wall and sat down on the bench next to her. “I watch you hustle through here every day. You never walk, always running. What you running from child?”

“There’s never enough time.” Of course, for some things, all there was was time. Never ending, unceasing time, hell. “Like tonight. I missed my train, the last train. There isn’t another tonight that will take me to Lowbridge.”

“Ahh child, no reason to work yourself up into a fuss, there’s another shuttle in forty-five minutes.” He pulled his stalking cap further down over his ears and smoothed his mustache again for good measure.

“That one only runs to South Arston. Not Lowbridge.” She shook her head in disgust. Not at him, mostly it was directed to her life. “I’m sorry. It’s not you. It’s not you at all.” Her choices were always wrong. She was wrong about how fast she could get to the depot. Wrong about which towns to hide in, in her futile attempts to escape Stephan. She was wrong. Wrong. Wrong. If she’d chosen correctly all those years ago...

He patted her leg, cocked his head to the side and smiled. He reminded her of someone. Someone from long ago. The sparkle in his eyes was so similar--but it couldn't be. "Sometimes unfortunate circumstances present us with the great opportunity."

"Sometimes, I guess." Simone cocked her head and examined his dark eyes, his full lips partially concealed under his mustache.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing." She shook her head. Maybe he was a long distant relation. Generations had passed. "You remind me of an acquaintance from years ago. You have the same bone structure."

The janitor smiled. "Trust your feelings. Make your life what you want it to be."

"What?" She'd run for so long. Until about ten minutes ago she didn't even know Heath had suffered the same horrible fate that day. And immortality was horrible. Every night she'd lay her head down to visions of what could have been and every morning she would wake to know it would never, ever happen.

No, she hadn't known he lived. She'd thought he'd grown old, married, and passed on many many years ago. Stephan had never let her go back to her homeland.

Simone felt her anger rising, the heat in her chest and her mind warmed her dulled senses. He knew. Stephan knew Heath lived! Her stomach quivered. The hairs on her neck stood on end. The bastard knew! All of these years--she choked on a sob--he knew!

It was Friday night. Heath's antique shop would close soon. She glanced down at her watch. She could go back to the shop...if she hurried. He might still be there.

Her cell phone rang again.

"You better answer that, child. It might be important." The janitor hoisted his tired body and retrieved his broom. "That call might just hold the answer."

Looking at the man with wonder, she flipped her phone open. "Yeah?"

"Simone, where have you been?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I'm supposed to be on my shuttle home."

"But you're not."

"No." Annoyance laced her words. Through the centuries she had been tied to Stephan Marceau, bound by an invisible chain more powerful than the strongest steel. She had fought it for nearly five centuries, then she gave up. There was nowhere else to run. No place to hide.

He found her every place she cowered. Every day, he was there. An immovable thorn in her side. And the burn of it was that it was her fault. All of it. She'd cast herself this lot. Cursed herself. Apparently, she'd cursed them all, Stephan, herself and Heath. She would've felt satisfaction knowing she'd cursed Stephan, but he appeared to eat up the whole immortality thing. There was no gratification in that.

"You flew out of here so fast, I didn't get a chance to speak with you." His annoying accent had not changed over the centuries. It grated on her nerves now, just as it had the first time he'd burst through the Dancing Dragon Inn doors. When she did not respond, he continued. "Simone, you know tonight is the De Rostard opening."

She rolled her eyes. Of course she knew, she'd scheduled it. She booked the artist. She handled the invitations. She got the reviews in the paper. Of course she knew.

"Are you there, Simone?" he whined.

She ground her teeth to the point of pain, biting back all of the things she truly wanted to say. After a moment, a tense moment where she wasn't certain she had the strength to go on. Simone spoke in smooth, measured tones. "Yes, I know the opening is tonight."

"Then why in Heaven's name are you not here?"

"It's not my problem. I already--"

"P--problem?" He stuttered. She pictured his fine almond brows drawn together in obvious consternation. His lip tucked down and to the side, exposing his dimple. Tyr she hated that dimple! "A world-renowned sculptor is a problem? Really Simone. I have seen to your education. Top notch. You've been tutored. You've traveled, and yet you would dare speak of a great with such irreverence. I don't understand. Somehow, I've failed you."

She wasn't going to let him, at least not tonight, manipulate her into feeling sorry for him. Poor, poor Stephan. The noble knight, who came and rescued a pretty bar wench--a nothing. He'd come charging in, saved her from a marriage to a godless, pagan, ill-educated farmer. He'd taken her away to the towns, then the cities, and the metropolises. He'd educated her, clothed her in fine garments, and introduced her to the elite of the passing age. Stephan had shown her things she never thought possible. He made her, sculpting her like clay. But the finished piece was not at all what he'd anticipated.

"I'm sorry." He whimpered again.

"Cease the dramatics, it's only you and me, Stephan. And I'm too tired to deal with it."

“Well, I never! I’ve only tried--”

“You did what you thought best at the time. I, too, have done my best by you. This is an old argument. One I grow increasingly weary of. Tonight is a prime example. I set the show up. I readied it. But, you’re the one who opened the gallery, Stephan. Not me. I don’t need to be there. I need time off, too.”

“And you’ll get it...soon.”

“Soon? That’s a relative term, now isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he cooed, ignoring her question. “You can have some time as soon as you make tonight all right for me.”

“I don’t have to do this! I already did my job.”

“You’ll do what I tell you, Simone.”

Snapping the phone shut was not an option, but it still had appeal.

“You work for me.” He paused for effect. “Who else can handle the tax issues like I? Who else will see to it that you are paid in cash? That there is no paper trail, and yet will give you an impeccable reference? Not that you need it.”

“That’s not fair, Stephan.” He had no right! She could find a way. She had a few reserves. Over the years, she had hidden funds. Funds not even Stephan knew about. Money for an emergency. But when time has no meaning, where is the line of emergency drawn?

“Fair does not pay an honest man’s wage. I own you.”

“You’re a bastard.”

“I detest all of this name calling and threats, I need you, Simone. The gallery needs you.” He changed his whine to a petulant plea. She hated that more than his nasal bleat. “Please come back. You and Jacque have such a delightful understanding. Tonight would mean so much. To me. To him.”

Silence.

“Come on Simone. I even had a special treat lined up, just for you. I can’t wait to see your face when it happens. Please? Don’t ruin my surprise, just because you are in foul temper with me. Jacque will never reschedule if this goes poorly.”

Jacque was the highly-strung artist. He had to have his champagne chilled to exactly thirty degrees. His caviar had to be Blue Shell. Jacque had many needs; it was her job to see

them filled. She hated her job. Almost as much as she hated her life. “Fine. I’ll do it. For Jacque. Not for you, Stephan.”

“Whatever, *mi amour*. “

“Don’t press it, Stephan. I’ll be there in time for the opening.” She snapped the phone shut before he could say anything else. She looked up at the janitor. He still watched her, his eyes intelligent and interested. She rose. “I hope you don’t have to be out here much longer. A nasty storm’s brewing.”

“I’ll be fine. A little weather never hurt me. But you, you be careful tonight. Strange happenings are afoot. I sense it and when that happens opportunities abound.” He inclined his head and bustled off.

The man was crazy, kindly, but crazy. The only opportunity at *Château’d Lup* was for Stephan or Jacque to annoy her, maybe if she was lucky a chance to get fired. That made her smile. One could only hope.

The wind whistled and sharp shards of ice pelted her exposed cheeks, erasing the smile from her face. She shivered and pulled her coat tight, wishing she had her mittens. They wouldn’t really help, but the idea soothed her soul. Little daily extras like mittens made her feel some semblance of normalcy. They offered comfort, but not really relief from the chill. The cold in her stomach went beyond the nasty weather. The thirty-seven steps to the top of the tunnel seemed like a thousands. Her feet were heavy. She stepped out into the elements no longer shielded by the hard concrete. A gust of wind unbalanced her. The emptiness in her soul stretched the vastness of the earth and then some. A tear escaped her squinted eye before she knew she needed to cry.

The young Gypsy woman had never told her it would be like this.

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“Well, it’s about time! I was beginning to lose faith in you, my sweet.” Stephan rushed toward her. His dark blond hair was tied back in a leather queue. It was a bit Renaissance, but he worked it. He had sharp features that many found devastatingly handsome. Simone found them nauseating.

“I told you I would be here.”

“I know, I know. But the hour grows late. Two guests have already arrived.”



“I had to stop and pick up a dress.” She shrugged out of her coat, hung it behind the door in the coat-closet near the entrance to the gallery. The floor-length midnight blue gown she wore sparkled in the track lighting. “I didn’t think you’d appreciate an employee in Harvest-Knit for your show.”

Stephan smirked, the corner of his thin mouth twitched as did his sculpted brow. He took a sip from the flute he carried.

“*Mon cheri*, you look fabulous.” Jacques’ brusque, clipped walk echoed on the hardwood floor. “For this,” he grabbed her wrists and held them to the heavens, his hands cold on her already chilled flesh. “For this, I would wait for hours!”

She smiled.

He spun in a slow circle, taking her with him. “Ignore Stephan. You know how he gets at these events. The man’s nerves wind tighter than a clock-spring. You look positively good enough to eat.”

She laughed politely, but stepped back from his friendly embrace feeling a tad nauseated. Jacques eating her was about as tempting as a hangnail. Let one of his followers have him. For some unknown reason young women flocked to his showings in droves. They called out their name. They gave him room keys. One would think he was a superstar not an artist. Money was one thing, and though Jacques had enough of it to satisfy ten women for quite some time, he was an insipid man. His jowls had grown loose, his stomach paunched from opulent living. Gnarly. She liked the term. She’d learned it in Hawaii. It fit him in a most unflattering way. Momentarily suppressing her distaste, she asked, “Where is Monique? She’s supposed to be taking tickets tonight.”

“I sent her for more champagne.” Stephan dismissed the question with a flippant wave of his manicured hand.

“More? I ordered two cases. That’s more than enough.” Simone looked at both men. Premadonnas. Both of them.

“Oh, yes,” Jacques falsely cringed, twirling the end of his tie in his hand. The bright scarlet design dipped and swirled as he twirled it around one of his long fingers. “I might have forgotten to tell you, I invited the *Journal*.”

“The Journal? Not Joseph or Andre? Not Madeline or Marguerite? *The Journal*?”

“*Oui*.”

“Forgot?” How in the hell did one forget inviting an entire magazine?

“*Oui.*”

She cursed under her breath. That was all she needed, a bunch of pretentious art wannabe followers scouring over her gallery. Yes, it would definitely top off her perfect day. She rubbed her eyes. The men and women of *The Journal* would barge into the gallery as if they owned it. They would look down their surgically crafted, upturned noses at the position of the paintings and the lightening of the sculptures, judge the quality of the food and think if the napkins didn’t have just the right name emblazoned on them that Jacque did not deserve the best or worse yet that the gallery could not afford the best.

Crap. “Thanks, Jacque.”

“Oh, come, *Cheri*. You know you always take care of Jacque with superb care. It will all be perfect.”

Wotan she hated it when he referred to himself in third person. Freaky. Plain and simple, freaky. Over the years she’d come to associate it with severe egos and psychotic personalities. Jacque fit both categories. “Yes, Jacque. It will be perfect, but no thanks to you two! Both of you. How can I do my job if you’re always throwing these last minute glitches into the system?”

Stephan wrapped his arm around her waist. His grip was firm enough she could not have worked her way out of the embrace without causing a scene. She hated him more at that moment than she ever had in all the years of her imprisonment at his side. That said a lot. She casually slid her hand down her waist, wedging her hand between her body and his hand. Consequences be damned. She didn’t want him touching her. His powerful musk cologne turned her stomach. She pried his hand free from her waist. “I must see to the last minute details. If you’ll excuse me.”

She didn’t say it as a question. She marched away before either of the men could construe it as such. With purposeful strides, she moved toward her office. It was near the back of the gallery. If she kept walking, she could just walk right on out the back door. Nothing stood between her and escape, except... Except now she’d seen Heath. He was close. He was alive. For a moment, her heart warmed. He remembered her.

Simone stepped into her office, shutting the door with a soft click.

Heathclif Denton.

Her one time fiancé.

She pressed her back against the solid support of her office door, closed her eyes, and allowed the years to slip away. They fell away like a sand castle in the late night tide. Gone were the years of emptiness and never-ending sorrow. The guilt and the shame, too.

Heath stood before her, proud. Tall for his family, he stood a good head above most men in their village. The women all whispered openly about the beauty of his long hair and appeal of his lean muscles. They stopped their work to come lean on the fences of his property in the late afternoon heat to see when he stripped his shirt off, the sweat glistening on his hard muscles. She, too, was guilty. She stood with her friends and gawked. Fantasies filled her nights. Dreams of things she'd never yet experienced but believed with him she could.

That day, he'd walked up to her counter. Always he kept his long hair tied back. Today, at the antique store, it had been free. Thick, shiny, still long, but free. It made her happy that something remained free.

In her mind's eye, she watched him stride with a confident swagger directly to her. He pulled up a stool to the bar counter and sat down. Then and now, she sighed. He'd come to the Dancing Dragon. It was her father's tavern and inn, respectable in a land where respect often fell short. She'd spoken to him several times at the market, watched him work in the fields, but he'd never frequented the tavern. He'd actually never come in until that day. He said he'd inherited his father's farm. His father and mother still lived but he was a man, in his estimation. She'd congratulated him and he'd proposed marriage.

Yes! Of course she'd said yes.

Simone was the tavern owner's daughter. Heath, a farmer and militia. Over six foot-four, he cut a wide swath wherever he went. Men respected him. Women adored him, but he had eyes only for her. Gorgeous eyes. Hazel eyes that changed with his mood. Cat eyes, shrewd and understanding of things beyond his years. She loved to gaze into their depths and guess at what his thoughts were. And from that moment on, she'd never looked into another man's eyes or wanted another. Even after...even after she never wanted another.

His laughter ran deep and he laughed for her, often. Normally serious and looking to the future, but when they were together, Heath let the façade fade away. He'd lived for every moment they shared. She knew because he told her. She knew because she felt the same way when she was with him.

They were to be married on the equinox. Rumors flowed of the men from the south. Horribly wicked tales of the nobles invading the countryside, confiscating the rich, fertile land. One night, under the shadow of moon, she confessed her fears. But Heath laughed them off, gently kissing her lips. He always tasted of fresh cider, the fruit fresh on his tongue. His strong hands rubbed in gentle caresses on the soft skin of her neck. The touch torture and bliss. “Surely, they’ll not come here. We are a farming community. No water, no gold, no precious gems. What would they want this far north? Simone, my love. You worry too much.”

And she had. She worried night and day. Day and night. Every rising of the sun, she said her thanks that they were still alone in their farming community and every night she prayed for it to remain so.

A soft knock on her door jarred Simone from her memories. She cracked it open. “Yes?”

A beautiful woman with high cheek bones, amethyst eyes and ruby lips smiled. She delicately tucked a loose strand of her elegantly styled hair behind her perfect ear. “Simone, we need to talk.”

## Chapter Three

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

“Now what would I do at a fancy-shmancy opening?” Brigit shook her head. “I belong here. Kenneth and I will rent a movie or something, cuddle up near the fireplace and enjoy each other. You go. Go and have a good time.”

Heath grinned. Brigit’s night sounded far more appealing than Jacques’ show. He was only going because it was expected in the industry. New contacts always popped up at these events, and Heath was a little intrigued about the new gallery. This was the first show since it’d opened its doors. “Brigit, we could drink lots of champagne...free,” he coaxed.

Laughing she pushed him to the door. She handed him his jacket. “No! Go. Have fun. Stay out late. Be a kid.”

He almost laughed out loud. A kid? He hadn’t been one in quite some time. “Yes, mom.” He did laugh then.

She continued pushing him out the door. “I’m locking it.”

“I’m going already. Night.”

“Night.”

The door chimes jingled closed. Heath turned up his collar against the unrelenting December wind and turned toward St. Sebastian Avenue. New England winters were harsh. He liked it that way. The holidays had everyone feeling warm and fuzzy. So he wasn’t tempted to join them, he’d moved here. Everything looked beautiful, chipper, and full of Christmas cheer, but the harsh reality bit at him each morning. The howling winds and stinging sleet, it was just the reminder he needed. Life was harsh and it would bite you in the ass at the least provocation. Hell, without provocation. The weather kept him from slipping.

He tucked his head low and pressed on. A few people called out greetings as he passed. He nodded, but with each step he became more mired in memory. Simone.

The memory of the first time he’d ever seen her came to mind. At least the first time her remembered being aware of her. He was on his way to the market with his father. That summer he’d just turned seven summers, so she was only five. Her father carried her. In her arms she carried a bag. Heath couldn’t remember anything else, but how her curls danced in the afternoon sun. She looked like the angels his mother told him about at bedtime. Her eyes, even then, were

a dark, clear blue. Deeper in shade than the dark waters of Hannaubaut's well. From that moment on, he'd never had an interest in anyone else in their village. It was her--always her.

That memory--of the good memories--was rivaled only by the memory of the first time they made love.

"You know we shouldn't do this, Simone." His mouth protested, but his hands already worked furiously on the tight lacings of the bodice of her gown.

"And why not, my love? We are to be wed soon. This is but the natural progression of our union. Not even the gods would dare condemn our act of love and joining. The ceremony is show and pageantry for the sake of the village only. You and I, we have bound ourselves eternal by love's chord. Nothing can tear us apart. This," she rubbed against him, her body heat soaked through the thin material of his work shirt, "completes that bond."

He didn't know about any chord of love, but he knew she had him strung so tight he'd pop if she moved her hand a little to the left. There wasn't even room to shift. He stood, tall and rigid. Hard, aching, and desperately in love, he savored the feel of her smooth flesh as each lacing slid free.

At the best of times, in her boots, the top of her head barely brushed the underside of his chin. Barefoot, she stood even shorter. Tonight her beautiful, full curls tickled his jaw. She tilted her head up and raised herself on tiptoe. Her lithe body trembled in his hands. Hot breath preceded the sure bliss of her soft lips right above his Adam's apple. He fought the urge to moan and swallow. He wanted nothing to interrupt the hesitant pattern of moist kisses trailing across his neck. With each flick of her tongue and hitch of her breath, she grew more bold, pressing her body against his, moving them back until his bare back scratched on the splintery surface of the barn door.

The rich soil, and stacked hay had filled the barn with the smell of nature, but the scent of her body drove everything else from his mind. She smelled of ale, wild flowers, and desire. A heady combination that spun him into an orange haze of passion.

Coarse cotton fell off the smooth curve of her shoulders, tangling around his wrists, binding him. He didn't fight it. Instead, he grasped the material, felt the weave, felt the careful stitching, let it anchor him. In her arms was where he desired to be above all else. By his life, he loved her.

“Relax. No one will find us here.” She coaxed.

At that, he did swallow. A difficult task. Suddenly his throat was very dry. It was mid-afternoon on a workday. No one should come looking for him, but then again... “Simone--”

She cut his protest off with the soft whisper of a command, “Shh.” Slowly, her kisses shifted in direction and intensity. They trailed down his neck, lingered over the pulse at the base of his throat. Her tongue ran in a wavy path over and back of the frantic beat. Her hands wandered in intoxicating patterns over the flat of his stomach, dipping and swirling until he felt surely she had more than two hands. “If you’re so nervous...watch.”

The little pause and double meaning in the word *watch* was not lost to Heath. Simone smiled, the hint of mischievousness bright in the flash of her deep blue eyes he caught from underneath her thick lashes. She flipped her head, making the heavy golden locks flee from her face, exposing her very sensual dimple and full lips.

With a flick of her wrist, he felt his arousal spring from the tight confines of his drawers into her inviting palm.

“Happy memories there, hero?”

Heath jerked his attention from the sleet-laden sidewalk and his all-too-real memories of his father’s barn to the old crone leaning just inside the alleyway on 34<sup>th</sup>. Her hair was matted and gnarly. Unmatching shoes, both lefts, adorned her feet. Wrinkles encased her face, obscuring most remarkable traits. “I beg your pardon.”

“Don’t beg mine, maybe the maid’s father, but not mine.” The woman cackled, but the sound reverberated deep in his chest. He recognized that laugh. Then, he saw her eyes.

“Atropos?”

“Damn. Can’t I go anywhere unrecognized?” She snapped her fingers in a display of mock dismay. With two steps, she shifted into the saucy Gypsy form, whom he’d first met.

“Happy to see me, Heathclif?”

He rolled his eyes. Yes, this was definitely what he needed to top off his day. His gaze rose and looked up into the gathering storm. He wrinkled his brow and squinted against the falling ice and rain. “Not really.”

Her full lips curved into a frown. “Now, is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“Friend? Is that what you call it?”

She shrugged. "I like you more than I like most."

He looked down at her. Sizing her up with the same scrutiny he felt pelt him from her dark, dark gaze. After a moment, he determined he believed her and that it had taken a great deal for her to admit such a thing.

"You have," she looked at him and licked her lips, "staying power. I'll give that to you."

"Nice." He stepped to the side, to avoid the hand she reached toward him. Picking up his pace, he growled, "Think you've done enough damage, witch?"

She grabbed his jacket. Cocking her brow, she took three measured breaths. He noticed the power pulse within the dark depths of her eyes. And for the moment, he was worried. "Now, Heath, that's just wrong and I'm going to pretend you didn't say it. After all, I helped you out all those years ago, and I'm here to help again." She smoothed his lapel with delicate precision and stepped away. "There. Let's start over. My, my. Heath! It's so wonderful to see you again."

"Death."

Tsking, she started walking again. "Men. Chronically foolish."

He hated that she might have the answers to his questions, to his life and existence. Four hundred and two years ago, she pointed him to the Americas. She said he would find Simone here, but she would not give him more detailed information about where to find his love. He swallowed his pride. "It's good to see you. How have you been?"

She looked back over her shoulder, her long, dark hair rested in tight dreadlocks dancing down her back. "Idle chatter doesn't suit you. So, I will endeavor to make this as painless as possible. You, though you did try, have fumbled about for years. Your darling, Simone, has been an even larger disappointment. Until this very day, she believed you dead."

"What?" His step faltered.

"I know. I can't believe it either. You'd think if you were eternally bound to someone, you'd know if they were alive or not." She shook her head in disgust. "Humans."

"I thought she ran from me. Every time I got close..." Heath took several large steps to keep up with the triple of Fate. The last of the three sisters. The oldest. The most vindictive. "She ran away, every time I got close."

She shrugged. "Ever the charmer, Stephan somehow managed to convince her otherwise. He knows where you are. Always has."



The man's name tore like a knife in Heath's heart. He tried not to harbor ill-will to any, but Stephan he hated. The noble with the wavy fair hair, the weak blue eyes, the power of his death. At least, Heath had believed so at the time. Obviously, Simone had too. "How would he know?"

"Let's just say he came by the knowledge through devious means, and I plan to see the balance restored."

## Chapter Four

“Devious means?”

“Yes.”

“Come on, Atropos. You have to tell me.”

She looked around, the beads in her braids clinking together with a lyrical jingle. “Stop using that name. You know I hate it.” Grabbing the hood of her oversized hoody out from under the lapel of her trench coat, she tugged it over her head.

“You look scared.”

“Scared isn’t the word I’d use, unless I was describing how you should be feeling pushing me like this. I told you. I will see this problem rectified.”

“It’s been seven hundred years, At--” Her look stopped him cold. “What would you like me to refer to you as, your highness?”

“You’re pushing it, boy.” She started walking, taking the short cut down Marsons Boulevard. “Call me Attie, or don’t call me anything. And seven hundred years is nothing in the over all scheme of things.”

“Been a hell of a long time for me.”

“Yes, but you’re you.”

“Should I be offended?”

“Probably.” She stopped.

They stood in front of the *Château’d Lup*. From all Heath had read this was *the* up and coming gallery of the age. From the outside, it didn’t look like much to him. It had the same weathered stone façade as the rest of the buildings on the street, the same stilted appearance. The two-toned windows allowed light to pass through the purple and blue coating, but a passerby could only vaguely discern bodies and movement beyond the barrier. Booked solid for a year-and-a-half, many big names in the sculpting and shadow and play arena were coming to their small town, just to frequent this gallery. It could mean some good potential clients. It could mean sales. He could put on a happy face for that.

He glanced down the street and then to his walking mate. She had changed clothes again. Now, she stood in a long, chili-red pantsuit. A fox fur coat graced her slender curves and her dreads had shifted into a fantastic chignon. “How many more outfits do you have tucked in there?”

“Come on. It’s cold out here.”

“You’re a Fate.”

“So?” She tugged the door open. Where normally bells sounded or an irritating chime rang, instead a whorl of light skittered across each wall hanging announcing the guests of *Château ‘d Lup*. “Damn, he’s pretentious.”

Heath looked down at Attie. She looked pissed. He took her coat and handed it to the attendant. “Would that devious means have anything to do with you?”

She ignored him, her gaze scanning the room. Men looked to her and blushed, women looked and whispered. Attie didn’t show any signs of care. Well, nothing except the rigid set of her shoulders. They pulled straight, as if a board bound her back.

“Welcome. Welcome!”

The unmistakable congestion of Stephan’s voice made Heath’s blood run cold.

Attie smiled and winked at Heath. “Oh, this is going to be fun.”

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“But I don’t understand.” Simone’s shaking hand set the brush on her desk. Her fingers trailed a moment longer on the smooth handle.

Lachesis sipped her champagne. “That’s the problem.”

“How could I not know?”

Lachesis shrugged daintily.

Had she really believed Heath dead? Stephan told her, almost daily. But deep down, did she ever truly believe? She’d always still felt, if only in the dark reserves of her mind, that if she reached out she could feel him. She could sense him and know as long as she had that connection it was enough. Hell, she’d felt crazy enough for years. After ten years with Stephan, ten years, of waking every morning and looking into the mirror, seeing the same face, the exact same face, not one more wrinkle or worry line, not one silver hair, nothing changed. She’d thought she’d lost her mind. Thought she’d separated from all known reality. She sank into her chair. “You are The Moirai.”

“I am She. She is we.”

“And you’ve been involved in this since the beginning?”

“We have been involved since the *very* beginning. But I think what you meant was the beginning of your ordeal, in which case, yes we were involved sadly before you were.”

“How is that possible?”

Lachesis tapped a finely manicured nail against her chin. “May I?” She pointed to the chocolate dish.

Simone nodded.

Unwrapping the truffle, Lachesis popped it into her mouth. The soothing scent of orange blossoms filled the room as she spoke. “Clo spun you a beautiful tapestry. I drew the lots and Attie, well she had determined time.” She hesitated.

“And?”

“And something changed. Stephan took one of his threads. He seduced my sister to gain access and then ran. Without his string to complete his fate. Without things proceeding as determined, as recorded...well, nothing worked the way it should have. Your fiancé was not afforded the chance to kill Stephan, as designed. You two were not afforded the chance to live out your lives together. You see, Attie doesn’t take kindly to being duped.”

Simone shot to her feet. “This has all been about your sister’s revenge?”

“Don’t you dare get self-righteous with me, Simone! You choose poorly. That is your curse. Your choices determined your life. Your failings, your faults, your insecurities. Don’t blame others for those mistakes. You just happened to choose poorly in a situation that involved an angry Fate. Once again, your choice--not ours. For years we’ve been trying to help you. We come prod you gently in the right direction.”

Simone blinked in disbelief as flashes of kindly visitors flashed through her mind. Some a little more obvious in their guidance than others. Some directed only by a slight action. Some with words. The Gypsy, the baker, today’s Janitor.

Lachesis smiled. “I guess we don’t hide as well as we think.”

“So why expose yourselves now?” The soft hum of arriving visitors to the gallery snaked down the corridor. She’d have to leave soon. What if Stephan came to get her? Would this Fate disappear? She needed answers.

“Fate was again altered today.”

“By you?”

“No. By you. When Heath came out of his store and touched you. You two relinked. There is no turning this back.”

Simone felt a chill slip down her spine. “Turning back from what?”

Lachesis reached into her clutch and pulled out a tube of lipstick. She unrolled the color, examined it for a minute then expertly applied the shine. “Though you again chose poorly, your skein will proceed as it should have all those years ago. Circumstance will just be a little different.”

“Chose poorly?”

“You ran off again, didn’t you? You had true love but you abandoned him. I should think that constitutes poor judgment.” Disgust crinkled the Fate’s finely sculpted brow.

“I didn’t abandon him. Stephan told me I could leave with him. If I left, he said he would allow the village and Heath to live. If I did not go, he would kill us all.”

“Listen to yourself. Sounds selfish to me.”

“What!” Rage pounded in her forehead. Selfish? Never. She’d wanted Heath to live, to see his future, to see the next sunrise.

“Stephan would kill us all.” Lachesis mocked. “You feared death.”

Simone’s open jaw snapped shut. Had she done it for herself?

Lachesis rose and walked to Simone’s side. She rested a gentle hand on Simone’s forearm. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. Surely somewhere you believed he would find you and it would all go away.”

Simone nodded mutely.

“And he tried.”

With the weight of an anvil, Simone’s heart plummeted.

“He’s never once given up his search for you, Simone. We know what Stephan’s done. And it’s egregious. No one has a right to strip a person of all hope. No one. Not man nor god. He’s a horrid little snipe and he will get his. Trust me.”

Again, Simone nodded.

“But you and Heath have again set your futures in motion. Do not waste this opportunity. You will not get a third.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“The gods frown on any obvious involvement in your pathetic world.”

“But?”

“But, as I said, Attie’s pissed.”

## Chapter Five

“Well, hello Stephan.”

Stephan’s step faltered at Attie’s words. His already pale skin turned almost translucent. He cast a furtive glance around the room. His gaze returning to Heath and Attie, shifting uncomfortably between the two. “I did not know we would be so honored as to entertain a Fate this evening. What a grand premiere, indeed.”

Attie trailed her hand over a delicately crafted blob of something that reminded Heath of a ship in tormented waters. Even the clay held the heavy darkness of a storm-tossed sea. He stood by, silent.

“Atropos, please. Don’t touch things.” Heath could see Stephan’s need to jerk Attie away from the expensive sculpture. With a perverse glee, Heath hoped she’d topped the statue.

She clucked her tongue and with one finger, pressed a little harder.

“Attie! Stop it.”

They all turned to see a stunning brunette and Simone emerge from the long hall to their right.

Heath’s heart stopped.

The brunette was obviously Attie’s sister. He didn’t know which one. And he didn’t care. Simone was there. She walked with her head held tall. Even though her makeup was impeccable, he could still note the dark under her eyes, and the red rim around her eyes. An eternity of crying, and not a thing he could do about it. Her sapphire gaze rose to his with the most heart-rending apology he’d ever scene. Tears stung his own eyes.

“Simone. I command you come here, this instant.” Stephan barked. His tone more forceful than Heath had ever heard.

Attie and her sister stepped in front of Stephan. They spoke as one. “You do not have the power to command.”

Attie added, “Nor have you ever.” He stepped back. She advanced. “Far too many times, you have manipulated this world to your gain, little brother.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Sure you do.”

The crowd began to turn.

“Attie, ssh.” Her sister reached out for Attie’s shoulder, but the smaller woman ducked from her grasp. The other woman sighed and with both of her hands raised to the heavens, she closed her eyes and mumbled words Heath had never heard spoken. Everyone else in the room froze. She looked to Stephan and shook her head. “You’re on your own, but at least no one will remember the scene.” She turned to her sister. “Try not to break anything.”

Attie nodded. “So, should we let all these people know who you really are? No. Well I think they should know.” She turned. “Simone, Heath, meet Hebe.”

Hebe to Stephan. Heath tried not to laugh. He would have changed his name too.

Simone continued to walk, one step at a time, until she was at Heath’s side. “I’m sorry.” She whispered.

He slid his arm around her waist. It had not changed. It still felt as though it had been crafted for his very own touch. “There is nothing to apologize over.”

“Oh, my dear Heathclif, that is where you are mistaken.” Attie mocked. “Hebe here was nothing more than a messenger.”

“Attie,” her sister warned. “Be careful.”

“He was not contented serving the gods. Not contented knowing that at one time his line would expire. So one day, under the pathetic guise of friendship, Hebe here, came to see...me.”

Now it was all making sense. Heath tightened his hold around Simone and took a step back, moving them farther and farther away from the angry Fate. Hell hath no fury...

“After,” she actually blushed, “distracting me, he left. Not for years, years, did I learn of his deceit.”

“I did not deceive you Atropos.” Stephan/Hebe whinned.

“Stealing your own end-clipping. What would you call that if not deceit?”

“I did nothing any other man would not do!” He shouted.

“Exactly, man. You are a mortal and have no right to fuck with Fate! You were granted an allotted time. You have changed that.”

Attie’s sister stepped forward. “We don’t take kindly to that, nor does Mother Nature, or Time or, well, any number of others. Hebe, Hebe. Both worlds look for you. So, if Attie doesn’t kill you, one of the others will.”

A dangerous bright red light pulsed in a enlarging aura around Attie.

The sister turned toward Simone and Heath. “Take the second chance you are given. Run.”



## Chapter Six

“My love, I cannot believe I have you back!” Simone wrapped her hands in the thick waves of Heath’s hair.

“Finally mine. Finally, my wife.” He tilted her chin up with his thumb, rubbing small circles against the satin skin.

“Do you think they let him live?” She mused, her eyes partially closed.

“I hope not. The bastard.”

Her lids opened. She examined the hard lines of his face. Though she knew the pain and the emptiness she’d experience all those years, she had not weathered a day, yet, somehow, Heath had hard lines near his mouth and on his forehead. She brushed her fingers over his skin, wishing she could take back all his pain, all of his suffering. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I wanted to know you were safe. I believed he would kill you had I not left with him.”

Tears filled his hazel eyes, cat eyes, knowing eyes, loving eyes. “Don’t you know, the moment you left, I died. Every breath from my body was torture. I would rather have been slain that day, with you by my side, than die a thousand deaths, rising each morning knowing you were gone.”

She pressed their lips together. The tinge of cider again assailed her senses. He still tasted of the spicy fruit. She groaned and softened into his hold, allowing her body to press into the curves of his, filling the space between them. He embraced her in a bear hug and squeezed. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye. The fire crackled. The tiny jewels of the jewelry box now adorning his dresser caught the amber gleam and danced fantastic color around the room, washing their bodies with the refracted light.

Heath lowered her to the king sized bed. The down comforter pushed up around them, coddling their bodies, enveloping them in their own cocoon.

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Attie and Chesis stood outside the window, watching the couple.

“Clo is going to be happy to know her beautiful tapestry has been restored.” Attie mused.

“She’ll be happy they are happy.”

“Yeah, that too.”

“Come on, Attie. It’s almost for Time’s change. You know he likes to have us there.”

Attie cast one parting look over her shoulder. “Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night.”

“The Color of Love”  
by Brenna Lyons

Chapter One  
November 16<sup>th</sup>

“Package, Miss,” the delivery man intoned.

Grace took the clipboard without looking up and signed the virtual screen. The plastic board was lifted away and the small box deposited on the counter in front of her, silently and efficiently, as most deliveries were made at the art gallery.

She didn’t look at it immediately. It was probably some trinket to be placed in the gem art displays, which meant less room in the rapidly-filling safe. So intent was she on her paperwork that Grace nearly walked away from it entirely.

“Not smart,” she muttered, turning back. She hadn’t made a name for herself with artists by losing their work, and she wasn’t about to start now. She stuffed the box in her deep jacket pocket and ambled toward her office.

Anne was working at the cleaning stand, a surprisingly popular exhibit. No one who’d ever restored art could have imagined how interested buyers would be in seeing it accomplished, and sales of older pieces had risen almost twenty percent since she’d instituted it.

Grace set the package on the work table next to Anne’s swabs. “Do me a favor and log this in. And if it needs any work—”

She laughed. “Yeah, I know. The Gemstone Tea is only three weeks away. Everything will be ready, Grace. You know it will.”

“That’s why I trust you to do this.” She turned away, checking her watch. There was still time to finalize the menu with the caterer before he closed for the evening. Everything would be perfect. It was the only way she ran a show. *The Gemstone Tea will be well-attended. The sales might carry us for a full six months.*

“Grace?” Anne called out.

She sighed, hoping there was no major damage to the shipment. “Yes?”

“I don’t think this box is for the exhibit.”

That brought her out of her circling thoughts and concerns. “Then what is it?”

“I don’t know, but it’s not addressed to Le Artiste. It’s addressed to you. Are you sure you want me to open this?”

Grace looked back in surprise. “Me?” Why would anyone send her a package at the gallery? Portfolio folders or letters of introduction were often addressed to her as the gallery owner, but not packages.

“Grace Elizabeth Mallory.”

She smiled at the joke. “They did not use my full name.” No one used her full name, not even her mother.

“Actually, whoever sent this did.”

“How strange.” She strode back to the table and plucked the box from it.

It was tiny, smaller around than her palm. Sure enough, the box was addressed, in miniscule printed lettering, to her. There was no return address, not that there was room for one. Grace ripped the brown paper off, opened the lid and pulled out a bit of blank newsprint paper, uncovering a jeweler’s ring box.

“Oh my,” she managed, setting the box down again.

Anne’s eyes lit in glee. “Do you think this is Mr. Winters’ way of proposing to you?”

Grace’s heart pounded. “Joshua? No. I don’t think so. I mean, he wouldn’t...” *Would he? No. Not Josh.* “Not this way, I’m sure.” It was way too flighty and – inappropriate. One thing Josh was known for was his impeccable appearances. If he ever decided to propose, it would be in the most expensive restaurant in Boston, on one knee with a velvet pillow beneath it.

“Maybe a friendship ring then,” she suggested. “Open it. You have to look, Grace.”

She nodded, pulling the ring box free and flipping the lid open. A folded sheet of paper flipped down over the ring, and she caught it between her index and middle fingers, staring at the ring beneath. It was certainly no engagement ring.

Grace furrowed her brow, stunned at her relief at that. She pushed away the unwelcome realization and pulled the ring out of the box.

It was a white gold band etched with Celtic knotwork. The stone was a teardrop shape, the top smooth and gleaming, crystal clear and reflecting the white gold backing.

“Lovely,” she murmured.

Despite her current show, gemstones weren’t Grace’s usual line, and she couldn’t begin to imagine what type of stone it was. If it was quartz crystal, it was higher quality than most she’d seen...and more stunning. There was no way that it was diamond. The stone had to be at least two carats, and even Josh wouldn’t spend that for anything but an engagement ring.

Grace slid the ring on her right ring finger, admiring it. She gasped, dropping the paper in surprise as the stone started to change color.

“What is it?” Anne asked.

“It’s... It’s a mood ring. My God! It’s been years since I’ve seen one.”

Anne crowded next to her, her freckled nose scrunched up. Grace half expected her to grab the magnifying glasses from the tabletop.

“It’s odd, though.”

“What is?” The stone settled on a peaceful peach color.

“Most mood rings are just a clear stone with a film of heat-sensitive metal beneath. Looking down on it, it seems to change color, but looking at it from the side, it’s still a clear stone.”

It turned light gray. Grace stared at it, smiling as it turned bright sky blue. “And?”

“Look at it from the side, Grace.”

She lifted her hand and turned it slowly, watching the entire stone shift from sky blue to Hunter green. “The whole stone changes,” she noted. “The whole stone is sensitive?” What kind of stone did that? None that she knew of.

\* \* \*

“Ohhh. How wonderful,” Anne squealed.

Grace rolled her eyes. “I *do* have to get some work done,” she suggested for the third time. As it was, she’d missed the caterer and had to add it to her overloaded schedule for the following day.

Anne ran a finger down the paper that had been folded in the ring box. It turned out that it wasn’t a note from the sender, which was still a mystery, but rather an ornate hand-calligraphed list of the colors the stone would take on and their meanings. “But, it’s turning orange, which means... No. Yellow. Oh...”

“What?” Grace snapped.

“I’m annoying you. Aren’t I?”

“What was your first clue?”

“Uh... The ring turning yellow. It’s never wrong, you know.”

“Anne,” she pleaded.

“Well, it isn’t. Look at the colors you’ve seen so far. Peach...” She bit her lip, panning her eyes downward. “Well, that means either friendship or fond remembrance. Weren’t you saying how long it had been since you’d seen a mood ring?”

“Yes, but—”

Anne motioned for patience. “Gray... That’s confusion, and sky blue is happiness. Hunter green is surprise.”

“You’ve been keeping track of every change?” she asked incredulously.

“Watch it. You’ll see.” Anne handed the instruction sheet over and headed out of the office.

Grace stared at the paper uneasily, her eyes straying to the ring again. “Butter yellow.” She scanned down the list of colors and meanings. “Nervous. Delightful.” Anne was right. The ring was never wrong.

\* \* \*

Grace pulled into the parking garage under her apartment building, sighing as she turned off the car. Despite her best intentions, she’d gotten very little work done since the ring crossed her path.

It was a mad obsession of sorts. Over and over again, she’d taken the ring off, determined that she wouldn’t sacrifice hours of time to some trinket. It never lasted long. Invariably, she’d put the ring on again, trying to prove it was wrong. It never was.

Well, dinner wasn’t going to cook itself. She dragged herself out of the car and locked the door with the key fob remote. The walk to the elevator then down the hall to her apartment seemed longer than usual.

Grace tried to convince herself that she was simply tired, but she wasn’t. There was no question about that. She was distracted, nervous, any number of things the damned ring would tell her. The worst part was, she knew she’d look at it.

Inside her apartment, Grace kicked off her shoes and stripped off her winter coat, leaving both in the front hall. Why not? Josh was out of town on business. He wouldn’t be stopping by to scold her about her almost non-existent housekeeping skills.

She let down her hair and shook the long, brown ringlets around her face. It felt great to shed the last vestiges of the office and simply enjoy the silence around her.

Her dinner was already prepared and in the fridge as usual. All she had to do was pop it in the oven and prepare tomorrow night's dinner while it cooked. Overall, Grace figured that the seemingly-backward system saved her an average of an hour or so per night, and with her commitments, time was priceless.

The timer set and the oven heating, the stew along with it, she pulled the chicken she'd defrosted out of the fridge, placed a package of pork chops from the freezer in its place, and set about making the cheese sauce it would bake in. Grace stilled, the blinking light on the answering machine catching her attention. Who would be calling her now?

Josh wouldn't call until nine; he always assumed she'd work late and didn't want to waste time and money on her answering machine. That was Josh, all right...practical to a fault. She scowled at the realization that he had no apparent faults, and dealing with a seemingly perfect person was somewhere between daunting and annoying some days. So, it wasn't Josh. Who else did that leave?

Her mother only called on Sundays, so it wasn't Mom. Her sister wasn't the calling type; Valerie only communicated via e-mail and instant messaging unless forced to do otherwise. Anne and Elizabeth had both left the gallery before she did, so it wasn't a problem there. In case of a break-in, the security company would have paged her.

Grace sighed. With no doctors' appointments that would need confirmed, that left only a telemarketer or similar annoyance. Better to get it over with and enjoy the rest of the evening. She hit the play button and went back to slicing the block of cheddar.

"Message one. Tuesday. Six p.m."

"Grace? Are you there?"

The knife slipped and sliced into her finger. *Oh, no. Life is simply not this unfair.*

"It's Michael Justice, Grace."

*As if I could ever forget your voice?*

He tapped the mouthpiece on the phone, and she could picture him doing it. Looking around the room...wherever he was, his rich brown hair tussled, his fingernail clicking against the edge of the phone. It was an old nervous habit of his.

*Is he nervous?*



Grace shoved that thought out of her mind violently. Whether or not he was nervous was none of her concern! Michael was the one who'd chosen to end their relationship. It was over, and his feelings were no longer her problem.

"I hope you're not avoiding me."

His voice was dark and sensual, an unspoken promise to come up with a suitable sexual torture for her peeking from behind the surface of the discussion. How many times had he...

*Stop that! You promised yourself there was no coming back. You promised yourself that you wouldn't be waiting for Michael like a puppy at the door.* And, she wasn't waiting for him. There was Josh, now.

His finger tapped again, several quick jerking movements. "I have to see you, Grace. I have a lot to tell you."

The message ended with a beep, and she sucked in air raggedly, abruptly aware that she wasn't breathing. She turned to the sink, pouring her attention into cleaning and bandaging the cut then mopping up the blood on the countertop with a sponge.

His words circled in her mind, echoing until all she could think about was Michael and the idea of seeing him again. There would be no avoiding that. Michael always got what he wanted.

"Except me back," she vowed.

Grace glanced at the ring, groaning aloud. She didn't have to ask what pink meant. If her rock-hard nipples, goose bumps and damp panties were any indication, pink meant arousal.

Chapter Two  
November 17th

Grace stirred her tea absently, visions of Michael dancing in her head. Typically, being secluded in her office, away from the desk and her usual patrons, focused her into the almost endless work of running the gallery, but not today. Not since the ring came into her life. She grimaced. Not since Michael called and said he wanted to see her. *No! He said he had to see me.* She ran her fingertips over her desk. It had been the first place they'd made love, a wild, passionate encounter that marked the start of the fourteen most carefree months of her life.

She growled, cursing herself for her weakness. Michael had hurt her when he left, and Grace had promised herself she wouldn't fall for his charm again.

The ring caught her eye, pearly pink announcing her arousal again. "Damn it." Couldn't the stupid thing lie to agree with her just once?

Grace pulled it off her finger and tossed it on the desk. The stone went clear with amazing speed, as it always did when it left her body. She tried to ignore it, tried to concentrate on the RSVPs for the Gemstone Tea, but it kept drawing her eyes back to it like a magnet with filings.

She sighed. It was a mood ring. There was no mystery about it. Like Anne said, it was simply sensitive to temperature changes.

A smile broke free. If she proved it was nothing more than a glorified thermometer, she could stop acting like the damned thing was magic. Her tea would be perfect. It was warm and not steaming. Yes...it would do just fine.

The stone turned orange as soon as her fingers closed around the band, and her mind supplied the translation, curiosity. Grace dropped the ring in the clear crystal cup – and her smile disappeared. The stone went clear as soon as it left her hand. Worse, it stayed clear.

Some rational corner of her mind argued that it might be a light peach or butter that she couldn't see because of the tea. She fished it out with the spoon, staring at the undeniably clear stone in confusion.

"It's not based on heat," she mumbled. What else could it be sensitive to? Possibly electrical current. Grace considered the cord for the old touchier lamp she intended to replace

seriously for a moment. *No! That is truly insane! You are not going to play electrician and strip wires just to test the stupid ring.*

She startled at a knock on the door, dropping the ring back in the tea then spooning it back up, dropping it twice in the process. She dried it on her kerchief, looked at the telltale stain on the linen then stuffed it in her jacket pocket, shoving the ring back on her finger. The stone turned Navy blue, and her cheeks heated at the completely unnecessary announcement that she was embarrassed to be nearly caught trying to prove this silly piece of junk was a fake.

“Oh, shut up,” she grumbled at it, wincing that she was talking to an inanimate object.

“Grace?” Anne called out.

“Yes?” Grace rubbed at the tension in her forehead. She’d spoken in too falsely cheery a voice. Anne wouldn’t buy that for a second.

“There’s *someone* here to see you.”

“I really am too busy today.” *And anyone I want to see will have made an appointment. Take that, Michael.*

“Excuse me. You can’t just barge in there,” Anne protested.

Grace looked up, half in exasperation and half in dismay, as the door swung in and Michael strode through, a mocking smile on his face. His dark eyes nearly gleamed in unspoken challenge.

*Michael gets whatever he wants*, she reminded herself. *Except me!* She waved Anne away before the young woman could offer to call security for her, turning her attention back to him as the door closed. “You really should learn to make an appointment, Mr. Justice,” she offered coolly.

He ignored the barb, striding across the room and sitting in one of the client chairs, dragging his fingertips along the edge of the desk suggestively. He was abruptly serious. She forced her breathing to even as his eyes darkened, certain that he was remembering countless ways that they’d enjoyed the desk...and the chairs.

Why had she never changed them out for new furniture? She had the money to redecorate and had considered it several times. To prove that he had no power over her? Perhaps to prove that it meant nothing to her?

*It doesn’t!* “You don’t have an appointment,” she reminded him, “and I’m very busy.”

“Would you have given me one?” he countered, his mouth curving up into a wicked smile.

*No!* “Of course. Your art is very popular with many of my patrons.”

His eyes flicked down her body then up again as if taking stock of any changes since he’d been gone, not that there were many. “You are a horrible liar. You always were.”

Grace schooled her expression, though she felt her cheeks heat. “Your right to claim familiarity with my emotions was forfeited last year.”

His smile disappeared. “You’re right. It was, but—”

“Are you here for some reason besides a lame come-on, which I assure you, I will turn down?”

Michael stared at her in seeming shock that fueled her dislike of him. How long had it been since he had been on the receiving end of a dump? Maybe the experience would do him good.

“Yes. Of course, I am. I *am* an artist, and you were a gallery owner, last time I checked.”

Her breathing hitched. *What? You expected him to say he’d come to see you? Just you? That he can’t live without you? That giving you up was the worst mistake he’s ever made?* Well, it would have been a good start!

“Grace—”

“Just a moment.” She wrenched her side drawer open, rifling through the files until she came up with a blank show packet. She pushed it across the desk, keeping her hands far from his and pulling them back the moment he had a hold on the forms.

The last thing she wanted was him trying to comfort her in some awkward, clumsy Michael way. The man chose the worst words he could in almost every situation. *Like the night he left.* No. That was planned.

“Gr—”

“The forms haven’t changed much in the last year. You know how to fill them out.” *He should after two shows here.* “Just drop them off to Anne when you bring them back.” *My clients like Michael’s work, and a Michael Justice show combined with the Gemstone Tea will carry the gallery another nine months without breaking a sweat.* That meant she could afford the alarm upgrades she wanted.

“Don’t you want to see the paintings before you agree to this?”

Grace ignored him. “Would January the thirteenth be agreeable to you? Or do you need more time to complete your offerings? A Michael Justice show is always easy to populate, so the short notice will be no problem, and everyone is looking for something to do at that time of year.” *And the sooner the show is over and he’s out of my life, the better for me.*

“No. They’re ready. The thirteenth is fine, but...” He sighed.

“But?” she replied, feigning interest in her calendar to hide her hurt.

“You should see the paintings before you agree to this.” He sounded confused, perhaps even hesitant.

*No. Michael Justice is never hesitant.* “December the twentieth at six o’clock,” she offered without looking up.

“All right. If you really want to wait that long.”

Grace flicked her pen open. “How many paintings will you be showing?”

“If you accept only the main body of works, I can fill the front gallery. The full showing would also fill the Rounde and the blue room.”

She fisted her pen, calculating the number of paintings he’d completed in the past year in disbelief. “I guess you were right,” she managed. Ending their relationship was obviously the boost his muse needed. She’d been holding him back.

“Grace... I – I really should explain.”

“That won’t be necessary, Mr. Justice. I’ll see you on December twentieth. You can approve the invitations that night.”

“Or before,” he grumbled.

“I don’t think that’s wise.”

“You’re avoiding me.”

She didn’t answer. Why should it surprise him that she didn’t want to spend time with him after the things he said? Especially since he’d been right about her influence. The man wanted his art, and now he had it back. That should be enough for each of them.

Michael rose and strode to the door, opening it. He paused with the knob still encased in his fist, his back fully to her. “I know you’re hurt, and that’s my fault. Sooner or later, we have to discuss this.”

“It’s ancient history. There is nothing left to discuss. You said it best. You are an artist. I am a gallery owner. End of subject.”

“You never were a good liar.” He stepped through the door and disappeared down the hall.

Grace dropped her pen, burying her face in her hands. She would not allow herself to cry. Not over Michael Justice. She’d done more than her share of that, and she didn’t intend to start again now.

She lowered her hands to the desktop, forcing a semblance of calm to her general appearance much as she had in the months after he left. A groan built in her throat, escaping as the ring’s lavender stone called her a liar.

“Longing,” she noted miserably. After the hell he’d put her through and all the rational arguments, she still wanted him. The fact that he was poison to her didn’t seem to factor into it in the least.

\* \* \*

Michael slammed his studio door behind him, pacing the floor in frustration. He cursed himself a dozen types of fool, creep and general asshole within a two minute period.

Leaving Grace had been a stupid move. He’d been a coward, afraid of how much he needed her, afraid of admitting that their fling had become something more, afraid he’d painted their relationship with impossible colors that would turn dun and gray when they’d had time to set.

It was true that he hadn’t been painting much at the time, but he’d lied about Grace hampering his creativity. She inspired him, but she inspired him to paint pieces unlike anything he’d ever painted before.

Gone were the angsty pieces in blues and browns. Suddenly, his canvas sang with reds, coral and gold, vibrant colors, full of life and light...like Grace was. He looked toward his failed attempts at recapturing his old form in disgust. Grace had spoiled him on it, and at the time, that thought had terrified him.

Michael laughed harshly at his own folly. The idea of wiping away Grace’s influence by wiping Grace out of his life had been born out of desperation, ill conceived and poorly executed.

The things he'd said to her that winter night had been nothing short of cruel. He couldn't even remember why he'd wanted to hurt her so badly. The only plausible excuse, sad as it was, was that he was hurting, and he didn't like the fact that he was. Or, maybe he was blaming Grace for making him hurt? But, whether he was blaming her for the fact that losing his art as he knew it hurt or losing her hurt, he couldn't begin to untangle.

Of course, there was the truly mad possibility that he thought the hurting would bring back the dark muse. Perhaps he even welcomed the pain in hopes of it...or in hopes of making some amends for hurting Grace.

Hurting hadn't brought back the old style. Loneliness hadn't engendered a single blue painting. Even moving to his parents' place in Hartford for six months, where every corner of his surroundings didn't remind him of Grace, didn't do the trick; all that had done was annoyed him with his mother's attempts to marry him off while he was under her roof.

He'd tried to force himself to abandon the new style, even tried to copy his older works for practice. His hand had shaken so severely that he could hardly hold the brush.

No, Michael could paint bold reds and gold through bitter tears or in rare moments of peace. He lived the lemon light, dreamed the coral vitality, breathed the crimson energy of his new style. Through it all, Grace was never far from his mind. Everywhere he looked, he encountered proof that he'd made a mistake.

He had to get her back, but her pain ran deep. His only ray of hope in their meeting had been when the ring turned lavender. Despite his actions, she wanted him. As long as that was true, he'd never stop trying to win her back.

## Chapter Three

November 19<sup>th</sup>

Michael strolled down River Street, shifting the paperwork in his hand nervously. He had to see Grace to win her back, but how was he going to convince Anne to disturb her when Grace had no doubt given orders not to admit him again?

He couldn't fake a question about the paperwork. With five years of shows at various galleries and two at Le Artiste, there was no clause he could pretend not to understand. In addition, Anne could answer any question he had...or deal with any reasonable request.

Playing the prima donna would backfire in two ways. First, it was still almost two months until his show. Any changes he demanded could be handled by Anne and Elizabeth without involving Grace. The upcoming Gemstone Tea would be her primary concern. It was a showcase of artists, some new to her patrons, and Grace worked best under pressure.

Second... He sighed. Grace loathed prima donnas. Acting the spoiled artist with her would only hurt his chances. *Well, what do you think you did a year ago?*

He winced at the sight of Le Artiste, wishing that he'd walked slower. He couldn't stand around outside, considering his course. He'd just have to wing it.

Another man reached the door just before him and released it into Michael's hand without a backward glance. They approached the desk a few steps apart.

Anne looked up, her brow creased in an expression Michael couldn't quite get a handle on.

The other man spoke in cool tones as Michael came even with him. "Good afternoon, Anne. Would you tell Grace I'm here, please?"

"Of course, Mr. Winters."

Michael bit back a curse. Grace had an appointment. That blew his chance to see her to hell. Now, how was he going to explain another visit to the gallery? *I'm just checking out the competition, honestly. Oh, that sucks!*

Anne pushed the button on the intercom. "Grace, Mr. Winters is here to see you, and—"

"I'll be right out."

Anne's eyes widened. "No, you—" She groaned aloud, grimacing as the office door swung open and Anne strode out, her hips swaying enticingly.



Michael swallowed a laugh painfully. If Grace was intent on ducking him, she'd have to get a lot better at picking up warning clues from her employees.

"Josh! I'm so glad you're back." She glanced at her watch. "Your plane must have been early."

"Believe it or not, one-twenty-eight was absolutely clear sailing."

She reached his side and rose on tiptoe, planting a kiss on the man's tanned cheek. "You came straight here from the airport? How sweet of you."

Michael rolled his eyes, scowling at his rival. Josh Winters hardly looked like a man who'd just come from a plane ride. His sun-streaked blonde hair was perfectly coifed, and his business suit seemed freshly pressed. How could this putz possibly keep up with a passionate woman like Grace?

She settled on her heels again, and her eyes locked on Michael's. The smile faded from her face. "Mr. Justice," she greeted him in a voice that nearly matched Winters' form of address for Anne. "I trust Anne is taking care of you."

"Not yet. I just arrived."

Grace nodded. "Well, then... I have a prior engagement, so I'll leave you in her hands."

*Liar!* She hadn't even known pretty boy was coming in. In addition to what she'd said to Winters only moments earlier, the catch in her voice and the movements of her eyes announced clearly that she wasn't telling him the truth.

Michael pretended not to notice Anne's hand reaching for the contract. He was too busy playing 'size up the competition' with a pair of ice blue eyes. Not that there was much to it. Winters dismissed his jeans, hiking boots, barn jacket and paint-stained, Mandarin-collar denim shirt nearly as quickly as Michael dismissed him.

"Justice?" Winters mused. "Would you be Michael Justice?"

"I would." *Delightful. Yuppie Jr. is going to make a gallant attempt to defend his lady's honor.*

He sniffed, an arrogant sound of dislike. "Yes. I've heard of you."

Michael raised an eyebrow at that, nearly daring Winters to say something about the shameful way he'd treated Grace.

"Brilliant artiste, of course, but you're not a very personable sort, I hear. The truly successful artistes mingle with their patrons, you know."

It was on the tip of his tongue to retort that he and Grace tended to christen each of his shows on her desk, and keeping his hands and mouth off of her had never seemed all that important to him at the time, that the “glow” the art columnists talked about when she hosted one of his shows was sexual afterglow.

He didn’t say it, of course. Her blush and the Navy blue stone in her ring let him know how embarrassing she already found the conversation. “I’ll take that under advisement,” he managed in what would pass for a civil tone – to anyone but Grace.

She bit her lip lightly, and the stone morphed to a soft butter yellow. Was she worried that he’d cause a scene? Michael knew better than that. Nothing would cook his chances faster than causing a scene here.

Deliberately, as if staking a claim on her, Winters lowered his face and captured Grace’s mouth with his. For an instant, she stiffened. Then she wound her arms around his neck and pressed closer to him. The kiss left no doubt that they were lovers. It wasn’t as unrestrained as the kisses she’d shared with Michael, but it was certainly involved. Grace had never been a good liar, even in action.

Michael ground his teeth in frustration. Why had he never considered that she might care for someone else by now? She’d had a year to move on, and she was a desirable woman.

She ran her fingers through Winters’ hair, and Michael found his eyes drawn to the ring, half-dreading what it would say about her feelings for the man who held her so close to him that he was probably wrinkling his pristine suit.

Michael relaxed so abruptly that he had to steady himself against the counter, though he thought he covered that well enough as a casual move. He bit back the urge to laugh out loud. The ring was a muddied color somewhere between peach and rose, friendship and affection. It was far too dark to be pink arousal and far too light to be red love. He still had a chance.

Grace broke away, studiously avoiding Michael’s eyes. The ring returned to Navy blue, practically shouting that she was more than aware of him watching that kiss.

Winters smiled widely, straightening his still-unrumpled suit and smoothing his hair. “Ready for lunch?” he asked, offering her his arm.

She wound her hand through and headed to the door without a backward glance...or a coat or purse. Michael fought back a fresh wave of jealousy and handed the contracts to Anne.

\* \* \*

Grace sighed in relief as Josh closed the car door behind her. At least that scene was over with. Michael would have no more reason to come to the gallery for a few more weeks. He certainly wouldn't pursue her now that Josh had made their relationship clear.

Or had he? She stared at the ring's shifting colors. Watching the ring was nearly addictive. Grace had admitted that to herself days earlier, though she couldn't fathom why it would be. The damned thing kept telling her what she didn't want to hear, after all.

Now, for instance... The stone kept shifting between gray confusion and purple despair. It just wasn't fair! Michael Justice had no right to confuse her or make her miserable. He'd done more than his share of it, and he certainly wasn't due more than that.

She considered canceling his show. She hadn't signed the contract, yet. It was still possible to send him packing, but this wasn't the right time for a move like that. His show would bring in good money, and canceling would give him a wide open field to take pot shots at her and her business. While she'd like to believe that he wouldn't stoop to that, she didn't know what to expect from him. How often did Michael Justice lose?

Josh settled into the driver's seat, and she offered him a strained smile. He seemed to consider her carefully for a moment. "Call Pietro's, will you?"

Grace stared at him. "Pietro's will be packed at this time of day," she reminded him. If there was one thing Josh couldn't abide, it was waiting in line at a noisy, crowded restaurant. 'Reservations' was practically his middle name.

"We won't be eating there. They'll be delivering..." He glanced at her again then turned his eyes forward, starting the engine and swinging out onto the side street that would lead up to River. "To my place."

Her heart skipped a beat at that, visions of Josh shedding his usual tactician control and ravishing her in his living room making her breathing labor and her head spin. Realization that she was projecting encounters with Michael onto Josh and looking forward to them shocked her back to reality.

This was Josh. It wasn't Michael. Josh was safe, dependable, easy to anticipate. Josh didn't do things like stripping away clothes and sending them flying. He didn't lift her onto her desk and...

*And, he won't break my heart! That's why he's safe.* She didn't delve into why he wouldn't break her heart. Josh just wouldn't do it, and that was enough.

"Grace?" he reminded her.

She pulled the cell phone from her jacket pocket, fumbling a bit as she opened it and started pecking in the number from memory. "Your usual?" she asked.

"Of course."

She nodded, placing the order with only half of her mind on the task. *His usual.* It was another reminder of why she enjoyed being with Josh. Strange that she couldn't seem to find as much comfort in it as she usually did.

They traveled the distance to his condo in silence, up the elevator and inside. Josh closed the door and took her suit jacket, hanging it neatly in the closet then his own.

He marched into the kitchen, back straight, regimental as always, and returned with two glasses – filtered water for himself and Classic Coke for her. Though he couldn't stand soda personally, he always kept a six pack of cans on hand for her visits.

Grace wasn't in the mood for Coke; her stomach was churning well enough without the added caffeine, but she took it and sank onto one end of the couch, sipping it for show.

Josh joined her, trailing his gaze from her feet to face slowly. "You still want him," he noted.

She choked on a mouthful of the Coke in surprise, accepting a napkin from him, blotting her lips and blouse carefully to avoid meeting his eyes. Grace searched frantically for the words to deny it.

"You do want him. Don't you?"

Her cheeks heated. "I'm not stupid, Josh. Michael is no good. Not for me, anyway. I know that. I have no intention of—"

"Then why do you want him?"

Grace didn't answer him. Why did Josh have to be so damned rational about the whole thing? Why couldn't he get mad about another man pursuing his girlfriend? Why couldn't he be upset that she wanted another man? The urge to point out to him that this wasn't a 'business problem' that would resolve itself with proper consideration and planning danced on her tightly-leashed tongue.

*Why can't you be more like Michael?*

She winced at that. It was the last thing she wanted him to be. Wasn't it? Of course, it was. It had to be.

Josh took the glass from her hand and set both on coasters on the coffee table. He turned to her, his body crowding hers. Grace gasped, suddenly certain that they'd be eating Pietro's in the sated afterglow of hot sex.

As if intent on proving her right, he pressed her back into the arm of the couch, his mouth covering then parting hers, delving inside. She closed her eyes on a groan of delight. Grace turned slightly beneath him, winding her fingers in the waves at the back of his scalp, pressing her aching breasts to the hard lines of his chest. His fingers played at her nipple, causing them to tighten more forcefully.

The rest of the afternoon played out in her imagination, a montage of images: Josh pulling off her clothes and dropping them to the floor...then his own, his hands and mouth roaming her body, his length sliding home as she shattered around him, the living room, the bedroom, the shower.

His mouth left hers, and she moaned in protest, her hands sliding to his shoulders as he backed away.

"This is why you want him. This is what you miss."

Grace forced her eyes open, watching in dismay as he smoothed his hair, seemingly as discomfited as always with her mussing him...or her being particularly mussed.

"Josh," she began.

"This isn't me, Grace. This is him...Justice. But, this is what you want. I suspected it when you kissed me at Le Artiste. You've never kissed me that way, but I've never encouraged it."

She shook her head, squelching the mad urge to suggest that there was nothing wrong with a varied sex life. *Is that what you want? A safe guy and hot sex in the same package?* Well, what was wrong with that? Of course, this was the wrong time to point it out to Josh. There was simply no way to say it that wouldn't validate what he believed, and he believed... *Oh hell, I am projecting Michael on to him.* But, was it so impossible for him to occasionally get down and dirty, hot and sweaty about the whole thing?

As if he knew precisely what she was thinking, Josh drew her hand to his half-erect cock. "It really doesn't do it for me, Grace. I'm sorry."

“No need to be,” she managed, straightening her skirt self-consciously and avoiding his eyes.

There wasn’t. She’d known Josh’s tastes fairly soon after she started seeing him. He was a fan of long, slow seductions. It wasn’t that Grace didn’t like the effects. On the contrary, Josh patiently brought her to multiple mini-orgasms many nights, finding his own only when she was sated.

But, he was also right. She wanted unrestrained sex. She wanted an explosive encounter – at least once in a while. In six months, she hadn’t admitted it...even to herself, but what Josh offered wasn’t enough.

“You’re going to leave, aren’t you?” he asked quietly.

“It’s not what you think. I’m not going to Michael. He’s not right for me.”

The backs of his fingers feathered along the line of her jaw. “Neither am I. I wish I could be, but I can’t. I hope you find what you need.”

She nodded, pulling off the ring and offering it back.

Josh screwed up his face. “What is that thing, anyway?”

“You mean— If it’s not from you, who is it from?” The etching was lovely, and she’d convinced herself that Josh had picked it up on a lark, but if it wasn’t him...

“It’s tacky enough to be from Justice,” he noted in distaste.

Grace slid it back on her finger with a nervous laugh, unwilling to admit how much she liked it in light of that comment. Even if they were through, Josh was a deep-pocketed client.

“No. If anything, it’s from my sister, Valerie. It’s just her quirky style.” It really was more like Val than Josh, and Val might have been teasing her by using her full name on the packaging. Since there had been no return address, it could have come from anywhere.

A knock came at the door, and Josh straightened his shirt before heading to answer it. He looked back in surprise, as she opened the closet and retrieved her jacket.

“You’re sure you won’t stay for lunch?” he offered.

She managed a stiff smile. “I don’t think that would be a good idea, Josh.”

“Then grab my coat. I’ll drop you at the gallery with your lunch. You probably have a lot of work to do for the tea.” He opened the door and took the receipt from the delivery girl, signing it in his neat, compact script.

A peculiar pull at her heartstrings made her hesitate. Josh was perfect – or nearly so. It really was too bad that it was ending. “I can take a taxi. Anne can meet me outside with my purse.”

He handed the receipt back then the pen. “Grace—”

“Your lunch will be stone cold before you get back here,” she reasoned. It was bad enough that she was leaving the man because he wasn’t hot enough for her in bed; she wasn’t going to make him eat a cold lunch on top of it.

He chuckled. “My usual is...”

“Honey roast chicken on a bed of Caesar greens,” she finished for him. How could she forget?

Josh closed the door and turned, food in hand. “Let me put mine away in the fridge, and I’ll drive you back.” He said it as if it were a foregone conclusion that he’d be driving her. Josh was often like that.

“Sure,” she managed.

The trip back was as quiet as the trip out had been, yet somehow more peaceful. At the gallery, she reached for the door handle, unable to find the words to end it formally.

Josh turned her face back to his gently, placing a slow, solemn kiss on her lips. Grace participated fully, recognizing a last kiss much better when it came from a man who did things in an orderly fashion.

“Call me if you need me,” he offered. He didn’t need to say more than that. They’d been friends before they were lovers. They could still be friends now that they weren’t. Josh was like that.

“Thanks, Josh. You’ll be at the Gemstone Tea. Won’t you?”

“Of course.” He smiled. “I always attend your shows. You know that.”

*Strange*, Grace mused as she left his car behind, *how painless ending so intimate a relationship was*. Her break-up with Michael had been excruciating. Then again, she’d chosen Josh for one reason. From the beginning, she’d known he wouldn’t break her heart.

## Chapter Four

December 9<sup>th</sup>

“Ready to go?” Anne asked.

Grace smiled, smoothing the ankle-length burnout black lace dress she’d chosen for this evening’s festivities. She strolled into the front gallery, nodding to the serving crew. It was show time. Moments like this were what she lived for, what she worked until she couldn’t see straight for. A Le Artiste show was guaranteed perfection.

The critics and patrons arrived, as usual, fashionably late. Though she was at the front door to greet them right on time, it was a full fifteen minutes before anyone but her staff and a few of the more eager artists arrived. Josh was the fourth person through the door, laying a kiss on her cheek and complimenting her dress before he moved away to examine the exhibits...and probably choose a few to give as Christmas presents.

After that, it was one handshake and kissed cheek after another. By half an hour in, they were coming in droves, a sure sign of a successful show. In fact, Grace greeted so many people in the space of five minutes that she didn’t notice the odd grip on her hand as she noted the Herald critic arriving until it was raised to a pair of warm, soft lips.

She snapped a look at the man, expecting it to be one of their older, European-born patrons, no doubt hurt that she hadn’t welcomed him earlier. Her eyes locked with Michael’s, her heart taking up a frantic rhythm. He laid a second kiss on her hand, his questioning eyes flicking down then up again.

Grace forced her smile not to falter, blushing as the camera flashed. “Welcome back to Le Artiste, Mr. Justice. I hope you have an enjoyable evening.” She prayed he’d move on quickly.

He didn’t. “How could I not when I’m here with you?” His voice was smooth and knowing.

Constructing a coherent sentence suddenly seemed a physical impossibility.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, leaning close to place a kiss on her cheek.

Grace looked toward the door self-consciously as it opened again, acutely aware of the warmth of his hand enfolding hers, the reaction of her body to his proximity and the cameras still flashing.



“I have people waiting,” she breathed. “I should welcome them.”

“Of course.” Michael released her hand immediately, moving away into the crowd.

She placed her hand in the next patron’s, leaning to kiss sweet old Mr. Alastor on the cheek. Grace faltered at the residual red of the stone, completing the kiss stiffly, trying to put the mocking color out of her mind as she continued greeting the guests.

*The ring is wrong! Arousal, yes, but I cannot love Michael Justice.*

\* \* \*

Michael snagged a flute of champagne, his heart beating double time in pure joy. *Love! She loves me!*

When the stone turned that gorgeous shade of red, the urge to kiss her had been nearly maddening, but Michael wasn’t that stupid. Even if Grace loved him – *And, she does!* – she wasn’t ready to forgive him yet, and he couldn’t blame her for that.

He sipped the champagne again, peeking at Grace as she pointed a critic to one of the glass display cases. She glanced toward her hand, seemingly disconcerted, and he prayed that she’d looked at it just after he left her. That was the point, after all. Grace wouldn’t give him another chance easily. Michael needed every ounce of luck and support he could get.

He turned back to the case in front of him, not truly taking in the art, considering how to proceed. This entire thing was so tenuous, so delicate that there really was no master plan. Every step was like walking further out onto a tightrope.

“That was in poor taste, Justice,” a man’s voice informed him. “Then again, I’ve come to expect it from you.”

Michael didn’t need to look over his shoulder to recognize Josh Winters. “I think the champagne is rather good. Do you suggest the white wine instead? Or perhaps the red? I admit, I’m not particularly fond of red wine.”

“I meant coming here.”

“Ah. I see. Forgive me, Winters, but didn’t you suggest I mingle with patrons?” He knew he was antagonizing Winters, but that was sure to happen eventually. After all, Michael wasn’t walking away until he walked away with Grace. *Unless...*

No, he wouldn't consider the possibility of failure. Failure was not an option. He would get Grace back, and Winters wasn't going to be happy about it. What man wouldn't be enraged at the idea of losing her?

"I meant at your own showing," he growled.

Michael sipped the champagne, biting back a smile rather unsuccessfully. "You'll have to be more specific in the future. With my – appalling lack of people skills, I misunderstood you."

"Amusing." He didn't sound amused. Winters edged up and around so that he was facing Michael. "Stop playing games with Grace," he warned in little more than a whisper. "She doesn't want you."

"Then she can tell me. Grace is an adult and quite capable of—"

"She told me!" His blue eyes blazed in fury.

Michael's stomach tightened painfully. Though the ring wasn't wrong, Grace could forsake her true feelings. He'd never considered that. He'd foolishly assumed she'd follow her heart as she always had.

*Until I broke it.* What would he do if she refused him when he knew that she loved him? Like everything else about this mess, he'd have to play it by ear if it happened.

"I won't let you break her heart again," Winters warned.

"I don't intend on it." *This time, I'm playing for keeps.*

\* \* \*

December 10<sup>th</sup>

Grace stretched in bed, warm and comfortable. The Gemstone Tea had been the smash of the season. The gallery had filled with patrons and press until it had fairly burst at the seams, and though the final sales wouldn't be tallied until today, she felt certain that they'd broken their own record.

She went about her morning routine in an unhurried fashion. Anne would expect her to be a little late today, so there was no rush. She strolled into Le Artiste an hour late, her smile not dimmed in the least, feeling on top of the world, coffee in hand – and stopped cold.

Anne and Elizabeth looked up from a newspaper spread out before them, wide-eyed and blushing. A dozen different scenarios, each more disturbing than the last, passed through her mind.

“The critics panned us?” she asked woodenly. It seemed ludicrous when there was nothing but praise for them the night before, but it was the worst-case scenario. If that wasn’t the case, she could deal with whatever was wrong.

“No!” they practically shouted together. Anne and Elizabeth dug through the pile of papers, handing her the three columns she’d been expecting.

Grace set her coffee and purse on the countertop, taking them and scanning them quickly. “Stunning collection of... The best in stone art... Precious, even the semi-precious... A stellar event...” She looked up in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

It was only then that she noticed her employees trying to ease more newspaper over the top spread.

She put out her hand, fighting back annoyance. “Give it.”

Elizabeth turned a vivid red. “You don’t want to—”

“It’s just a gossip column,” Anne cut her off with a sigh, “and I imagine someone is going to mention it eventually. I was just hoping that you wouldn’t see it this morning, when... Well, when you’re in such a good mood.”

A lead weight seemed to sink her stomach to her knees. This wasn’t happening to her. “Hand it over.”

Anne did so with a resigned nod.

The photos caught her eye first. Grace swallowed a cry of disbelief at the picture of her and Michael, face to face with her hand enfolded in his. She glanced at the other two photos, wincing as she read the captions beneath them.

It was a timeline. The first picture was one of Michael planting an impetuous kiss on her lips at his first showing at Le Artiste, captioned “Diamond in the rough.” The second was a picture of her greeting guests at a Lisa Renauld showing the month Michael left her, captioned “Lady loses her luster.” The final caption made her groan aloud.

“Gemstone Tea. Romancing the stone.”

“Grace...”

She waved Anne silent, reading the column in numb disbelief.

Artist Michael Justice is back in town, and sources say he's the reason for the renewed twinkle in gallery owner Grace Mallory's eyes. It's not dollar signs from her successful Gemstone Tea the young entrepreneur is seeing or even future revenues, though Mr. Justice is undeniably an earner for whatever gallery he shows in, and he reportedly has another show at Le Artiste next month. Word around town is that we'll be seeing a lot more of this couple...

"God, no," she pleaded. "How could she?" But, she didn't really have to ask that question. Josh's cousin had never cared for Grace, and with the break-up, Amelia would have seized at any opportunity to do something like this.

"Grace, calm down. You know you can't respond to this," Anne reasoned.

"I know." Anything she said to refute the column would be twisted, and the gossip mongers would be all over her until they got more to print.

*And they will!* She didn't question that Michael would try something like this again. Nor did she question that it would be as hard to ignore him as it had been at the tea. *Hard? Impossible!*

The phone rang, and Grace scooped it up without taking her eyes off of the column. "Le Artiste," she answered automatically.

"Grace?" Michael sounded nervous, as well he should after pulling a stunt like this. "I don't know if you've seen the Trib yet, but—"

"I suppose you're happy. Nice bit of publicity for the playboy artist," she spat at him. This was all his fault, after all. Why shouldn't she be angry with him?

"I didn't plan this," he protested.

"You didn't plan to kiss my hand?"

"Well, of course I did, but I'm not the only man who kisses your hand or cheek, you know."

"This is your last show at Le Artiste, Michael." Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them away. *Damn him!* He shouldn't be allowed to hurt her. Wasn't there something in the laws of break-ups that said that?

"You don't want that," he whispered.

“I have to...” She cleared her throat, abruptly aware of the feeling of it closing on her, cutting off her air.

“I’m sure your boyfriend will be overjoyed,” he grumbled.

Grace didn’t bother to correct him. She’d stopped living her life to stroke Michael Justice’s ego long ago. Knowing she wasn’t with Josh anymore would only spur him on.

“Grace—”

“I will see you on the twentieth to preview the paintings for your show. I will host the show. Other than that, you will deal with Anne. Am I understood?”

\* \* \*

Michael fisted the receiver in his hand, trying to force himself to speak when he wanted to scream in frustration.

“I said, am I—”

“Yes. I understand you.”

“Then we have nothing more to say to each other.”

She disconnected, surprisingly not by slamming the phone down in his ear. Michael stood there, heartsick, unable to conceive of what he’d do now. When the annoying tone announcing an open line started, he managed to hang up at last.

The damned gossip columnist had pushed her too far. He shouldn’t have touched her in public, though he ached to do it. He should have found a way to touch her in private.

*How? When?* He’d taken the opportunity, because she’d been distracted by the event. But, the damn press had... He wanted to throttle...

Michael stormed to the table, grasped the paper, and scanned for the columnist’s name. He stopped cold, fisting the paper in fury. “A.W. Winters. I should have known.” Not Josh but likely a close relative of his. It wouldn’t have been hard for him to ask a favor to put Michael in the doghouse.

The mad urge to redecorate Mr. Winters’ face settled in his mind, and he fisted his other hand in sympathetic preparation. Michael eased back to rationality slowly. That would just make things worse with Grace.

A smile flirted with his lips. Of course, if Grace read the columnist's name as he had, it would put good old Josh in the hot seat with her. That would be good.

He dropped the crumpled paper back on the table and strode across the room, barefoot and nude save the sweat pants riding low on his hips. There were only ten days until the preview, and Michael was determined that his latest piece would be ready in time.

\* \* \*

Grace's eyes strayed to the column again, much as they strayed to the mood ring. What was it about the scene that she couldn't seem to shake?

From years of dealing in art, she recognized the "frozen moment" sensation of the picture. It was a look that was impossible to duplicate with models, captured or lost forever.

His hand cradled hers gently, his lips poised as if to kiss again. She sighed at the memory, wondering when the photographer got this shot. Was it in that instant between the two kisses? She tilted her head, examining Michael's face. His eyes were focused downward, not meeting hers. It was the instant just after he'd kissed her hand the second time.

But, what was he looking at? Not her chest at that angle, though he had been rather fond of her chest when they were lovers.

She set her chin on one fist and traced his line of sight with the opposite fingernails. Her blood ran cold. "Son of a bitch!" It wasn't possible!

But, there was the proof. Michael was looking straight at the mood ring.

Grace fought for a coherent thought strand. He couldn't know what it was. *Unless he saw it change.* He would think it was a novelty piece. It was a Gemstone Tea, after all. He couldn't possibly know the color key for it, even if he thought it was a novelty. *Unless he bought it.*

In her office, when he showed up to book the show, hadn't he glanced at her hands on the desk several times?

*Usually just before he called me a liar.*

The ring had arrived the same day he contacted her for the first time.

*"It's tacky enough to be from Justice."*

No. It was just a coincidence. Valerie must have sent it. It was just her sister's quirky style. Where was she now, anyway? Central America somewhere?

*If Michael sent it...*

"He didn't," she assured herself. "I just have to e-mail Val and thank her for the ring."

That would settle it – once Val wrote back. God only knew how long that would take, but surely she'd have an answer before Michael's show. In the meantime, it was time to get back to work.

Chapter Five  
December 20<sup>th</sup>

Grace sighed as Michael wheeled the last of the crates in from his rented truck. He met her eyes, looking drawn and tense.

“Do you need my help to uncrate?” she asked, hoping he’d turn down her offer of aid.

A look of near panic flitted across his face then was gone. “No. I’ll be fine. Maybe...” He looked at the crates nervously. “I’ll set them out then call for you. Would that be all right?”

She stared at him, stunned by his response. “Yes, I suppose— I mean... Of course, it is.”

He sighed as if in relief. “Good.” Michael made no move to open the crates, watching her intently until she’d closed herself in her office. The sound of hinges creaking and paper rustling followed almost immediately on the click of the door lock.

Grace let out a shaky breath, willing the tension in her muscles to ease. She looked around her office, mentally searching for something to do. Work would be a lost cause. Until Michael left for the evening, there was little chance she’d be able to concentrate.

Her gaze settled on her computer, and she headed for the desk. Checking e-mail was the perfect way to waste time.

There wasn’t much in there, though she hadn’t had a chance to check it for the last two days. After she’d deleted a Nigerian scam that claimed she’d inherited five million dollars, a PayPal spoof claiming she had to update her credit card information and three pieces of spam; there was only a shipping notification from Fed Ex – on a package she’d received that morning, an invitation to an art exhibition and auction for charity – and an e-mail from Valerie.

Grace hesitated, looking to the closed door between her and Michael nervously. She should open the letter and be done with it, but she didn’t.

*Why?* her mind raged at her.

Opening it meant that she didn’t trust him.

*I don’t trust him! I have no reason to trust him.*

Then why did the thought of opening the e-mail make her heart ache?

*Because I know what I’ll learn. Then what will I do? How will I pull off his show if I find out he’s done this?*

But, she didn’t know. Not for sure, anyway. *I should open it.*



*Don't open it. Ask him.*

Grace shook her head, trying to dislodge that idea, but it stuck. It made a certain amount of sense. She'd ask him, and she'd have Valerie's e-mail for proof of whether or not he lied to her. It was so crazy, it actually sounded sane to her.

Her legs shook lightly as she made her way to the door. She opened it, pausing while she took a calming breath. "Michael?" she called out.

He strode into view, looking back at the front gallery as if assuring himself that she couldn't see any of the paintings. She noted that uneasily. What was it about his work that unnerved him so badly? He'd had half a dozen showings, and she'd never seen him nervous before.

When she didn't speak immediately, he managed a rather tense, "Yes?"

"You..." She faltered. It was going to sound insane.

"Grace? What's wrong?"

She twisted the ring on her finger, and Michael locked on the movement. That made asking easier.

"You sent me this. Didn't you?"

He rubbed his fingertips over his eyes, grimacing.

"Michael?"

He met her eyes, nodding, looking like a child caught with one hand in the cookie jar. "Yes. The ring is from me."

Grace stared at him, her emotions warring within her. Part of her wanted to laugh. Part of her wanted to scream, cry, throw him out of her life – and still she ached at the thought of doing it.

Michael dropped his gaze from her face to the damned ring. The feeling of being spied on was too much. Grace pulled it off and threw it at him, turning on her heel and walking away.

"Wait, Grace," he pleaded.

"You used that thing to spy on me," she shouted, her face burning in embarrassment. No, she wasn't just embarrassed. She was mortified, exposed, violated, furious! "You... Every step of the way, you used it to set me up."

"That was never my intent," he informed her calmly.

"Then what was?" This was one she just had to hear.

“I wanted *you* to see how you really felt. I hoped... I hoped you wouldn’t fight me as much if you still...” He growled in seeming frustration and tried again. “Yes, I looked at the ring! When I saw you wearing it, I couldn’t resist. It’s sort of addictive.”

“Yes, I know.” How stupid was she? How naïve? She’d let a piece of metal and stone run her life.

“I had to know, Grace. Please, believe me when I tell you that I had to know.”

“It was wrong,” she lied. “The ring... It was wrong.”

Michael didn’t answer immediately. “It’s never wrong, and you know it. I’ll bet you tried to prove it. I did too.”

No. It was never wrong. “Why?” she managed, pressing trembling fingers to her lips to keep from sobbing.

“Why... I’m sorry. I don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Why did you have to know what I’m feeling? Why did you want me to know it?”

The silence stretched between them for a long moment. Michael sighed, and there were faint sounds of movement. Grace stiffened, but he didn’t seem to be approaching her.

“Look at me, Grace.” It was more a request than an order.

She turned, gasping in surprise at the sight of Michael slipping the ring on his pinky finger. Her protest stuck in her throat as the stone started flickering through several emotions: lavender longing, purple despair – and red love.

“The ring wasn’t wrong. I was,” he whispered. “I’ve hated myself for lying to you every day for the last year. I’ve hated myself for hurting you and—”

“Then why did you do it?” Grace wished her voice held contempt, bitterness, hate, but she was too tired and confused to feel any of it, and Michael was right; she’d never been a good liar, at least not when she was face to face with someone.

She couldn’t seem to get a handle on what she *did* feel. Relief? Shock? Longing? An insane thought flitted in her mind before she brushed it away. Taking the ring back just to figure out how she felt about this situation would be completely over the top.

“I was afraid. No. I was more than afraid. I was a coward, and I was angry.”

“Afraid of me? What? Did you think I was making too many demands on you?” She didn’t need the ring to tell her that his comment made her angry.

*How dare he!* She'd never been the clingy type. When he asked for space, she'd given him space. She'd never even hinted at the possibility of getting married. In the last month they were together, she hadn't even ventured to his studio, because he said he needed time on a painting, and she hadn't wanted to disturb his 'artistic flow.'

"In order, yes and no." Michael sighed, the stone turning butter yellow in nervousness. "Let me show you the paintings. That will explain it better than I can."

When she didn't advance on him, he offered his hand. Grace forced her feet to move, half-stumbling to him, meeting his eyes as his hand closed on hers. For a moment, neither of them moved. It was if they'd stood like this a thousand times, as if she could mark the moment Michael would lose control and kiss her.

He didn't. Michael shook his head, backing away slowly though the ring glowed bright pink. "The paintings." His voice was rough, deep, ready.

Grace took a calming breath and followed him to the front gallery.

Michael led her to the closest piece, blocking her view when she tried to look around at the rest. "In order...please. I have to explain this rationally."

She nodded, looking from his face to the painting propped against the wall, her eyes widening. "My God! Michael, this is wonderful." It was nothing like his typical style. The colors were vibrant and alive, a near-breathing representation.

"Do you remember it?"

A fragment of a memory flashed before her then took shape. "Okimo."

"Yes. That was where it started."

"It?" she asked, confused. It had been a simple hiking trip up Mount Okimo in Vermont. They'd had a picnic dinner at the summit on one of the last warm days of fall then made love as the sun went down. It was the sunset view from Okimo he'd painted, every stone and tree awash in a curtain of gold and red.

"Come see the next."

Though she wanted to examine the sunset a bit longer, she nodded and followed him. There would be time to come back later.

"Oh, Michael," she managed, barely breathing. If possible, this painting was even more beautiful than the last.

“The little gazebo at Landing Park,” he noted, squatting to run his fingers along the upper edge fondly. He stood again, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“Yes, I know.” She tried to look at the next picture, but he blocked her way again.

Michael took her hand and rubbed his thumb across her knuckles. “Before you see the next, let me show you something.”

Grace nodded, confused by his secrecy.

He pulled an envelope of pictures from his back pocket, opened it, counted out four and handed them to her with a wince.

She fought the urge to do the same when she saw what was on them. The canvases were in his signature blues, browns and gray, but the quality was uneven and the hand stiff. “How – interesting.” She peeked up, hoping she hadn’t offended him.

A wry smile curved the hard line of his mouth only slightly. “You never were a good liar. They sucked, Grace. I know it – and now you know it.”

She looked at the painting of Landing Park in dawning understanding. “You lost your usual style, didn’t you? Oh, Michael... I’m so sorry.” No wonder he left.

*Then again...* Examining the new style, she wasn’t certain why she was apologizing. It was beautiful, but Michael had been an artist comfortable in his style. Maybe he wasn’t comfortable in *this* style.

He stroked her cheek, shaking his head. “Don’t be sorry. Just tell me the truth. Do you like the vibrant pieces?”

“Of course. They’re stunning, powerful...”

An honest smile brought the light to his eyes. “Thank goodness you can’t lie. I know you really like them.”

Her heart ached. “But you don’t,” she guessed.

Michael ran his fingertips along the top edge of the canvas again. “I’ve come to like it,” he commented. “I won’t lie to you. I didn’t, at first.” He pulled his hand back, abruptly uncertain. “I have to unpack more paintings. Take your time looking at the next four, and please...stop at the far wall. I have more to explain.”

“All right.” Of course, she’d agree. She’d wanted to understand, and now that Michael was finally opening up to her, how could he think she’d refuse him?

“Promise me you’ll take one painting at a time and not look ahead.” His expression was heartbreakingly hopeful.

“You have my word.”

He smiled and leaned forward to kiss her, stopping inches away as if reasoning that it would be a bad plan. Grace didn’t give him time to pull back. She placed a quick kiss on his lips much like the one the photographer caught on film at his first show.

Michael stared at her, swallowing hard, his breathing quick and uneven. “Grace...”

“Get unpacking before I kiss you again.” She kept her tone light, though his expression made her want to do a lot more than kiss him.

Michael chuckled, turning on his heel and striding across the gallery, glancing back at her as if assuring himself that she wasn’t a mirage.

Grace studied the next four paintings intently, examining the fine level of detail on the canvases while she dimly noted Michael working furiously. He completely unpacked the front gallery while she identified the river view from her apartment window, ice floes on the partially frozen river as seen from Riverside Park, the clearing at the castle hiking trails. He moved on to the other galleries, unpacking the blue room while she explored his depiction of the castle at its center...then the Rounde as she gaped in wonder at how vividly he’d captured the Winter Solstice celebration at America’s Stonehenge in Salem, New Hampshire.

The paintings were beyond exquisite. She could stare at them all day and still find more to see. Grace wanted to move on, but she’d given her word to wait. “Michael?” she called out.

He came back in, dusting his hands on his jeans. When he realized which painting she stood before, he winced. “Time for explanations, I see,” he grumbled.

“You were afraid you’d lose your audience. Weren’t you?” And, he might, but the audience he’d gain would be just as powerful and influential. Doors that had been closed to him would be opened now. Gallery owners who didn’t like angst would love this.

Michael darkened. “A shitty reason to break your heart.”

“Yes. It was. You should have told me.”

He nodded. “I can’t argue that.”

“Why did you have me stop here?”

“You didn’t look ahead?” he asked in disbelief.

“I promised I wouldn’t,” she reminded him in irritation.

He seemed to have trouble forcing himself to speak.

“Michael?”

“I painted those in hopes that I’d get it out of my system – like my personal Red Phase or something, but it didn’t work that way.” He pulled out the pictures again and handed her three more.

Grace bit her lip painfully. “Would you be offended if I said that these were awful? They’re worse than the others.”

Michael took them back without comment, placing them behind the short stack he still held. “They were.”

He met her eyes, seemingly miserable. She glanced to the ring, confirming his state of mind. If Michael noticed the move, he gave no sign of it.

“I was wrong, Grace. I was horrible to you. Yes, I was desperate, but I know that’s no excuse.”

She couldn’t find the words to answer him. What could she say in the face of such a heartfelt apology?

“I knew I made a mistake immediately. No! Mistake is too soft a word. Forgive me. Words aren’t my strong suit. You know that. Let me show you.”

“Sure.” Maybe that’s why he didn’t want her to look ahead. Maybe these six were the only decent canvases he’d produced in the last year. No. That wasn’t like Michael. If he brought a truck, he had a truckload of worthy canvases. The pictures told the tale of his failures.

He handed her more pictures, half-finished blues. “I couldn’t concentrate. I could barely hold a brush. All I could think of was you.”

“You seem to have gotten over that,” she noted, well aware of the bitter bite in her voice.

Michael paled. He turned her and guided her to the next painting. “All I could think about was you,” he repeated, his voice hoarse.

Grace stared at him in confusion, looking down at the canvas only when he motioned toward it. She fought for an unhampered breath, unable to think clearly. Her own face smiled back at her, the wind on Mount Okimo tangling her hair around her face, a coffee mug halfway to her lips.

“You painted me? A portrait of me?”

Michael drew her away from the painting gently, turning her face toward the next without comment.

The painted Grace lay out on the grass in Riverside Park, her legs crossed at the ankles, her arms folded beneath her head, staring at the clouds drifting past.

She went on to the next.

Grace handed a Frisbee back to a group of children at Winnekenni.

And another...

She did cartwheels in a sunny storm.

Grace moved from one painting to the next, reliving a dozen moments in their life together. She turned to him, searching for words in her muddled mind.

"All I could think of was you. Nothing else mattered." Michael took her hand and kissed it much as he had at the Gemstone Tea. He placed it on his arm and escorted her toward the blue room. "Come see the rest."

"Of me?" she asked. Surely, he couldn't have painted more of her.

"All I could—"

"Oh, Michael. You know... If I carry this show, I'll have to give you another chance. What would the gossip columnists and critics say about you painting me, if we weren't seeing each other? They'd say you were obsessed, psychotic..."

He smiled a near-predatory smile. Before she had a chance to question it, he'd motioned her to the first of the paintings in the blue room.

"Dear God!" No wonder he'd worried about her carrying more than the main body of work.

The portrait was one of her asleep in his sleigh bed, her hair fanned over the empty pillow beside her, the sheets tangled around her body, thankfully covering the essential parts, one arm curled around her head while the other lay across her hips. She gasped in the realization that her nipples were beaded against the sheet.

"It's tasteful," he pointed out nervously. "A boudoir shot, more or less."

"You have more like this," she guessed.

Michael shot her a sidelong glance, nodding silently.

Grace moved from painting to painting without comment, evaluating each. He'd done one of her in a long silk robe, beckoning him into her bedroom. Another showed her wrapped in

a bath sheet, her wet hair in long curls around her face. Another showed her sitting up in bed, one leg extended from under the sheet. Still another showed her in one of Michael's dress shirts, looking at him over her shoulder, a wicked smile on her pinked face.

The last made her head spin. "It's the night of the Gemstone Tea," she breathed. *From his point of view.* The portrait was from her chest up, the look of longing the camera had captured on her face, her hand clasped in Michael's, the only bit of him in the painting, and the ring shining red. He'd finished this in a little over a week?

His hands closed on her shoulders. "You were so beautiful, so enchanting, I couldn't help myself."

The double meaning hit her solidly, heating her blood for him. Maybe it was the wanton feeling of him touching her that sealed her decision. Either way, she didn't question it. "They can stay in the show." After all, they *were* no worse than boudoir shots.

Michael turned her toward him, looking stunned. He cupped her chin up and kissed her, slowly and completely, parting her lips with a groan. He broke away, his eyes still closed as if savoring her taste. "Thank you."

She didn't ask if he was thanking her for letting him show the portraits or for the kiss. At that particular moment, coherent thought seemed an odious chore. "We should – I should see the rest."

His eyes opened, and he cleared his throat, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "The – ah – rest of them won't be showing."

His meaning hit her full force. "You didn't!"

"Maybe I am just a little obsessed." His words had the sound of an apology.

Grace pushed past him and raced into the Round. The first portrait brought her up short, unable to form words, even an expletive.

It was a simple head and shoulder piece, unclothed, her head thrown back, hair mussed and eyes closed. Though there was no clear indicator of when he'd seen her like this – *Probably, many times!* – it was obvious that she was in the throes of passion.

"Are you furious?" Michael asked quietly.

She struggled for words, her unresponsive mouth staging a revolt against her disorganized mind. Grace grasped his hand with a growl of frustration, dragged the damned ring off of his finger and pushed it onto her own. If she couldn't tell him, she'd show him.



Michael stared at the rapidly-shifting colors, his lips moving silently, no doubt cataloging one chaotic emotion after another. “Not angry,” he mused, “but you do need positive focus.”

His meaning wasn’t lost on her, though she couldn’t seem to decide how she felt about it at first. The kiss started off a slow exploration, but this was Michael; it wouldn’t remain that way for long. In moments, her hands were roaming his body, pushing up at his sweater, their mouths meshing passionately.

He pulled away, laboring breaths in and out. “Not yet.”

Grace looked at him in shock. “I think that’s the first time you’ve ever said that to me. No. I *know* that’s the first time.”

Michael darkened. “I’ve done a lot of things wrong, Grace. This won’t be one of them.”

“I don’t understand.” She didn’t. He thought there was something wrong with the way they’d always made love? Based on the revelations of this evening, she was more convinced than ever that it was the single, purest part of their relationship.

He pulled the pins from her hair and combed his fingers through it. “*If* we’re going to pursue this, we’ll do it right. That means you breaking off things with Winters first.”

She bit back a laugh, half at the stress he put on the word ‘things’ and half in his obvious attempt at chivalry.

“This isn’t funny, Grace,” he protested. “And, it’s non-negotiable.”

“Oh, but it is funny.”

“I will not allow Josh Winters – or whoever...whatever Winters is the gossip columnist to say you were screwing around on him. It will be properly over before I take you to bed.”

“Or to my desk?” she teased.

“Especially not to your desk!” He shifted uncomfortably, the bulge in his jeans no doubt pinched.

“Well... Then maybe you should take me to my desk...or to bed.” She trailed her fingertips over the bulge, watching it harden further and wondering how long it would be until he couldn’t stand her teasing anymore. “They won’t be saying that.”

“I’m serious, Grace.” He gave up and adjusted the package so that it lay just behind the buttons on his jeans, straining them.

“So am I. We’ve been broken up for a month.”

Michael went so absolutely still, a look of confusion on his face, she was certain he hadn't heard her and was trying to piece together what she'd said.

"I said—"

"I heard you. His idea or yours?"

"Mutual. We weren't right for each other. We make better friends than lovers. We both knew it."

"I'm..." He scowled.

"You're not sorry."

"No. I'm not." He sighed. "Now, I'm sorry. I told you words aren't my thing." Michael stroked his fingertips along the line of her jaw. "You're sure you want this? I can wait until you're ready."

"I think I've waited long enough." It seemed that she'd been waiting for this since the last night they spent together.

His smile sent shards of light through his eyes. "I'll pack the other two rooms, if you pack this one," he offered.

"Your place or mine?"

"Definitely mine."

Her heart skipped at that. *Of course, his. It's closer.* "Deal."

Michael laid a quick kiss on her lips and bolted away.

"Don't damage the canvases," she shouted after him.

"Never!"

Grace smiled, loading the portraits back into the crate, the erotic images making her arousal more than painfully clear to her. She paused with a truly wanton piece in her hands. The Grace on the canvas had half-covered her breast with splayed fingers so the erect nipple peaked through the gaps between. That breast fairly ached for attention. And, so did she...the *real* she.

She smiled, putting the rest of the paintings in the crate. This idea was too delicious to pass up.

Her blouse, bra, pantyhose and panties folded over the crate, she set the portrait against the far wall and sat next to it. Grace fluffed her hair and posed herself to her best advantage, one knee bent, the high heel flat on the floor, her skirt hiked nearly to the crease of her thigh to

accomplish it. She draped her hand across her breast much as it was in the painting, smiling that her nipple was already erect just from the thought of what she was doing.

“Michael,” she called out.

As he had the last few times, he came to her immediately – and went absolutely still in the doorway, his wide eyes tracing every line of her body.

“I thought you could use some inspiration,” she purred.

“Is the gallery closed tomorrow?”

“You know it is.” That’s why she’d scheduled his viewing for tonight. “In fact, it’s the start of Christmas vacation for the staff.” No one except a daily security sweep would be here for the next two weeks. Had he forgotten the schedule she kept? “Why?”

“I’m *inspired* to keep you up all night.” He pulled the buttons on his jeans open with one tug. “God knows I will be.”

He scooped his sweater over his head and tossed it toward the crate, missing by several feet. She’d always wondered at how defined his chest and arms were, though she’d once joked with him that he kept his physique from sex more than from any other form of exercise.

Michael didn’t spare the sweater any attention; he strode toward her, his eyes locked on hers. Grace found it hard to breathe. There was never any question that sex would be explosive when he had that focused look on his face.

He sank to his knees before her, trailing the fingertips of both hands up her inner thighs as he leaned forward and captured the nipple peeking from between her fingers in the heat of his mouth. The dull throbbing at the apex of her thighs spread outward and became a potent drumbeat of anticipation, punctuated by the flicks of his tongue and his insistent sucking. Michael moved from one nipple to the other, enflaming her with ruthless efficiency.

Grace grasped at his hair, matching his moan of pleasure at the move. His slowly-traveling fingers converged on their goal, one hand massaging her mound and clit slowly while the other breached her body.

That was her breaking point. She dragged his jeans halfway to his knees, stroking his cock, guiding him forward, demanding him silently.

Michael’s mouth and hands left her and he rose up, cupping her buttocks and lifting her, holding Grace so that his cock brushed the sensitive skin he’d been massaging. “Are you going to come as fast as you did the first time, Grace?” he taunted, seating himself just inside her.

She shivered, immersed in the memories of him kissing her, taking down her hair...then her panties and thrusting inside her on her desk. “Faster,” she panted, wrapping her hands over his shoulders and her legs around his waist.

“Mmmm. We’ll see.” He pulled her down over him, thrusting up at the same time so that his full length rammed home at once.

Grace screamed in delight, moving against his manic hip thrusts, arching her back as she shattered, her hands tightening on his shoulders reflexively.

“Too fast,” he moaned, following her over, his ragged cry mixing with hers as the hot wash of his climax did the same.

For several long minutes, they stayed like that, curled together on the floor, their breathing slowing, their bodies entwined.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it last longer that time,” Michael offered. “First time overload, I guess.”

Grace laughed.

“What is it?”

She laid a kiss on his chest. “Well, you did promise me all night. I figure the more times you push us both over that quickly, the more times we...”

Michael captured her mouth with a whispered curse.

Epilogue  
January 14<sup>th</sup>

“Michael,” Grace warned, pushing his face away from her neck with a hearty flush. She waved him away. “You paint. I’ll read.”

He chuckled, glancing back at her as he walked away, noting her perusal of him instead of the newspaper in her hand in satisfaction.

She cleared her throat. “Sporting... Who says sporting, anyway? It sounds like I have a black eye.”

“Grace,” he warned. “I’m coming back there.”

“You have a deadline.”

“Slave driver,” he muttered. But, she was right. The Cambridge show was only eight months away.

“I’ll get my whip out later,” she commented, obviously distracted.

“I could always show the exotics,” he suggested, placing Vermillion on his palette.

“If you weren’t painting...”

He smiled. “Read, woman!”

“Oh, yes. Sporting a small diamond ring... It’s not small,” she complained.

“She’s a Winters,” he sang back.

“That’s true, and not a very nice one at that. How Josh got such a—”

“Grace.”

“Okay. Grace Mallory, owner of Le Artiste Art Gallery on River Street, is back on the arm of Massachusetts’ hottest homegrown artist, Michael Justice. Is it wedding bells we’re hearing, or will Haverhill’s own Runaway Bride do it again? That bitch! I have never broken an engagement before. In fact...I’ve never been engaged before.”

Michael faltered in mixing coral in, fighting back a shocked laugh. Amelia Winters hadn’t let up on Grace since the night of the Gemstone Tea. Of course, the panties they’d forgotten in the Rounde at Christmas hadn’t helped, though thankfully they’d removed the exotic paintings before the first security sweep.

He went back to his work. “Well, won’t it be a disappointment to her when you don’t?”

“I suppose.”

“What else does she say?”

“The usual. Big city morals dragged to our fine burgh. Scandals waiting to break. My tacky ring that no one seems to be able to agree on the color of. Isn’t it just a shame that the colors never photograph?” she noted sarcastically.

“Do you really like it that much?” he asked, scowling at the too dark mixture and evaluating its usefulness. Maybe for shadowing...

“I think we should get a more masculine one in the same style and both wear them.”

“Why?”

“It would be hard to miscommunicate again when we can read each others’ emotions.”

“I suppose it would. Why not? The proceeds from one painting will cover the ring.”  
*Even as expensive as the ‘real, magical’ mood rings are.*

It wouldn’t be a hardship to buy it. Michael had sold sixteen of the twenty-six paintings he’d displayed at Le Artiste. The show had been dubbed ‘the season’s smash hit,’ and Michael Justice’s new style was the talk of critics across New England.

Better, the ten remaining paintings and another six or eight would show in Cambridge in the fall. All Grace had to do was keep playing the part of muse. He flicked a glance at her, curled on his bed, the sheets pooled at her hips, nude otherwise. She inspired him in more ways than he could count.

Michael strode toward her, uncertain as to why the red on his palette resonated with him when it wasn’t the color he’d intended on mixing. “Grace? What does this color remind you of?”

She studied the palette, her smile spreading and her blush deepening.

“Grace?”

She extended her right hand toward him, the stone in the mood ring a deep red that nearly matched what he’d mixed. “It’s the color of love, Michael.”

“Then, I’ll use it in every painting,” he vowed. “Just for you.”

The Christmas Necklace

By

Elaine Charton

## Chapter One

A very important letter waited on her desk. Most the letters that came to the house were addressed to her husband. This was addressed specifically to her and sent special delivery. She sat down and read it carefully, smiling at the request from the two little girls.

*My name is Annabelle Hurley and my best friend is Jilly Nikols. We decided to write you instead of Santa Claus because we have something really important to ask. I hope that he won't be mad at us for not asking him. He's good at bringing toys and stuff but he's a man and my nana told me men can be a little slow and don't understand things like love. Not the way a woman can. I need a mommy and Jilly needs a daddy. Her mommy and daddy divorced and my mommy and daddy are in heaven. Uncle Brian is my daddy now but I need a mommy. If you can help Uncle Brian and Jilly's mommy meet and fall in love, than they can get married and Jilly and I can be sisters and best friends. Uncle Brian is lonely. I know he is, and Jilly's mom is too. Please Mrs. Santa, help us."*

She turned to the computer and looked the little girls up in Santa's database. While toys were mostly made the old-fashioned way, the database worked wonders when it came to keeping track of the children. Satisfied with what she saw, she tucked the letter in her pocket and went in search of her husband.



## Chapter Two

It always helped to open a new store during the holiday season. Brian thought as he headed down the mall toward the parking lot. It had been a good opening day. He let out a low whistle when he saw the lines of kids and parents at Santa's village. Luckily, Jilly's grandmother offered to take the girls. He loved kids, they were some of his best customers, but he wouldn't have the patience to stand in that line. Fortunately, he wouldn't have to do that. Lost in thought he didn't notice the woman rushing across the mall, not until she practically knocked him over. His hands went around a slim waist and softly rounded hips, "Whoa, there. What's the hurry?"

He looked down to discover he'd been hit by one of Santa's elves. Tall, slim, short, curly reddish hair, no make that brown, it was hard to tell in this light. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

He was paying attention now. If Santa's elves had been this good looking when he was younger, maybe he'd have tried to behave better. He recognized the jolt of attraction between them and his mouth curved into an unconscious smile. Did he know her? She looked familiar.

Her mouth parted in surprise and recognition. When he released her she rushed away before he could even ask her name

"Excuse me?" He said to no one in particular he thought of following her to Santa's Village but he didn't have the time. Instead he headed for his car.

"Oh hell!" Kirsten muttered to herself as she raced down the mall. She'd been able to avoid him so far. Just because he had a store opening in the mall, why did he have to show up? She'd assumed, as head of the company, he'd send one of his flunkies to oversee the opening.

Nervously, she played with the chain around her neck, the crystal felt particularly warm. She could still feel the warmth of the blush that had sprung up when she realized who he was. She could still feel his hands on her waist. Damn him! Even after all these years she still reacted to him.

She rushed back to Santa's Village and took her place behind the camera.

"Are you all right Kirsten?" Harry, the head elf rushed over all concerned. "You look flushed."

"I'm fine Harry. Some idiot almost knocked me over that's all."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No, Harry, he didn't," She pointed over his shoulder, "Santa's back, lets get this line moving."

Later that night she lay in bed reliving the scene earlier. Thankfully, he hadn't recognized her. It'd been close to ten years since they'd seen each other. A lot of things had happened since then. He'd left school and taken over the family business making a success beyond anyone's expectations. He'd even made the cover of one of the major business magazines. The story had lauded him as one of the most employee friendly companies around. She'd married, gotten pregnant, had Jilly and divorced. Now they were both back in the same town. He was a successful businessman and she was back home with mom. She reached across the bed for her phone and dialed long distance. It was early morning in France maybe she'd catch him before he left for the studio.

"Bonjour." A male voice answered.

"Hello Robert." She didn't realize how much she'd missed him until she heard his voice.

"Kirsten! Mon Ami! What is wrong darling?"

"Why should anything be wrong? Can't I call an old friend?"

"Yes, but it's after midnight where you are. Is Jillian sick? What about your mother?"

"They're both fine. Actually, Jilly may have caused a little problem." She quickly filled him in on Jilly and Annabelle and her little run in with Brian earlier at the mall."

"So, he's her uncle. Chances are you won't see him at all."

"I'm not going to be that lucky, Annabelle's parents are dead, he's her guardian."

"Is he married?"

“No, my mother made sure she told me that. I knew I was going to run into him sooner or later but the chances are even more now that our girls are friends.”

A soft chuckle traveled over the over seas line. “How much time does the owner of a toy company have to spend with his niece, especially at Christmas?”

“Apparently, more than I do, at least according to my mother, and Jilly.”

“Does your mother know about your history?”

“No! I never told her who the baby’s father was. If she even had an inkling, she’d be scheming ways to get us together.”

“Is he still as handsome as you described?”

“Lord, yes.” She didn’t have to think twice about that. When she realized who held her that afternoon every feeling she had kept buried all those years came to surface. “Robert, what should I do?”

“Did he recognize you?”

“I don’t think so, but then I didn’t give him time to. As soon as I realized who it was, I ran.”

“Well, hopefully he won’t equate the lovely jewelry designer with the chunky girl he used to know in college.”

“I hope so.” She ended the call and snuggled down in her bed, wishing she felt as secure about the situation as Robert did.

\* \* \*

“Ready Annabelle?” Brian called up the stairs.

The sound of small feet running down the stairs was his answer. He watched his niece hurry down, Annabelle had one speed, fast. She was just like her father that way. A sharp pain pierced his heart, just as it did every time he thought of his brother.

“Let’s go Uncle Brian.” She grabbed her jacket off the rack in the hallway, putting it on before lifting her book bag. “We have to hurry!”

“Whoa there, Sunshine, what’s your rush, we have plenty of time.”

“It’s story time today, the librarian is coming to school and tomorrow we get to go there, remember? I’m getting my own library card!” She grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the door, yelling her good-byes to her grandmother sitting in the kitchen. Laughing Brian followed her out the door and to the car.

When he turned the corner to the school, Annabelle pointed in front of them. “Look! There’s Jilly and her mom!”

“I thought her nana took her to school?” he asked. He’d met Jilly’s grandmother once or twice, he knew his mother and she were “lunch nana’s” volunteering a few days a week to help out with lunch at the school.

“Sometimes her mother does, you just haven’t met her before.”

Brian pulled into the empty spot behind the car just as Jilly and her mother jumped out. It was a good thing he’d put it in park or he’d have driven right into the vehicle.

It was her! He wished he could remember where he knew her from, she’d been on his mind ever since that day in the mall. Annabelle jumped out as soon as the car stopped, calling out to her friend. He watched Jilly run to her and point to her mother, as the older woman came closer Brian got a better look at her, that’s when it hit him. Kirsten Daly! Thinner than when he’d last seen her, she’d cut her hair, but it was still her. He watched her bend down to talk to the girls, as he slowly he got out of the car and walked toward them. This time he wouldn’t let her get away. “Hello Kirsten.” he said softly.

\* \* \*

She decided if she ran into him again, she’d turn and face him, deal with it the best she could. Now, hearing his voice call her name, she wasn’t sure she could do this. Aware that the girls were watching she stood up, took a deep breath and turned to face the one man she’d ever really loved. She extended her hand to him and smiled, “Hello, Brian. It’s good to see you.”

He surprised her by pulling her into his arms. Damn him he felt too good, too right. She wanted to sink into his embrace but forced herself to step back.

“When did you move back? Why didn’t you call me?” he asked and then stopped as he remembered.

“Exactly,” she answered the look he gave her. The school bell rang, interrupting their conversation.

He reached to give Annabelle a hug, “Have a good day, Princess. Nana will pick you up when school’s out.”

“Bye Uncle Brian, see you later. Bye Kirsten. She grabbed Jilly by the hand and they raced into the school building.

Kirsten headed back to her car, eager to get away.

“Wait!” Brian called out. Following her he placed his hand on the door, preventing her from opening it. “You didn’t answer my questions.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Look Kirsten, I’m sorry. I know we didn’t exactly part on the best of terms.”

She laughed, “Brian Hurley, still a master of the understatement.”

“I admit it, I was a jerk, would it help if I said I was sorry?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I am and you’re here now, can’t we at least be sociable, friendly? After all, our girls are “bestest friends.”

She smiled at his imitation of her daughter. “You’re right, I apologize for being rude. It is good to see you Brian.” She kissed his cheek. “But I really have to get to work.”

He looked down at her, “But you don’t have your elf costume on. I like the way you look in that.”

She blushed at the way he looked at her, leaving his meaning all too obvious. “I work in Santa’s Village, two nights a week and all day Saturday. I have a studio in the art district of town.”

“Still designing jewelry?”

Her eyes lit up. “Yes, I’m part of an artists cooperative down by the train station. I’ve done pretty good so far.”

“Is that one of yours?” He nodded to the chain around her neck.

Kirsten touched it, “Yes it is. A friend gave me the stone and I created the necklace. She held the chain out and almost dropped it. “That’s strange.”

“What?”

“The stone is normally a milky white, not the red it is now.”

“Maybe it’s a reaction to something surrounding it.”

“Could be.” She looked at her watch. “I really have to go, Brian.”

“Wait. I’m taking Annabelle to the movies tonight and dinner. It’s something I try and do at least once a week, when I’m not traveling. That way she doesn’t feel neglected. Why don’t you and Jilly join us? Please?”

She thought about it a minute then replied, “Yes, I’d like that.” Both the girls would be along. So, it’s not like a date.

They made plans to meet later that evening and she finally got in her car. Rolling the window down she called out to Brian, “Three years.”

“Three years, what?” he asked.

“You wanted to know when I moved back. It was three years ago, once my divorce from Daniel was final.” She pulled away before he could say another word.

\* \* \*

Annabelle and Jilly stood in the school doorway excitedly watching the adults. “Did you know your Uncle Brian knew my mother?” Jilly asked.

Annabelle shook her head, “No, but that makes everything easier. Maybe they were in love before and then my mom met my dad.”

“I don’t know...”

“I wonder if Mrs. Claus knew that.”

“Of course she did silly, Santa knows everything and she’s his wife so he probably told her.”

“I guess so,” Annabelle didn’t look convinced.

“Look, Harry is the head elf in Santa’s village and he told me that Mrs. Claus got our letter. Then your uncle and my mother meet. Mrs. Claus had to have something to do with it.”

Annabelle thought about it and nodded in agreement. “You’re right.”

“I’m always right, silly,” Jilly said.

The school bell rang, interrupting their conversation for the moment as they hurried into their classroom.

\* \* \*

What had she been thinking, agreeing to go out with Brian Hurley of all people? Kirsten argued with herself as she drove to the studio. “Remember, it’s not like it’s a date, you’ll have two seven-year-olds with you.” She said aloud as she steered the car into her parking space behind the building that housed the artists co-op. She reached for the necklace around her neck and glanced down at it. “That’s so strange.” The stone had turned back to its usual color. She’d have to ask Harry about it the next time she saw him. He’d been the one to give her the stone.

Just as she reached the door to the building, she heard someone call her name. Turning she saw Jason, who had a studio on her floor. He ran across the parking lot, waving a piece of paper in his hand.

“I’m glad I caught you.” Breathlessly he handed the paper to her, “This came after you left last night. I knew you were working at the mall so I didn’t call you.”

Quickly she scanned the piece of paper, it was a notice from the owner of the building, and he wanted to sell the building and was giving them notice. “Damn, I was hoping this wouldn’t happen for at least another year. We’ll have to call a meeting of the cooperative. Any ideas on what we can do?”

“I talked to my sister last night, she told me what we’d need if we decided to make a bid on the building. Since she deals with commercial real estate, she offered to help us.”

“Good, that will be a plus for us.” They’d reached the front of her studio. “Can you notify everyone, we need to have a meeting ASAP, preferably in the next few days. Can your sister be there?”

“I’ll call her and find out what her schedule is.”

“Thanks, I guess I’d better call the management company and see what they’re willing to tell me.”

\* \* \*

“I didn’t know you knew Kirsten Nichols,” Brian’s mother said when he entered the kitchen that night.

“Annabelle told you about this morning, did she?”

“Are you kidding? That’s all she talked about. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t know until I saw her again. We knew each other in college, before she moved to France. I never knew her married name.”

“Oh?” His mother looked at him with knowing eyes.

“Ma, don’t do that. Don’t even think about it.”

“Think about what?”

“You know what, get that matchmaking look out of your eyes right now.” If she had even a hint of a relationship between them, she would not leave him alone. His mother made no secret of the fact that she wanted more grandchildren.

“She is going out with you tonight, isn’t she?”

“Yes, I invited her and Jilly to join me and Annabelle tonight. It’s our usual time together and I thought it would be nice if she had a friend join us. With the holiday season starting, I’m afraid movies will be out until after the holidays.” He looked around the room, “Speaking of which, where is Annabelle?”

“Up in her room. Let me go get her.”

The movie was typical young girl movie fare, what she remembered of it. The girls enjoyed it but all she’d been aware of was Brian, still wearing the same cologne he wore in college, even with the girls sitting between them she could smell it. It brought back memories, memories she thought she’d buried long ago.

“Can we go for pizza, can we Uncle Brian?” Annabelle begged as they walked out of the theatre.

“You two demolished a bucket of popcorn and two sodas and you still want pizza?”

Kirsten laughed,

“What?” He turned to her, “It sounds like a legitimate question to me? My experience is limited to one seven-year-old and her eyes are usually bigger than her stomach.”

“Kids can be strange creatures, especially seven-year-olds.” She put an arm around each girl, “Their metabolism defies all logic.”

“How about your metabolism? Is it up for Pizza?”

“Pepperoni and mushroom?” She asked.

“Is there any other kind?” The girls were making faces at the combinations of flavors. “Don’t worry ladies, we can get a plain cheese one for you.”

“Good,” Jilly said. “I hate all that extra stuff my mother likes, it’s gross.”

“Yeah gross,” Annabelle seconded.

They placed their orders and settled in their seats. Brian’s beeper went off just as the pizza was delivered. He looked at it and got up. “Would you excuse me? I have to take this call.”

“Of course,” Kirsten said wondering what was so important that it interfered with his night off with his niece.

A few minutes later he returned to the table.

“We don’t have to go, do we Uncle Brian?” Annabelle asked



“Well, princess, I have to, but if Jilly’s mom doesn’t mind bringing you home?” He looked at Kirsten hopefully.

“No, I don’t mind at all. Is everything all right?”

“Just some problems in the warehouse. I’m needed down there.”

“Then I guess you’d better go.”

He leaned down and kissed his niece. “I’ll call Nana and let her know what’s happened.”

Annabelle nodded solemnly. “Will you tuck me in when you get home.”

“Don’t I always?” He looked over at Kirsten. “I do appreciate this. Can I call you later?”

She nodded, “Yes, I’m usually up until about midnight.”

“Hopefully, I’ll be home by then. I’ve enjoyed this.”

“Me too,” she said aware of Annabelle and Jilly watching them a little too intently.

He walked out just as the waitress was coming over with their drinks.

“Does your uncle get called into work all the time like that, Annabelle?” Kirsten asked as she dished slices of pizza out to the girls.

Annabelle nodded. “Nana says Uncle Brian worries too much about people and should let someone else handle things sometimes.”

“And what does Uncle Brian say to that?” The Brian she knew was very happy to stay in college and let his father handle everything in the business. He’d told her once he knew he would take the business over from his father but until then he would enjoy himself. However, anytime his family called, he was there.

“He told me once he had to, that the workers were his family and he always takes care of family.”

He said that was the way my Grandpa worked. My grandpa died before I was born,” She looked sad.

“Oh sweetie,” Kirsten hugged her, “at least you have your Uncle Brian and your Grandmother.”

“And us!” said Jilly also putting an arm around her friend.

\* \* \*

The look on Annabelle’s face still haunted her as she lay in bed that night. The phone rang and she grabbed it before it woke her mother or Jilly.

“Hello?”

“Did I wake you?” Brian asked, “You said you’d be up until midnight.”

She looked at the clock, eleven thirty PM. “No, I’m awake. Did you get everything taken care of tonight?”

“Mostly, there were a few things but nothing that couldn’t wait until the morning.”

“It’s almost morning now.”

He chuckled and the sound warmed her heart. “So, it is, I should let you go to sleep.”

“That’s all right. What was the emergency?”

He told her about the accident at his warehouse and the worker who was injured. His concern for his worker came through his voice. She let him talk and before she knew it almost two hours had passed. They spent a lot of their earlier relationship this way, on the phone talking for hours at a stretch as she helped him pass Art Appreciation. At the end of the semester, they’d both gotten “A’s” in the course and fallen in love. But that was another lifetime ago.

“Brian, I have to go. It is getting late.”

“Thanks for listening to me, I appreciate it. It’s almost like old times.”

“Not quite,” Kirsten said, not yet willing to go down that road, yet.

Brian had other ideas. “We’re going to have to talk about it sooner or later, you know that.”

“I know,” she sighed, “but not tonight.”

“When?” He asked, “We can’t carry this thing further until we do.”

“We’re just friends, Brian. Old friends whose children go to school together.”

“All right, as an old friend just tell me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“What are you wearing right now?”

She didn’t want to go there, not now. It had been how they’d always ended their phone calls, when they weren’t spending the night with each other.

“Are you still there, Kirsten?”

“Yes, I’m here, wearing my usual T-shirt.”

“Good,” his voice broke with huskiness, “Are you snuggled down under your blankets?”

She cursed herself for automatically curling down into the bed before he even asked.  
“Yes.”

“Good night then, sleep well.” He ended the call.

Kirsten reached over and placed the phone on the table. “Damn you, Brian Hurley.”  
It was a long time before she was able to drift off to sleep.

### Chapter Three

He'd very little sleep that night and it was his own fault. He cursed himself as he stood in the shower, trying to wake up. The image of Kirsten in a T-shirt and nothing else kept him awake. Mostly because he knew what the reality would feel like as he slipped that T-shirt over her head and...

"Uncle Brian!" Annabelle knocked on the bathroom door. "Nana said to hurry up or we'll be late!"

"I'll be right there." So much for daydreaming, he thought before turning the shower to cold, ice cold.

He dropped Annabelle off at school, hoping to run into Kirsten again. She was nowhere to be seen. "Good morning, Mary." He greeted his secretary through a stifled yawn.

"Morning Boss." She followed him into the office. "How's Tom doing this morning?"

"He's better, they're still not sure of the exact extent of his injuries but he's getting some feeling back into his legs today. I need to go to the warehouse this morning and look the place over. Is the area blocked off?"

She nodded, "And I have a call in to the company that made the cabinets. That should not have come down like that."

"No, it shouldn't. I need to have a meeting with the warehouse management staff this morning."

"All set up thirty minutes from now in the main conference room."

"Mary, if you weren't already married, I'd propose to you right now. I know why my father kept you around all this time."

“As long as you remember that when it comes to my salary review,” she said, shaking her head at him as she walked out of the office.

He sat at his desk and picked up the first folder Mary left for him to review. It was a proposal to buy a building downtown in an effort to expand their warehouse space. They needed more space and while he didn’t really want to move right downtown, it was further from their main factory, it was within his price range. He’d have to make arrangements to go take a look at it.

Kirsten hurried out of the dressing room, she wanted to catch Harry before her shift started. The closer it got to the holidays, the busier they were. The little man was sitting on a chair in the lounge, watching TV.

“Harry!” She sat down next to him.

“Hello Kirsten, how’s Jilly doing?”

“She’s fine. I have a question for you Harry. You know that stone you gave me last year?” She took the necklace out from under her tunic. “The one I made into a necklace.”

“Of course I do. It was a stone my wife had, she thought you might like it.”

“Did she say anything else about the stone? Is there anything unusual about it?”

He stroked his beard, while thinking before he answered. “Not really.”

“Are you sure Harry? Where did she get the stone?”

“She told me it was a piece of a stone she received from her mother. Every female in her family gets a piece of it. Since we have no children, she wanted to give it to you. Because you’re so good to me when I am here each year.”

“Why just the females? Why not the males?”

“Because the females are the leaders of the family, they’re the ones who keep everyone together. They’re the nurturers.” He smiled at her, “I thought that would appeal to you, better than the other reason.”

“What was that?” she said, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“I’m not really sure how, but it’s supposed to show them their one true love.”

“That’s silly, how can a stone do that?”

“I don’t know, but it can. It’s different for each female. For my wife it would vibrate whenever I got within a certain distance. For her mother it would turn purple when her husband

came in close contact with it. I can't remember what it did for her grandmother. Her great-grandmother, who originally found the stone, saw it in a cave, she fell while trying to retrieve it and was injured, the man who rescued her was my wife's great-grandfather."

"Well, it can't be that, it didn't turn purple."

"What happened?" he asked. "Did it turn a different color?"

He looked excited and she didn't want to feed into his fantasy, harmless as it was, it was still a fantasy, nothing more. "It turned red, must have been a reaction to something around it." That was the only logical explanation.

"Possibly," he said, "Why don't you go on up? I'll be there shortly. I have to make a call first."

"Sure thing Harry, see you upstairs."

No sooner had she closed the door than he'd pulled out his cell phone and dialed a long distance number. Soon a woman's voice came on the line.

"Hello, Harry."

"Hello, Mother Claus. I think it may be working." He quickly gave her a synopsis of his recent conversation with Kirsten.

"Wonderful, now try not to interfere any further. Hopefully, these two youngsters will realize they really are meant to be together, and the girls can get their wish."

"All right, I have to get upstairs. Tell Helga I'll call her later." His wife worked with Mrs. Claus as her second-in-command.

\* \* \*

Kirsten watched the little man hurry down the mall and into his place, talking and laughing with the children as they waited to see Santa. Some times she worried about him, he could come out with the strangest things. She knew he lived somewhere, "up north" and showed up every year to work in Santa's village. He didn't believe what he'd told her about the stone, did he? It went against every logical bone in her body. Stones couldn't predict who your true love would be any more than tea leaves could predict the future.

The lines grew longer each night, but Harry took his time, talking with each child finding out their name, making them feel special. It was one of the reasons he was asked back each year, one of the reasons this was the best Santa's Village of all the malls in town. Thanksgiving was next week and after that the Christmas rush would start. She'd already agreed to come in an

extra night each week. She wanted a computer for their house and the extra money would come in handy.

When the last child gave his wish list to Santa, they closed down for the evening. Her lack of sleep the night before was taking its toll. Not even bothering to change, Kirsten grabbed her coat and headed home. No sooner had she started the car than her phone rang. "Hello?"

"Can you sit on my lap and I'll tell you what I want for Christmas?" A male voice asked. She smiled, "Brian, how are you?"

"Just fine, I thought I would call and see if you would give me another chance at dinner?"

"When?"

"How about tomorrow? Just the two of us, no kids?"

She knew she should refuse, no good would come of it. Once he found out he'd never want to speak to her again. Unfortunately, where Brian was concerned, her heart had always overruled her head. "Yes," she found herself saying, "I'd like that."

However, dinner was not to happen, the next day, as she was finishing up a commissioned piece, her cell phone rang.

It was Brian, "I'm sorry Kirsten, I have to cancel tonight. I have something that's come up here."

"I see," she said resignedly, "Another emergency?"

"Unfortunately, yes, can I call you later?"

"I don't know Brian? Maybe this is not a good idea."

"Why not?"

She could hear another muffled voice telling him to hurry up.

"Listen, go take care of your emergency, we'll talk later. She hung up before he could even answer.

"Are you ready Brian?" Mary asked from the doorway of his office. "They're waiting for us."

Brian looked at the phone in his hand, Kirsten was wrong; it was a good idea. Ten years ago he let her get away to France and almost lost her forever. Now he had a second chance, she would not get away so easily this time. He just had to convince her, but not tonight. Placing the phone back in the cradle he grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair. "No, but let's go anyway."

\* \* \*

She pulled up in front of the school and went rushing in. She'd had a last minute customer who wanted a custom made piece for his wife. He wouldn't leave until she could at least give him a sketch. She'd start work on the piece tomorrow. However, he'd made her late for picking up her daughter. She could hear Jilly laughing as she ran down the hall. She stopped just outside the doorway to catch her breath. Inside she found Brian holding the girls' attention as he drew something on the chalkboard. He talked to the girls as if they were adults, something she appreciated. They were making suggestions and he added them to his drawing. He looked up and saw her standing there, the smile that lit up his face reminded her of a better time, a time of innocence, before she realized just how fickle love could be.

"Mom!" Jilly ran over, "Where were you? Ms. Clark was going to call you. Brian said he'd drive me home."

Kirsten reached into her purse and pulled out her cell phone. Sure enough there was a missed call. "It would help if I turned it on."

Just then Ms. Clark ran into the room. "Mr. Hurley, I couldn't reach..." She stopped when she realized Kirsten was there.

"I'm sorry Ms. Clark. I shut the phone off when I was with a client and I forgot to turn it back on."

"Well, it makes no difference, you're here now."

"Yes, but if it happens again, Mr. Hurley has my permission to bring Jilly home. If neither myself or my mother are around."

The teacher looked from one to the other and nodded. "Of course. We'll need something in writing."

Kirsten nodded, "I'll send it in with Jilly tomorrow."

"That will be fine."

Kirsten picked up her daughter backpack. "Ready Jilly?"

"Yup." She waved to her friend and to Brian. "Thanks, that was fun."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Just as she put the key in to start the car, she heard Brian call her name. "Stay here," She told Jilly.



Outside she waited as he opened the car for Annabelle and made sure she was belted in before walking over to her. “Have dinner with me?” he asked not wasting any time.

“Brian, I told you it was a bad idea for us to be anything other than friends.”

“I know and it’s as friends I want us to have dinner. Actually, I have a business proposition for you.”

“What sort of “proposition” do you have in mind?” She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the car.

“Get your mind out of the gutter, young lady. What I have in mind is strictly business.” He silently added, for now.

Jilly rolled down the window, “Mamma, I’m hungry!”

“Be right there, baby.” Kirsten turned back to Brian, “Tomorrow night, 6pm.” She named a Thai restaurant that just opened up near the mall.

“Can I pick you up?” he asked, “Save us taking two cars.”

“No! I’m sorry Brian but if you get another emergency, I don’t want to have to worry about a ride home.”

“I wouldn’t leave you stranded.”

“I know, but I’ll feel better if I have my own car. Besides, this is a business meeting, not a date.”

“Does that mean I can hope?”

“Brian,” she warned

“Yes, Ma’am!” He saluted smartly before running to his car and his waiting niece.

“It’s just a business meeting,” she repeated as she changed her outfit for the third time that evening. “He’s a prospective client, just like any other client.” She looked at herself in the mirror; a long straight denim skirt and white silk blouse had changed to a black skirt and white silk blouse. Did she have too many buttons open? She tried a scarf around her neck, seeing if that helped. “Damn you Brian Hurley, you’re not supposed to affect me like this, not after ten years.” She gave herself one last look in the mirror and repeated her mantra, “it’s just a business meeting,” before heading down stairs trying desperately to ignore the butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

“You look lovely dear,” her mother said from her seat in the living room where she and Jilly sat watching a movie.

“Thanks mom. I should be home in a few hours.”

“Can I go Mom? Please?”

“No, baby, you can’t. This is a business meeting, not like when we went to the movies with Annabelle.”

“Yea Mom,” she answered, her lower lip stuck out in a pout.

“Come here, baby.” Kirsten held her arms out for her daughter. She held her close, never failing to marvel at the happiness Jilly brought her. “I’ll come see you when I get home.”

“Promise?”

“You know it.” She grabbed her purse off the chair where she’d thrown it earlier. “Be good for Nana.”

“I will. Love you mom.”

“I love you, both of you.” She hurried out the door.

Jilly turned to her grandmother and asked, “Can I call Annabelle, please?”

She pulled right next to his car. It may have been an SUV, a family car, but it was a high-end family car. He always did like the best of everything, while she loved to shop in thrift stores, which made them very complex as a couple to their friends when they were in college. She glanced at her watch, she was on time, for a change.

He studied papers in a folder as she crossed the restaurant to join him. From the top of his carefully styled hair to the tip of his carefully polished toes he looked every bit the polished businessman he told her he would be someday. They’d both achieved their dreams, just as they’d discussed them all those years ago. Except for one, the dream of a life together. He’d decided he didn’t want that dream. Now they were back in each other’s lives and they could at least be friends now, for the sake of their girls.

He looked up and smiled, standing to greet her as she reached the table. “Let’s eat first, then we can talk business, he said as she sat next to him.

“All right,” Kirsten glanced at the menu and placed her order, as did Brian. She allowed him to pour her tea, “Thank you,” she sipped the warm fluid. “I do love their tea.”

“So, you’ve been here before? I thought it was new?”

She nodded, "It's only been open a month. The cousin of the owner rents studio space at the co-op, she threw herself a fortieth birthday party here."

"Co-op? For jewelry designers?"

"No, for artists of all kinds. We have people working in several different mediums, acrylic, oils, photographers, clay, ceramic, even one who creates sculptures out of pieces of metal he salvages."

"Metal salvage?" He looked incredulous

Kirsten laughed, the sound seemed to fill the restaurant. "Brian, your conservative side is showing. Maybe we met again just in time."

"Why did you move to Arizona? I thought home was back east."

"It was, when Dad retired, they moved out here. That was just after I left for Paris. A year later he had a fatal heart attack."

He placed a hand over hers, "I'm sorry, I didn't know. Did you come home?"

"For a little while, I was going to leave my job in Paris and move back but Mom wouldn't hear of it. So back I went. Shortly after, I married Daniel."

"And along came Jilly."

"Yes,"

He liked the way her eyes lit up when she spoke of her daughter.

"She's the best thing out of that marriage."

"Can I ask what happened?"

She sat silently for a few minutes before speaking, "We grew apart, he wanted one thing and I wanted another. He wanted a trophy wife who wouldn't mind him working all the time, or spending his free time fooling around with models."

"Well, I for one, am glad you decided to come here to Arizona rather than back east."

She shrugged, "It was a no brainer actually, I couldn't afford to live on my own in Paris, or could I back east. Not and give Jilly the life I want her to have. So, we moved in with mom."

The waiter came with their dinner and all conversation was kept to a minimum while they eat.

When the dishes had been cleared away, and more tea poured, he brought out the folder once again. "Now we can talk business."

"Yes, I've been trying to guess what a toy company would want with a jewelry designer."

“Actually, your designing is what gave me the idea. I should say the bracelet you helped Annabelle to make.”

“I do that a lot with the girls, I usually picks them up when the grandmothers have their readers group meeting. I like to spend time with them, and they both like jewelry. Since your mother is also in the group, I just bring the girls to the house and then she gets Annabelle when the meeting is over.”

“I wonder how our mothers can be friends and we not know about it, or what was happening to each other.”

“Simple, they didn’t really meet until the girls met. My mother got your mother interested in the reading group.”

“No matter how it happened, you’re here in Arizona and I’m glad.”

“Just friends, Brian. Strictly business.”

“Just friends.” he agreed silently adding once again, *for now*.

“What I was thinking of was a line of jewelry making kits, something a little different then the usual beads and such. We could do different kits for different ages, maybe up to preteens.”

“Maybe even teens? Those we could really get into some complex things. With wires and such.” She indicated the pad of paper in the folder. “May I?”

“Of course.” Brian slid it across to her.

For the next half-hour or so, she sketched, explained, diagrammed and basically created the outline for a new line of kits, even adding some unisex ones. Finally she realized she had used up most of his paper. “I’m sorry,” she said

“Don’t be, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this alive, not even in school when you tried to explain design to me. Do you still design clothes?”

“Only for myself. When I was in Paris, the man I worked for, Robert Nikols introduced me to the man who designed his jewelry. I basically learned from him. The jewelry for the designs was late. Everyone was in a panic. I managed to find some wire and string and beads and such and made a few baubles to go with some of the dresses. I found I had a knack for it and more importantly I loved it.”

“Nikols?”

“No, not my husband, my brother in law, I should say ex brother in law. The house Charles worked for was where I did my internship. He was going out on his own and hired me when my job ended. He introduced me to Daniel.”

“Is he upset that you took Jilly back to the states?”

“Daniel? No, the last I heard he was living it up with some pencil thin model, a Kate Moss look alike.”

“What about the rest of his family?”

“It’s just his brother Robert. He and his partner own a design studio in Paris, they design purses and other accessories. He was the one who encouraged me to come home. He comes to the states yearly on business and came out here last year to see us. He’ll be back in the spring for a visit. That’s enough about me,” she looked at her watch. “I have to get home. Jilly will wait up for me.”

“Not your mother?” he teased.

“Her too, but Jilly waits for me to come home when I work late. She can’t sleep until I do.”

He signaled the waiter and paid the bill, “I thought Annabelle was the only one who did that. Mom says it’s because her parents went away and never came back.”

“Could be. Jilly’s father dropped her off at the babysitter and never came back. I got a call asking when I was going to come pick her up.”

“Bastard.” He folded the papers up and placed them back in his brief case. “I want you to meet with my R&D people and go over this. I’m sure we’ll have to make some changes to meet federal regulations.”

“Not a problem, I can call them tomorrow if you like and set up a meeting.”

“That won’t be necessary, I’ll have someone call you.”

“All right.” She rose and grabbed her purse off the chair she had placed it on. “Thanks for dinner, Brian. I’ve enjoyed it.”

“Wait!” I’ll walk out with you.”

As they walked to their cars, she was all too aware of him, if anything he’d gotten even more handsome with years. “Seasoning” is what her father used to call it and looking at Brian, she knew just what he’d meant. Brian was definitely ‘seasoned’ and she wanted to taste him. To see is reality was as good as her memories. She shook her head, stop that she told herself.

He held his hand out for her keys, she shook her head and pushed the button on her remote start. Her car's engine started immediately. She turned to him and smiled. "For those few cold mornings around here."

"You never did like the cold, I'm glad to see you haven't changed that much."

He stepped closer, she stepped back and found herself against his car. Suddenly, she couldn't breathe, she needed to get this situation under control, she held her hand out again, "Thanks for a wonderful time. I look forward to talking to your research and development people tomorrow."

He took her hand and held it for maybe a minute longer than expected before muttering, "ah hell," and pulling her into his embrace and claiming her lips with his.

So much for control, was her last lucid thought before she found herself surrendering to the kiss. Ten years seemed to melt away at the velvety warmth of his kiss. Instinctively, she returned the embrace, needing the warmth and desire she had missed all these years. Her breasts tingled against the fabric of her blouse and her skin sang at his touch. The ringing of a cell phone bought them both back to reality. They jumped apart, breathing heavily, trying to catch their breath.

"It's mine," Kirsten said, reaching into her purse and pulling a phone out. "It's Jilly."

He leaned against the car and watched as she talked to her daughter. He hadn't intended to do that, but seeing her again, having her so close, he just had to taste her, this once.

"Sorry," she said. "Jilly wouldn't go to sleep until she knew I was coming home."

"Does she interrupt all your business meetings?"

"No, just the ones at night," Kirsten smiled, "Come to think of it, this is the only night meeting I've had. "

"Nice to know you'll make an exception for me."

"Brian, about what just happened."

He held a hand up. "I know, I shouldn't have done it."

"I wasn't exactly unwilling. But it can't happen again." She wasn't going to let him break her heart again.

"Why not?"

"Because it's too messy, that's why not. I think given the situation with the girls, and our business relationship, we're better off as just friends."

“I’m glad I didn’t blow the business end anyway.”

“No, I think you have a fantastic idea and I’d love to help your people with the design.” She reached for her car door. “Now I really do have to get home.”

He reached around her and opened the door for it, waiting until she was buckled up before he closed it. She rolled the window down. “Thanks, I’ll talk to you soon.” He stepped away so she could pull out.

“You certainly will.” He smiled and watched her pull out of the restaurants parking area and down the street. He didn’t get into his own car until she was out of sight. If she thought they were going to be “just friends” she was in for a surprise.

Brian pulled into the garage, he could see the light on in the kitchen, his mother must still be awake. He looked at his watch, Nine PM, she was waiting up for him. Sure enough, she sat in the kitchen drinking a cup of tea. “Hello, Mom.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “How’s Annabelle?”

“She’s sleeping, we did her homework and then I read her a story. Oh yes and she had a phone call tonight from Jilly.”

“So, Jilly’s called her before.”

“You didn’t tell me your dinner meeting was with Kirsten Nikols.”

He grabbed a beer out of the fridge and sat down at the table. Opening it, he took a long sip before continuing. “You didn’t ask me.”

“And this was strictly business?”

“Yes, mother, it was strictly business. We want to design a new line of Jewelry making kits for the stores, something different than the usual stuff. Annabelle was thrilled that day she let her make a bracelet. I thought she would be a good person to bounce some ideas off.”

The look on his mother’s face showed she clearly did not believe him, all she said was, “We’ll see.”

Brian decided to ignore the comment.

\* \* \*

The rest of the week was busy, she had people in and out of the studio, people commissioning and picking up pieces, other co-op members talking about the landlords notice.

They had a meeting and had decided to look into buying the building themselves. She also worked extra nights at the mall so she could be off Thanksgiving weekend.

The last night she worked, it had been quiet, she was teasing Harry and Santa about the calm before the storm. “You’ll be away for the first weekend,” Harry said, “How did you manage that?”

“Simple, I work every night I’m scheduled, even some I’m not and I’m reliable. Plus this is the first time I have asked off in the three years I’ve worked here.”

“So, what do you plan to do?” Santa asked.

“My mother is taking me and Jilly away for the weekend, but she won’t say where. We’re leaving tomorrow morning. She’s even packing things for us so it will be a total surprise.”

“Sounds like fun.” Both men said.

“I don’t know about that. However, Jilly really wants to go, so we’ll go.”

“She’s a lucky girl to have you and your mother.”

“We’re lucky to have her.”

Later that night, she and Harry walked out together. He usually rode home with a friend that worked in one of the mall stores. That friend was not working tonight so she had offered to drive him home. As they pulled out of the parking lot, Harry asked, “Did you have any more problems with the necklace?”

“Not really, the one other time I was around that man, I forgot to wear it.”

“Remember what I said.”

“Come on Harry, think logically, is there any reason for that stone to change colors like that?”

“We’re talking love, Kirsten. Love is never logical and it certainly is never predictable.”

“I certainly can’t argue with that,” she muttered, signaling for a right turn.

“Sounds like a broken heart speaking there.”

“No, just a mending one.” She stopped at the red light and turned to him. “Harry, what would you do if something had happened to Helga and you didn’t know about it. She didn’t tell you until long after it had happened. Could you forgive her?”



“That’s not exactly a fair question, other than when I’m down here working, we’ve not been apart since we met as teenagers. But to answer your question, I’d like to think I would, depending on what it was that had happened.”

“Helga’s lucky to have you.”

The little man’s face lit up. “I’m the lucky one. And you will be too, someday soon.”

“We’ll see, Harry, We’ll see.”

### Chapter Four

“Why are we going up to the cabin? Friday is the busiest day of the year for us.” He was reading the paper and having his coffee.

“Because it’s thanksgiving, and we always spent thanksgiving there, when you were a child. In case you’ve forgotten. I decided since Annabelle is here now, we need to revive that tradition. I told her all the fun you and her dad used to have up there. She really wants to go.”

“Woman, you do know how to lay on the guilt, don’t you?”

She smiled and kissed her son on the top of his head. “Oh course, it’s in the mother genes.”

The clacking of feet running down the stairs announced Annabelle’s impending entrance. “Good morning Uncle Brian. I thought you were going to sleep forever. I can’t wait to go to the cabin. Are you ready?”

Brian laughed and stood, draining his cup of coffee. “Yes, princess, I am. Let me go get my sweater and coat.”

“No sooner did the door close behind him than Annabelle ran over to her grandmother. “See, I was good, I didn’t even tell him our secret.”

“Yes, you did, I’m very proud of you. Now I need you to keep the secret just a bit longer.”

“Yes, Nana,” She closed her mouth and pretended to lock it and throw away the key.

“When was the last time you were up here?” Brian’s mother asked as the car climbed the hills toward their cabin.

“I can’t remember. I know Bob used it a lot. And you and your friends use it in the summer.”

“Yes but we haven’t used it as a family since your father died.”

Brian kept his eye on the road as he thought, “You’re right. I think the last time was the Christmas before Dad died.”

“Just as I thought.” His mother replied and went back to staring out the window. After a few minutes she spoke again. “After we get all unloaded, I’ll have to take stock of what we have, I may need to run out for a few more things.”

“More? There’s enough food in the back of this car to feed an army. And it’s going to be just the three of us, right?”

Silence was the only answer he got. He glanced at his mother out of the corner of his eye and then pulled off to the side of the road. “Out with it, who have you invited?”

Annabelle yelled out, “Jilly and her mom and her grandmother!” She looked at her own grandmother and slapped her hand over her mouth. “Oops, I wasn’t supposed to tell. I’m sorry Nana.”

“Don’t worry about it, darling. We had to tell him sooner or later.”

“I’m going to be in the cabin for the weekend with five women?”

“Well, it’s only three more than if it had been just us. You know all three of them and you said you wanted to bounce ideas around with Kirsten. This is the perfect chance.”

“You’re right, we’re involved in a business relationship and nothing else. So don’t even think about playing matchmaker this weekend.” He had his own plans for Kirsten and his mother did not need to know them.

“What’s a matchmaker?” Annabelle asked.

“Some thing you don’t need to know about, yet.” Brian said as he put the car in gear and headed toward the cabin. And something your grandmother needs to forget about.”

\* \* \*

“Where exactly are we going?” Kirsten asked as she drove up the mountain road. Her mother still hadn’t told her where they were going.

“You’ll see it soon, keep an eye out for the Girl Scout camp, it’s not far after that.”

“What is not far after that, mother?” Kirsten glanced back at her daughter who was busy playing with her Game Boy. “You’d better tell me or I’ll turn around right now. You’re up to something, I know it.”

Her mother sighed. “We’re spending the holiday with friends.”

“Friends? We don’t know anyone who lives up here.”

“Yes we do, just not year round. My friend Catherine owns a cabin up here.”

“Catherine, as in Annabelle’s grandmother, Brian’s mother?”

“Yes, that Catherine. The same Brian I might add that you never told me you knew before now.”

“That was years ago, in college.”

“We’re going to visit Annabelle?” Jilly asked from the back seat. “Cool! She told me the cabin has a fireplace and lots of room for us to play in and a porch swing. Maybe we’ll get snow and get stuck there.”

“Oh lovely, just what we need.” She rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“What’s wrong?” Her mother asked, “Do you need me to drive?”

“No,” Kirsten said, “I’m just tired. That’s all.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you where we were going. You would have refused to go. I want you to have a few days of rest. You’ve to do nothing but relax while we’re here.”

Yea, like she could relax with Brian Hurley in the same house. If she found out he knew about this and didn’t say a word to her the other night he would be sorry.

“There’s the sign for the girl scout camp!” Jilly pointed out, “We’re almost there!”

\* \* \*

Brian took the last box out of the car and turned at the sound of another vehicle approaching, by the time he’d taken the box to the cabin door and turned around, they had pulled in next to his vehicle. Jilly came running out as soon as the car stopped.

“Hi Brian!” She ran up to him. “Where’s Annabelle?”

“Hey Jilly. She’s probably in the kitchen with her grandmother.” He left the door opened for her and went to help unload the car,

“You must be Margaret?” He held his hand out to the older woman as she carried a suitcase up the walk.

“Yes, I am. It’s good to meet you, Brian.” She nodded toward the car. “Why don’t you help my daughter with the remainder of our things.”

“Gladly.” He turned toward the car where Kirsten had the trunk open and was lifting a box of food out.

“Let me get that.” He reached for it, grabbing it seconds before she dropped it. “What on earth is in here?” He asked shifting the weight around to make it easier to carry.

“Who knows? Maybe they’re expecting more people I swear there is enough food here to feed an army.” She looked up at him before slamming the trunk shut. “Did you know about this when we had dinner the other night?”

“No! I found out half way up here this morning. If I knew I would have said something to you.”

“Hmm. I think our mothers are up to something?”

“They’re not the only ones.” Brian looked up to the second floor of the cabin.

Kirsten followed his gaze just in time to see the two girls jump back from the window where they had been watching them. “It’s a good thing we’re just friends then, they’ll have nothing to talk about.”

“Yes, nothing at all.” He agreed. *Not yet anyway.*

\* \* \*

“Doesn’t look like the grandmothers are back yet.” Brian said to the girls as the cabin came into view. The two older women had gone to visit a neighbor and Kirsten looked like she was falling asleep on her feet. Brian offered to take the girls for a walk in the woods while she could take a nap. From the looks of her she needed it. Jilly had only been too happy to tell him about her mothers busy work schedule. No wonder she was so thin. He wondered why her ex didn’t give her child support. According to Jilly, she hadn’t seen her father since they left France.

Inside the house, Jilly ran up to see if her mother was still sleeping. She was anxious to show her the pinecones they had picked on their walk. Almost immediately she came running back down the stairs. “Brian! I think something’s wrong with Mommy.”

Brian took the stairs two at a time. Running to the guest room, he stopped just inside the door. Kirsten lay on the bed in sweat pants and a t-shirt. The shirt had rolled up to reveal a flat

abdomen, covered with spots! Her pillow was soaked with sweat. She opened her eyes and looked at him

“Brian?” she asked sleepily, “What’s wrong? I’m so hot.”

“I’m not really sure but off hand I’d say it was chicken pox.”

“What?” she struggled to sit up in the bed. “I can’t be sick, I can’t afford to be.”

“Well, I’m no expert, but I’d say that was chicken pox.”

She looked down at her abdomen. “Wonderful. Can you see them anywhere else?”

“Not yet. Do you know where you were exposed?”

She didn’t have to think about it. “The girls class. I was there a couple of weeks back, talking to the class about designing. A day or two later Jilly came home and told me one of the boys in her class had chicken pox.”

“That means the girls will probably come down with it?”

“More than likely, have you had them?”

He nodded, “Mom had me and my brother home with them at the same time. Speaking of which, I’d better go call her and let them know.” He held a hand out to stop her when she tried to get out of bed. “You stay put. I can handle the girls myself. This may explain why your necklace turned so dark.” He pointed to the chain around her neck.

She looked and once again the stone had turned a deep red. Slipping it off her neck, she lay back down, too tired to argue, keeping her eyes closed when he came back in and slipped a clean pillow under her and pulled the blankets up around her before silently closing the door behind him.. A few minutes later there was a knock on the door followed by two little heads peeking around it.

“Mommy?” Jilly asked

Kirsten opened her eyes and patted the side of the bed. “Come here Jilly Bean, and you too Annabelle.”

The two girls hurried across the room. “Do you really have chicken pox?” Annabelle asked

“Sure do, want to see them?” Kirsten pulled her shirt up to expose her abdomen.

“Gross,” said Jilly “Sammie said his hurt, do they hurt?”

“No, but they itch.” Kirsten made a face that had both girls in hysterics.

“Will we get them?” Annabelle asked solemnly, “I don’t like to be itchy.”

“You might, but you may not. If you start to itch or see any red spots, let your uncle Brian know.”

“I will..”

“Gee, if we got them now, we’d have to stay here, wouldn’t we?” Jilly asked.

“For a little while.”

“Cool,” the girls said in unison before jumping off the bed.

“Why don’t you both go back down stairs with Brian? I need to sleep a little more.’

The girls came over and gave her a hug. “I love you mommy,” Jilly said before running out the door.

“I love you too, Jilly Bean.”

Brian was on speakerphone with both mothers, who were still at the neighbors. “Don’t worry, I can handle the girls.”

“We hate to leave you like that. It sure does sound like chicken pox to me. Let me call the doctor and I’ll get right back to you. Tell Kirsten there’s oatmeal bath in the guest bathroom. She’ll probably want to soak in the tub for a while.”

“From what I saw mom, I don’t think she’ll quite feel up to that for a while yet.”

“Maybe, but don’t forget. I’ll call you back in a few minutes.” She disconnected and turned to Catherine. “I think Mother Nature may have just lent us a helping hand.”

\* \* \*

When Kirsten woke up the room was pitch dark, someone had come in and pulled the curtains closed. She could just make out a sliver of moonlight between the openings. Throwing the blankets off, she sat on the side of the bed and waited for her head to stop swimming.

“You decided to wake up?” Brian softly called from the doorway.

She simply nodded and asked, “What time is it?”

“Nine o’clock. I just finished putting the girls to bed. There’s some home made soup downstairs if you’d like some. I can heat it up and bring it to you.”

“That would be lovely.”

“Fine, I’ll be right back.”

“Thank you.” She waited until he left before standing up and slowly making her way across the room to the bathroom, stopping to get another t-shirt along the way. Removing the sweaty one she looked at herself in the mirror. The spots had progressed around to her back and

down her arms. There were a few scattered ones on her chest and neck. "Leave it to you." She chastised herself, "Getting chicken pox at your age." She ached all over so it took her a while to change into dry clothes and return to bed shortly before Brian came back with a tray of food.

"That smells wonderful! It must be my mothers soup."

He nodded. "I found it in a container in the fridge. Jilly told me that's what it was. I heated it up and gave some to the girls for dinner."

"Where is my mother? Are they still out?"

"They returned home. Mom called our doctor who said even though both mothers have already been exposed, given their age and their health, he thought it would be better if they just went back home and not risk further exposure."

"So, it's just us and the girls?"

Brian smiled. "Afraid so. He seemed to think the girls will break out in the next few days."

"Oh wonderful. I'm sorry Brian, this is the last thing I wanted to happen."

"Don't worry about it. I can work from here. Mom has a full computer set up in her room and I can use it. Oh, I forgot. Margaret said she'd call the mall and the co-op, in case anyone was looking for you. And my mother said there was oatmeal bath in the linen closet."

"Oh good! I'm trying not to scratch and that's all I want to do."

"Finish your soup and I'll fill the tub for you."

"Thank you..." She went back to eating, listening to him piddling around in the bathroom. She heard the water running. Putting the tray to one side, she sat on the side of the bed and waited.

Brian came out and took the tray of the bed. "Your bath awaits madam."

She couldn't help but smile he used to do the same thing when they were in school she was surprised he still remembered it. "Thank you, kind sir."

She stopped just inside the bathroom and almost started crying. The light was off and the room illuminated by two candles sitting on the vanity. Their scent filled the room. A bath pillow lay on the back of the tub so she could rest her head while she soaked. It was just the way she liked her bath, just the way he used to fix it for her when they were together. She turned to thank him but he was already out of the room. Stripping her clothes off she sank into the warm water, and sighed as the heat seeped into her aching body and the oatmeal helped to ease the



inflammation and itch. She lay back and closed her eyes. “Damn you Brian Hurley,” she said aloud, “You don’t play fair.”

Brian had snuck back in the room leaving lotion on her bedside table. He picked her necklace up, it had turned back to its usual white color. Amazed he watched as it turned dark red in his hand. What kind of stone is this? He stood at the bathroom door and listened. Telling himself he wanted to be sure she was okay. He barely suppressed a chuckle at her curse. *No, I don’t Kirsten. Consider yourself warned. We will not be just friends. I let you go once, I won’t do it again.*”

She stayed in the tub until the water cooled. Drying off she got dressed and went back to bed. Pulling the blanket back she was surprised to find the sheets had been changed while she was in the bath. There was a tube of anti itch cream on her bedside table. She applied some wherever she could reach. She’d have to suffer with the rest. A knock on her door was followed by Brian entering the room. “Just checking to be sure you didn’t fall in.”

“Not quite, but I could have fallen asleep very easily. Thank you.”

“We aim to please,” He pointed toward the tube in her hand. “Would you like me to help you with that?”

“I’ve managed to get everywhere but my back. I don’t want to bother you.”

He held his hand out. “No sense in suffering if you don’t have to.” He took the tube from her. “Now lay down and pull the T-shirt up.”

She did as he was told and the minute he touched her she was sorry. He always did have a gentle touch, he knew where to touch her and when. She closed her eyes and soon was lulled to sleep by his soothing touch.

What had he been thinking! Brian looked down at the pale skin, even covered in spots it was beautiful. Images flashed in his mind, images of a younger Kirsten, a different time, a different bed. Swallowing hard, he tried to banish the images of their past as he rubbed the medicated cream into her skin. When he finished, he quickly pulled the T-shirt down. “All done.” That’s when he noticed she was fast asleep. Chuckling he pulled the blanket up over her and left the room. He might as well get some work done, he certainly would not be doing much sleeping tonight.

How on earth had his mother done it? Brian thought a few days later as he sat on the bed with Annabelle in his arms. The doctor had been right and she had broken out a few days after Kirsten. Luckily Jilly hadn't shown any signs yet. Maybe that meant she wouldn't break out. He hoped so. Looking up, he found Kirsten standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing out of bed?" he asked.

"Jilly came in and told me Annabelle was crying."

He nodded, "she's miserable."

She walked over and laid a hand on the child's forehead. "Did you give her any Tylenol?"

He nodded, I gave her a bath with the oatmeal stuff and put some of the lotion on her. Everytime I try to leave her she wakes up and starts crying."

Kirsten nodded, "Bring her into my room. She can sleep with Jilly and me. I don't mind. She might sleep better and you won't have to crunch your big bod, cute as it is, into that little bed."

So she still thought he was cute? He stood up and shifted Annabelle in his arms. The child woke up whimpering.

"Hey pumpkin," Kirsten brushed some hair from the child's face, "how about you come in my bed for a while? Us chickenpox girls can sleep together. Maybe we can give them to Jilly."

"I itch Kirsten."

"I know hon, it's not fun. Come on, let your Uncle Brian sleep in his own bed tonight, he might break yours."

She was rewarded with a giggle.

After getting Annabelle settled, and making sure the girls were alright, he went down to the library to get some work done. Checking his email, he saw the owner of the building he was interested in wanted to set up a meeting with him and the current tenants. What was that about? He picked up the phone and dialed a number. Charles Dean, his second in command answered on the second ring. "Hey there, how's the hospital going?"

“Very funny Charles. I’ll tell you this, it gave me a new respect for what a mother does. I don’t know how my mother managed to stay sane. Annabelle has them now and is miserable. But that’s not the reason I called.”

“I take it you got the email about the new building?”

“Yes, what do they want?”

“I think to see what you’re going to do with the building and if they can stay there.”

“I figured something like that. I have no problem with a meeting but it will have to wait until we get back.”

“Any idea when that will be?”

“Probably at least another week. Do you have anything else I need to know about?”

Brian grabbed a note pad off the desk and jotted things down as he listened.

After giving some orders to Charles, he ended the call and shut the computer down. Mary had faxed some papers to him but he hadn’t looked at them. He’d deal with that tomorrow. In the living room he found Kirsten going through the bookshelves.

“How are the girls?” He asked.

“They’re both sound asleep, I came down to grab a book. I don’t want to leave Annabelle alone for too long, or Jilly.” She grabbed a book and was heading upstairs when she looked out the window. “It’s snowing!” She ran over to the window. “The girls will be thrilled when they wake up in the morning.” She looked up at Brian who had joined her at the window. “I remember the first time I saw snow on the mountains here, you want to know what I first thought?”

“What?”

“I thought to myself, well damn, Brian was right. It does snow in Arizona.”

“I know one thing I wasn’t right about?” he said

“What’s that?”

“I shouldn’t have let you go.”

Kirsten let out a deep sigh. This thing had been hanging between them for a few weeks, now was as good a time as any to get it out in the open. “Why did you?”

“You had the chance to go to France, you were so excited about it.”

“But you were going to come visit, we had it all planned.”

“I know, but then Dad got sick, to sick to work and I had to come home I didn’t go back. I didn’t think I had the right to ask you to give all that up and come back with me. Especially when I had to leave school and take over the business.”

“So, Brian Hurley once again decided to make the decisions for everyone. Was that the reason you called and told me you didn’t love me any more that you’d met someone else?”

He nodded. “I know I was wrong.”

“You don’t know how wrong you were buddy. What right did you have to decide my life for me? For me and my child?” She stopped as she realized what she had just said. “Damn! She hadn’t wanted to tell him like this.

“What?” He grabbed her by the arm, “Are you trying to tell me you have another child?”

“Had, I lost the baby during the first trimester.” She pulled her arm away and turned to the window, afraid to look at him, afraid of what she would see. She wrapped her arms around her middle. “I didn’t even realize I was pregnant until after I was in Paris.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“After the baby was born, you had made your feelings all too clear in that last phone call. I didn’t want you to feel you had to marry me. I know your sense of right and wrong and that would be the first thing you would have decided. Then the decision was taken out of my hands.”

“Did your mother know?”

She shook her head, “She knew about the miscarriage but not that you were the father.” She hadn’t been sure how he would react to her news but it certainly wasn’t what happened next. He wrapped her in an embrace and kissed the top of her head.

“I’m so sorry, Kirsten.”

“Why?”

“Because you had to face all that alone.” He kissed her forehead.

“I wasn’t exactly alone. Robert was with me.” She didn’t want him to stop.

“Ah yes, the infamous ex brother in law, Jilly’s *Uncle Robert*. He held on tighter, not wanting to let her go. He kissed the tip of her nose.

“Is that jealousy I hear in your voice?” When did the room get so warm?

“No, just sorrow, that I wasn’t there for you.” He brushed a kiss across her lips, once, twice, three times before pressing her lips to his, caressing her mouth more than kissing it. He pulled her closer to him, needing to feel her against him. Wanting her to know what he was feeling, what he’d been feeling ever since he saw her again and hope that had been dead was born once again.

The years melted away as Kirsten found herself on the sofa with Brian on top of her. His hands skimmed the hem of her T-shirt they blazed a path across her abdomen and up, exposing her breasts to the air. Brian pushed up on his elbows so he could see her better. The pox on her abdomen were fading but she was even more beautiful than he remembered. His lips caressed her neck, her shoulders and traveled down to her breasts sending shivers of need through out her body.

“Mommy!”

The one word acted like an ice cold shower on them both. Brian’s head lay on her abdomen and he took several deep breaths before lifting himself off her. He held a hand out and helped her stand, brushing her hair with his hand as she straightened her T-shirt. “I’m sorry, Brian.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” he gave her another hug. “Go see what your daughter wants.”

“Thanks.” She stretched up and brushed a kiss across his lips.

She found both girls awake but Annabelle was crying. “What’s wrong?” Kirsten asked rushing to pick her up. She sat on the bed with her in her lap and Jilly curled up next to them.

“She said she’s itchy.”

“Are you?” She asked.

Annabelle nodded taking her finger out of her mouth long enough to say, “And it hurts too.”

“Pass me that crème, Jilly.” She pulled Annabelle’s shirt up and saw several new eruptions on her abdomen. She squeezed some onto the child’s belly and began to rub it in. “Feel better?”

“Uh huh.”

Jilly came over with a book, “Read us a story mom?”

“Please?” Annabelle whispered.

If it would help the girls get to sleep she would be more than willing. So she opened the book and began,

Brian stood at the door watching, all three of them had fallen asleep, Kirsten on her side with a girl on either side. The blankets had been kicked off the bed. Silently he crossed the room and covered them up with it. Annabelle stirred a little and sleepily opened one eye. “Hi Uncle Brian.”

“Hi princess,” He held a finger to his lips, “Go back to sleep, princess. Don’t wake the others up.”

Annabelle nodded, “Love you.”

“You too.”

Uncle Brian?”

What?

“I love Kirsten, can she be my new mommy?”

“Go to sleep princess.” He closed the door behind himself and whispered, “Maybe, someday.

## Chapter Five

Another week passed before they were finally able to return home. Thankfully, Jilly never broke out. However, both girls were suffering from a severe case of cabin fever and Brian and Kirsten were kept busy keeping them occupied. Unfortunately, it left them with precious little time of their own. Their last morning there, they found themselves alone for a few minutes while the girls were upstairs getting dressed.

“Hardly the nice relaxing long weekend you expected, right?” Brian asked as he washed the breakfast dishes.

Kirsten couldn’t help but laugh, “That is so true. At least it’s been interesting.”

He dried his hands and leaned against the counter, “So, tell me where does this leave us?”

“What do you mean?”

He stepped closer and put his arms around her. “I’d like to be more than friends.” He lifted the necklace off her neck, “I like the way this changes colors when I’m around.”

“Must be your cologne.” She teased, not quite ready to tell him what Harry had said about the stone

He brushed a kiss across her lips, “Can I see you when we get back?”

She thought about it for a few minutes before saying, “Yes, I’d like that.”

“Good” his cell phone rang interrupting their conversation. He checked to see who it was. “Damn, I should never had told my secretary I’d be returning today. I’m sorry, I have to take this call.”

She got up “I better go check on the girls anyway, they’re taking far to long.”

“Yes Mary,” he answered, “What couldn’t wait until I got back to the office?”

“Not me boss, its Charlie, he wanted to know what your schedule for the next week was, he wants to set up that meeting.”

“I’ll call him, when I get home. Did we get an estimate on the repairs to the wall?”

“Yes and it won’t be cheap.

“I didn’t think it would be,” He heard the girls running down the stairs. “I’m, leaving here shortly, I’ll call you when I get back to town.” He ended the call and headed out to the car.

Once home, Kirsten called the mall and told them she’d be back tomorrow evening. After unpacking things, her mother drove her to the co-op. That way she and Jilly could take the car shopping and they would pick Kirsten up later, giving her time to go through her mail and answer messages that had been building up since she’d been away.

In the building, she found Jason in his studio.

“Hey chicken pox kid, how’s it going?”

“Very funny. It’s no fun having them at this age let me tell you.”

“From what I remember, it’s no fun at any age.” He pointed to a pile of papers on his desk. “There’s your mail waiting for you.”

“Thanks, any more on the meeting with the buyer?”

“No, my sister contacted his lawyer and they’re waiting to hear. We’ve been approved for financing so we can at least make a bid on the building.”

“That’s good news,” She picked the box up and headed for her studio. “Keep me posted?”

“Will do. Kirsten?”

She turned back, yes?

“I’m sorry you were sick but I have to say the rest did you wonders. You look better than I’ve seen you look in weeks.”

She laughed, “Thanks, I think.”

In her studio, she listened to messages and tried to get caught up. In the middle of a preliminary sketch for a necklace the phone rang. “Kirsten Nikols.”

“Hi!” It was Brian. “Are you swamped with work?”

“Not quite, but close. How about you?”



“Nothing I can’t handle. I called to see if you wanted to have dinner tomorrow night?”

“I’m sorry Brian, I have to work at the mall.” She held the sketch up to the light, looking at it critically.

“How about after ward, we can have a late dinner.”

“I’d like that.” She made a few changes and held it up again

“Fine, I’ll pick you up when the mall closes.”

“I can’t wait. See you then.”

“Who was that?” She looked up to see her mother and Jilly standing there.

“Brian. He’s taking me out to dinner tomorrow night after work.”

“Another business dinner?” her mother asked pointedly. Jilly just smiled and Kirsten ignored them both as she prepared to close up for the day.

\* \* \*

“You look lovely tonight, Kirsten. Are you going somewhere?” Harry asked as they walked out the mall to the parking lot.

“Yes, I have a dinner date, with an old friend.”

“Is this the same friend you told me about? The one who made the stone turn red?”

“Yes it is, but I decided that was a reaction to something. It couldn’t be anything else. Stones don’t change colors like that.”

“Well, what’s the initial glow of love but a chemical reaction?”

She laughed, “Harry, you can rationalize anything.”

“There’s nothing rational about love, my dear.” He held the door open for her.

Brian stood right outside leaning against his parked car. He came forward to greet her and Kirsten introduced him to Harry. “Do you need a ride home Harry?” She asked.

“No, thank you. Here comes my ride, I’ll see you tomorrow. It was nice to meet you Brian.” He ran up and got into a car that had just pulled in at the top of the lot.

“For a little old guy he moves fast.” Brian said, opening the car door and helping her in.

“Where are we going?” She asked.

“Some place quiet.” He pulled out of the parking lot and into the city traffic, at this hour it was minimal and soon they were on the outskirts of town. He turned down a side road and pulled into a development of expensive townhouses all of the with mountain views. A few more turns and they were at the back of the development. He reached up and pushed a button opening the garage door as he pulled into the driveway.

“I thought you lived with your grandmother and Annabelle.” She asked when he parked the car and they entered the home. The entry way had beautiful tile floors and stucco walls with a cathedral ceilings, it opened into a great room, which opened into a screened in patio where a candle lit table had been set for two. The patio had one of the best views of the mountains she had ever seen. “Do you own this?”

He nodded, “At least the company does. We use it for visiting executives and VIPs. Saves on hotel costs. I thought it would be a good place for us to have some piece and quiet, no parents or noisy little girls to bother us.” He indicated the patio, “Go on out, I’ll get you a glass of wine.”

Kirsten sat on the lounge at the end of the patio, from here she could look up at the mountains, illuminated by the moon and the stars. She could feel the stress of the day roll off her shoulders.

Brian handed her a glass of wine. “Dinner will be ready shortly.”

Don’t tell me your cooking skills have improved since college?” she remembered the disastrous few times he’d attempted to cook a meal.

“I wish I could say they had but no. I have to confess, its take out from the local gourmet market. And of course dessert. I don’t think you’ll be disappointed.”

“As long as the dessert contains chocolate. You know my rule.”

It was his turn to laugh, “Yes, chocolate makes everything taste better.”

A timer went off in the kitchen and Brian stood, “Your dinner awaits madam, I will return shortly.”

She followed him into a state of the art kitchen that her mother would die for. Margaret was a wonderful cook and would make full use of everything here. Taking the plates from him, she carried them out to the table as he followed with the bottle of wine. They settled down to eat. The conversation was as free as the wine, they talked of everything, the girls, their mothers, what they'd done since college. The things Kirsten had learned in France about fashion and design and art. Soon, Brian was taking the dishes away and returning with dessert and coffee. Brian eat very little, preferring instead to watch Kirsten eat hers, the sinfully sweet cake was covered with chocolate and strawberries and she obviously enjoyed it.

“Aren't you going to finish yours?” she asked

He pushed it over to her. “You were enjoying yours so much I thought you might like more.” He reached over and brushed a crumb off her upper lip, he continued to trace her lips with his thumb.

She was unable to breathe, unable to do much but watch. The smoldering flame in his eyes startled her, even though she knew it shouldn't have. Mesmerized, she watched as he dipped his thumb into the melted chocolate and rubbed it on her lips. Her mouth opened in surprised and he took full advantage, leaning over to trace the fullness of her lips with his tongue, licking every last bit of chocolate from them before covering her mouth with his. His tongue met hers, sending shivers of desire through out her body, heat she'd not felt in ten years, not even with Daniel, with no one but Brian.

Silently, he stood and held a hand out to her. She stood and let him lead her into the bedroom. He slid her jacket off and waited while she kicked her shoes off. He drew her to him for another kiss, this one longer, more heated, more demanding. He pulled her to him letting her feel just how much he wanted her, how much he had always wanted her. He reached for the hem of her sweater and pulled it over her head, he unzipped the skirt and let it fall. Standing back he was suddenly speechless, she stood before him in a sheer bra and panties with lace at the top of her thigh high stockings. She was even more beautiful than she'd been ten years ago.

“Brian?” she asked, not sure why he had stopped.

“I could just stand here and stare at you.” He said.

“Well, that might be a trifle one sided, wouldn’t you think?” She reached for his shirt and began unbuttoning,

He reached to help her.

“No.” she said, pushing his arms away. “You’ve had your fun, now it’s time for mine.” She reached up and kissed his lips, his chin, his neck, all the while unbuttoning his shirt. As she slid it from his shoulders she bit one and then soothed it with her tongue.

He watched her plant kisses down his chest to his waist and he hissed a breath when she reached for his belt buckle. He closed his eyes, held his breath and waited.

Oh my, she thought as she watched him standing there in his shorts, he has definitely gotten better with age. Wide shoulders, muscular arms, flat abdomen, he was beautiful.

He opened his eyes to find her staring at him, looking at him as if he were some of that chocolate cake she had devoured earlier this evening. “Are you through yet?” he teased her.

“No way, buster, I’m just beginning.”

“Good,” he reached down and swept her into his arms laying her down on the bed next to him. “Let’s be comfortable at least. He reached over undid the front clasp of her bra, nuzzling her breast before his lips touched them with tantalizing possessiveness. He continued down her abdomen across the curves of her hips and finally to that special place. He could feel the wetness on her panties, could smell her everywhere. It was not enough, he wanted to be inside her, he needed to be inside her. He helped her take them off and threw them to the floor, where his shorts soon joined them. Reaching into the drawer he pulled out protection, she took it from him and he let her sheath him. Gritting his teeth when she touched him, her touch was exquisite but he wanted more. She guided him to her and slowly, he slid in, inch by inch until he was full inside her, until he was home.

“Brian?” Her eyes looked up at him through a passion-induced haze. He felt so good inside her, he made her feel like she was home and she never wanted to leave.

“Yes, Love,” he slid out and in, slowly letting her feel him, wanting to make it last as long as possible. He held her hands over her head, never taken his eyes off her, wanting to see her come apart for him

However, ten years had been a long time to wait and they would wait no longer.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and felt him deeper inside her. “Please Brian, that feels so good.” She gasped, the pleasure building inside her, a sweet agony taking her higher and higher.

They found the pace that bound their bodies together. He willed her to open her eyes and when she did, the desire and love carried them both to a place where they would be changed forever.

## Chapter Six

She hated to leave the safety of his embrace but she had to get home before Jilly woke up and found her gone. She turned over and whispered in his ear, “Brian.”

He pulled her closer and ran his hands up and down her spine, murmuring nonsense as he did.

“Brian,” she repeated, “Stop that!”

“Why? Don’t you like it?”

“I do, that’s precisely the point, I have to get home. I have to be there when Jilly wakes up.”

He stretched his body the full length of the bed her gaze traveled along the gloriously naked body.

“Like what you see?” He teased her

“You know I do.” She leaned down and brushed a kiss across his lips before jumping up. “But one of us has to be realistic, we both have seven-year-olds who will be awake in a few hours and if we’re not there they’ll start asking questions.”

“And you have a problem with this?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. I’m not ready yet to face those kinds of questions from Jilly.

“Why not, they’ll find out about us sooner or later. Are you ashamed of me?”

“Please, Brian, you know better than that. I just need some time to get used to things.”

“Used to what?”

“This, us.” She had finished dressing and looked pleadingly at him. “Are you going to drive me home or not.”

“Give me a minute.” He got out of bed and threw his clothes on. Soon they were on their way the ride back was silent, each of them lost in their thoughts. He pulled up in front of her house and shut the car off.

She undid her seatbelt. “Thank you Brian, for everything.” She leaned over to place a kiss on his cheek but he turned and covered her mouth with his.

He kissed her with a demanding mastery, he would leave no doubt in her mind of his intentions.

“I’m not going away, you know that.” He whispered when they finally managed to break apart.

“I don’t want you to leave, I’m just not ready to explain to Jilly why I wasn’t there when she woke up.”

“Good, as long as we’ve got that straight.” He brushed her hair out of her face and leaned across her to unlock the door. “I’ll call you later.”

“Please.” She grabbed her purse and ran into the house. The light in the kitchen told her that her mother was still up, or just getting up.

“If you were going to stay out all night, the least you could have done was let me know.” She said when Kirsten entered the kitchen.

She leaned down and kissed her mother. “Sorry, I didn’t think I’d be out this late, to be honest with you.”

“I hope you at least had a good time.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I did.”

“He’s the one, isn’t he? Brian, the one who broke your heart before you went to Paris?”

She simply nodded and then gave her Brian’s explanation. “Why is it that men always think they have to make the decisions about things?”

“Maybe because we let them do just that most of the time. Unless we disagree with them. Was he the father of the baby you lost?”

“Yes, and before you ask I did tell him about it.”

“Good,” Margaret nodded, “so where are you two going from here?”

“I wish I knew. Right now, I’m going to bed. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“If you have no early appointments why don’t you sleep in? I’ll call Jason before I take Jilly to school. If anyone shows up he can tell them to come back later.”

“Sounds like a plan. And Mom, don’t say anything to Jilly, yet.”

“I won’t she wants a new daddy bad enough that she’ll have you married tomorrow.”

She just got into bed when the phone rang. Reaching over she picked it up. “Hello Brian?” she whispered.

“How did you know who it was?”

“Who else would be calling me at this hour. The only one I know who would be awake is Robert, it’s only eleven am in Paris.”

“Ah yes, the infamous Uncle Robert.”

“For your information, Robert is a good friend. I’m not exactly his type anyway.”

“He’s gay?” Brian couldn’t help the relief in his voice.

“Yes, he is. And I really do have to go to sleep Brian.”

“Then, snuggle down and imagine where you were a few hours ago. Sweet dreams.”

“Sleep well. Oh, and Brian.”

“Yes,”

“Just to let you know, I’m sleeping naked.” She hung up with a chuckle. Two could play that game.

\* \* \*

She took her mother’s advice and slept in the next day. Arriving to her studio about noon. Jason came into her studio shortly after she opened it. “Hey there, late night?”

“Sort of, any news Jason?”



“My sister called and the owner wants to meet with us and the other buyer one night soon.”

“I’m pretty well booked.,” She looked over at her calendar. “There’s my schedule for the next few weeks. See what you can do. Otherwise, you’ll have to meet without me.”

Jason grabbed a piece of paper and jotted down several dates. “All right. I’ll let you know.” He stopped at the door. “By the way, I don’t know what you’re doing lately but you look really good. You look happy. It’s about time.” He left before she could say another word.

\* \* \*

“So you finally decided to come to work?” Mary followed Brian into his office, laying papers on his desk for him to review.

“Yes, not that my arrival time is any of your business.” Pouring himself a cup of coffee he sat down at his desk. “What’s this?” He pointed to the papers on his desk.

“An estimate for the repairs to the warehouse as well as an estimate for what it will cost to make the changes necessary if you buy that building downtown. By the way, Charles called, the owner of the building wants to set up a meeting.”

“So? Can’t Charles handle it?”

“Apparently he thinks the owner is trying to raise the price. The people there now want to put in a bid and he thinks the owner is going to play one group against the other.”

“I think Charles is a tad paranoid. First though, I need to talk to R&D about that jewelry idea, I want them to work with someone I know.”

“Is that the lady you had dinner with last night?”

“Who I had dinner with is none of your business, young lady. Remember whose the boss around here.”

Mary just laughed and headed out to her office. “She must be someone really special.” She said before shutting the door behind herself.

“Yes, she is.” Brian whispered.

\* \* \*

Kirsten collapsed on her bed, she had worked every night this week at the mall. In addition to spending most of her days in the co-op. She'd talked to Brian almost every night, even though they'd both been too busy to do more than that. He'd send her flowers three times this week already. As she pulled the blankets up around her the phone next to her rang. "Hello, Brian." She answered.

"How was your day?" He asked.

"Tiring." She curled down in bed and lay her head on the pillow, cradling the phone to her ear. "As much as I love Christmas, I'll be glad to see December 26<sup>th</sup>."

"I know what you mean, Annabelle asked me when we would have our movie night again."

"Ah so, she's laying the guilt on you."

"Oh yea, big time. What about Jilly?"

"The same only being my daughter everything is majorly dramatic. If she's this dramatic now, I'm dreading when she hits fourteen."

A vision passed through his mind, Kirsten and he, their daughters and maybe one or two other children of their own. He liked that idea.

"Brian? Did you fall asleep on me?"

"No, love. I was just thinking."

"About what?"

About our girls being teenagers. I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

"I know what you mean. I can't stay on long tonight Brian, I'm exhausted, I just hope I don't have any trouble falling asleep. I think the last two nights I've been to keyed up to sleep right away.

"Well then, are you laying down?"

"Yes."

"Good, close your eyes and imagine I'm there with you, I've got my arms around you."

"What are you doing Brian?"

“Helping you relax and fall asleep. Now close your eyes like a good girl.”

“I’m always a good girl.”

“That you are, now do what I asked.”

“Yes, sir.” She closed them and imagined the way he felt laying next to her that night he’d cooked dinner for them. Remembering the feel of her head on his shoulders, his arms around her.

“Good, now imagine you don’t have any clothes on. And turn over on your stomach.”

Since she slept in a tank top and panties that wasn’t hard. She did as he asked. “Now what.

“Imagine my hands running up and down your back, stroking, rubbing, kneading all the muscles away.”

Hmmm.” She stretched luxuriously in the bed. “Feels so good.”

“It does doesn’t it, feel the pressures easing in your shoulders, down your back inch by inch, vertebrae by vertebrae, down your back, across your hips. Have I told you how soft your skin is, how beautifully soft. I love to touch you, touch your skin.”

She found herself squirming on the bed. “Brian, what are you doing?”

“Hush woman! I’ve already explained to you. Feel my hands on the backs of your legs, kneading the cramps out of your muscles, your thighs, your calves, your feet, your toes. Have I told you you have gorgeous feet? I love to touch your feet, to stroke them, ease the fatigue from them. Now, turn over on your back.”

She did, throwing the quilt off her bed. The room suddenly uncomfortably warm.

“You still with me sweetheart?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Good,” his voice got even deeper. “Have I told you how beautiful you are? “

She could feel her nipples straining against the fabric of her tank top. God what was he doing to her?

“You are you know? Even more so now than you were in college. I want you here with me. Is that what you want?”

“Yes, her voice was barely above a whisper.

“I’m still massaging your feet, your toes, easing all the fatigue from them, my hands going up your legs further and further and back down.”

“Brian! I thought you were trying to help me relax!

“You aren’t?” he asked innocently.

“No, I’m not. And you will pay for it.

“I can’t wait!” If I can arrange it, will you have dinner with me tomorrow night?”

“It’s my one night off, I was hoping to spend it with Jilly. But I want to see you.”

Tell you what, why don’t we do something with the girls early in the evening and then later you and I can spend some time together. After they go to bed.”

Since it’s Friday, that sounds wonderful! Why not let Annabelle spend the night here with Jilly?”

“Or we could let Jilly spend the night with Annabelle?”

“We could.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow and we can talk about it.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Kirsten, can I give you a piece of advice?”

“Sure.”

Cold shower works wonders, I know I’m going to need one.

He disconnected the call before she could even reply.

\* \* \*

There were pink roses waiting for her when arrived at her studio the next morning. She didn’t even have to look at the card to know who it was from. The phone rang shortly after, she

hoped it was Brian, but it was not. It was a client, followed by three more in quick succession. She thought she wasn't going to hear from him until later, but the phone rang again.

"This is Kirsten."

"I managed to change a few appointments so I can actually have a free night."

"Lovely, she said. "Thank you for the flowers. They're beautiful."

"You're welcome. There has been a slight change in plans though."

"What's that?"

My mother is coming, seems the grandmothers are cooking something up and want us all to be at your house for dinner."

"How come my mother didn't mention it this morning? Or Jilly?"

"I have a feeling Jilly didn't know as for your mother, I think they just cooked this up. My mother called me just before I called you."

"I guess the girls will stay at my house then. I'll have to stay home and help my mom with them."

"I thought of that, I can stick around if you'd like."

"Thank you, first I need to have a talk with my mother. I don't want our mothers or the girls to get any ideas about where this is going."

"Where are we going?" He asked curious to hear her answer.

"I'm not really sure. She answered honestly. "But I don't like being pushed in one direction or the other."

"Sweetheart, I don't think anyone could push you in any direction you didn't want to go in. I'll see you tonight."

\* \* \*

"Mom?" Jilly sat at a stool near the counter, helping her mother. Kirsten had washed the lettuce for salad and Jilly was tearing it into the bowl.

"Are you going to marry Brian?"

Kirsten knew this question would come up sooner or later, she had just hoped it would be later.

Slowly, she finished washing the carrots and placed them on the counter, drying her hands before turning to answer her daughter. "Well, he hasn't asked me yet."

"Of course not, men are slow about that. Nana explained that to me. If he does though would you marry him?"

"What else did Nana explain to you?" Kirsten glared over at her mother who was busy stirring sauce on the stove and didn't look at her daughter.

"Just that. But you didn't answer me mom, would you marry Brian if he asked?"

"Jilly, if I decide to marry Brian and if he decides to ask me, you'll be the second person to know."

"Why the second one? Shouldn't I be the first?"

"Silly goose, Brian would be the first." She grabbed her daughter around the waist and lifted her off the stool, tickling her as she did. "Now, go get washed up, they'll be here soon. I hope your room is cleaned."

"Yes ma'am." She left the room at a run.

Kirsten walked over to the stove and stood in front of her mother. "What else have you been telling your granddaughter? At least that I should know about."

"Did you know your daughter wrote Mrs. Claus and asked her to help you and Brian fall in love? "

"What!" Kirsten shook her head. "I'd have never let her given the letter to Harry if I had known what it said."

"It wasn't in that letter. The day I took the girls to the mall, when you weren't there, they gave Harry another letter to deliver."

"I think I need to have a talk with Harry. He has the girls believing he really is Santa's head elf."

"And what's so wrong with that?" her mother asked.

For once, Kirsten didn't have an answer.

Later that evening, Kirsten and Brian were in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner. The grandmothers had made a point of taking the girls out for ice cream. "They weren't exactly hiding anything were they?" Brian asked as he helped to load the dishes.

"Not really, but then my mother has never really been known to be to discreet." She closed the dishwasher and started it before turning right smack into Brian's arms.

"Hi there." He smiled, before lifting her onto the counter and stepping between her legs. She put her arms around his neck and pulled his head down to meet hers.

"Hello gorgeous," she whispered before kissing him. She drank in the sweetness of that kiss, savoring the way his lips felt on hers, on her neck on her chest. He had opened her blouse and his hand cupped her breasts. "What about if they come back?" she asked breathlessly.

"We've got at least an hour." He said. "My mother told me that before they went out."

She had to laugh, "Your mother is incorrigible." Her hands had pulled the shirt out of his pants and were busy unbuttoning it. "We could go upstairs you know."

"No, I don't think I can make it that far." He flexed his hips leaving her no doubt of his meaning.

His hands ran up her legs, sliding her skirt up further and further. He realized she had no panties on. "Jesus woman! What are you trying to do to me." Lifting her up just enough to bunch the skirt around her waist he stood back and drank in his fill.

Leaning back on her arms, her shirt wide upon, her breast free, Kirsten was glad the kitchen curtains were shut. Just the look in Brian's eyes sent her body on fire. She felt brazen and wanton and beautiful and she wanted him now.

"Look at your necklace." He said, holding it away from her.

"It had changed once again to red, but this time a deeper red, almost purple. "Did you change cologne?" she asked.

He shook his head. "That thing does react to something though."

“Come here handsome.” She gave him a come-hither smile “Wanna see what other kind of reaction you can get?”

What he did next totally surprised her. He pulled a chair over and sat down placing her legs over his shoulders. She gasped when he bent down and kissed her where no man had kissed her before. Brian!” she screamed what he was doing to her, with his teeth, and his tongue and his hands were positively beautiful. She wasn’t sure how long she would last.

“Brian.” She pleaded, holding his head to her, wanting him to never stop. But she needed him inside her now. “Brian... please...” She pleaded in short gasps.

“What love, please what? I thought I was pleasing you.”

He was, and she flew higher and higher until she screamed out his name as she flew over the edge.

But he wasn’t through yet. He rose and quickly unzipped his pants, letting trousers and boxers drop to the floor. He plunged into her, bringing her legs around his waist. “Kirsten.”

She wrapped her ankles around him, pressing him even closer. “Brian...” she repeated his name over and over with each thrust of his hips.

“Kirsten...god, Kirsten.” He reached down and kissed her breast, suckling them, reaching down to stroke where they were joined, until there was nothing but him and her and the passion between them..

Brian...” She screamed as she came.

“Kirsten, Love.” He whispered as he joined her feeling his passion spill into her, wanting this moment to never end.

When they were finally able to breathe, he had collapsed in the chair with her on his lap. He buried his face in her hair, not wanting it to end.

But end it must, the others would be home soon and he didn’t feel like answering questions from Annabelle or Jilly. “Sweetheart,” he whispered, brushing a kiss across the top of her head.

“Hmm,” She said, “I think I died and went to heaven.”



“I know, but if we don’t move soon, they’ll be hell to pay when the girls walk through the door.”

“All right.” She murmured. “There’s a bathroom on the first floor you can use. I’ll run up the back stairs to the one in my room.”

She slowly got up and pulled her skirt down before leaving him. He watched her walk away enjoying the view before he went in search of the bathroom to freshen up.

Kirsten looked at herself in the mirror. Had she really just made love with Brian on her mother’s kitchen counter? She’d never done anything so wanton, or so wonderful before. Looking in the mirror she realized she looked like a woman who had been totally and completely loved. In their hurry, a button had come off her blouse, she’d have to put another shirt on before she went back downstairs.

Brian was looking at the news channel when the girls came running into the house. “Uncle Brian!” Annabelle jumped on the chair into his lap. “Did you miss us?”

“Yes I did, princess.” He took his handkerchief out and wiped the corner of her mouth. “Chocolate ice cream again?”

She nodded, “but I mixed it with strawberries.”

“Good for you.” He turned to Jilly. “What about you Jilly Bean?”

“I had rocky road.”

“Ah, creative, like your mother.”

“Where is my daughter?” Margaret Daly asked as she entered the room. “Your mother wanted to go home, so we dropped her off on our way back.”

Brian nodded. “Was she okay?”

“Fine, she said something about having things to do at home.”

“Who is making all that noise?” Kirsten asked as she came down the stairs. A red shirt had replaced the one she had on earlier.

“We went to Cold Stone Creamery mom and I had rocky road it was so good.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Why don’t you girls go upstairs and get ready for your baths. I’ll be right up to run the water for you.”

“Can we use your bubble bath mom, please?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Yea! Come on Annabelle, that usually means yes. It smells like flowers and makes lots of bubbles.” The two girls ran up the stairs giggling.

Brian stood and stretched, “I guess I’d better go then, so you can tend to the girls.”

Kirsten’s mother also stood. “I’ll get the girls started, why don’t you walk Brian out to his car? Good night Brian, I hope to see you again, soon.”

“Good night Mrs. Daly.” He turned to Kirsten who simply shook her head. “Some times my mother makes me feel like I’m sixteen again.”

“I can vouch that you’re older than sixteen.” He held his hand out. “Shall we, before the girls interrupt us?”

Outside, he gathered her in his arms and kissed her gently. “I love you, you know that, don’t you?”

She nodded, “call me later?”

“Why don’t you call me? After the girls go to sleep.”

“Okay.” She reached up and brushed a kiss across his lips. “Drive safe.”

He got in the car and drove away, wondering why she hadn’t replied in same when he professed his love. “He really couldn’t blame her. He had burned her once before. He’d just have to prove to her that this time was different.

She thought the evening over as she got ready for bed. She could feel the blush on her body when she thought of what they had done earlier. Annabelle asked her if she loved her Uncle Brian. Up until that moment she hadn’t been sure. She surprised herself by answering yes. Picking up the ohone, she dialed Brian’s private number.

“Hello beautiful.”

“I bet you talk that way to all the girls who call this line.”

“Only the ones that are tall, curly hair and have seven-year-old daughters named Jilly.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“How are the girls?”

“Sound asleep, finally. I washed hair, braided Annabelle’s, curled Jilly’s and painted both their fingers and toenails bright red and Christmas green.”

“Oh boy, Annabelle must have loved that.”

“She did, she showed me her snow globe. That was sweet of you to buy that for her.”

“Mom and I decided we would do our best to keep her memories of her parents alive.

“She’s a lucky girl to have you, both of you.”

“We’re the lucky ones, she could have been in the car with her parents that night. Instead she was staying with my mother.”

There’s really nothing she could add to that.

“I’m going to be busy this weekend.” Brian said, “I won’t be able to see you.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Fine, but I have an couple of important meeting next week and I need to go over some material before then.”

“Okay, I can understand that. I have a co-op meeting Monday night and I have to work both days this weekend. Will I see you next week?”

“Try and keep me away.” He said, “Are you in bed yet?”

Kirsten got in and pulled the blankets up over her self. “Now, I am.”

“Goodnight my love, sleep well.”

“Brian?”

“Yes?”

“Annabelle asked me something tonight, she asked me if I loved you. Do you want to know what I said?”

Brian's heart stopped beating, he was afraid to answer, afraid what he would hear. "If you want to tell me." He finally managed to whisper.

"I told her yes, I did love her Uncle Brian."

He didn't trust himself to speak at first.

"Brian? Did you hear me?"

"Damn you woman, why did you have to tell me that over the phone."

"Because I think I was afraid to tell you earlier."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay." She said not sure what she had expected him to say but it certainly wasn't that.

"Kirsten?" He interrupted her thoughts.

"Yes?"

"I meant what I said earlier, I do love you and I am not going to lose you this time."

"I like the sound of that. Good night Brian." She disconnected the call and curled down in her bed. Within seconds she had fallen asleep.

## Chapter Six

“So what’s so important that you couldn’t meet with us during the day?” Brian asked the owner of the building. My people have looked over the building and it will only need minor changes to accommodate us. I know our bid was more than generous.”

“Oh it was, indeed. However, the people who are there now are threatening to sue. They couldn’t afford to pay what you can.”

“If this is a ploy to get more money.”

“No, it’s not.” The man looked nervously at his watch. “They should be here soon. I want to avoid a lawsuit and I thought if you met with them, you might come to an understanding. They’ve been in the building for a few years now and are good tenants, for artists, but I’m a businessman. I need to make money.”

Brian had been barely paying attention, until he heard the word artists. “What type of artists?” He asked, fear growing inside him. Kirsten had said she had a co-op meeting tonight but she didn’t say where.

“It’s a cooperative, they rent studio space from me.”

Brian put his head in his hands, this was not going to be pretty. He rose and headed for the door, just as it opened. Leading the delegation was Kirsten, who stopped right in front of him.

“Brian!” she said before turning to run, ignoring the cries of her friends. Brian ran after her.

“Handle things Charles,” he called out over his shoulder. The rest of the group gathered around the door, impeding his exit so that by the time he reached the parking lot, she was in her car and speeding away.

“Kirsten, wait!” He took out his cell phone and punched her number. Damn, she wasn’t answering. He left a message. “Kirsten, answer me, for god sakes. At least give me a chance to explain.” He hung up and tried again, with the same results.

As he entered the building one of the artists met him on the stairs. “She’s gone.” it was more a statement than a question.

Brian simple nodded. “She’ll probably never speak to me again.”

“You the guy who’s been sending her flowers?”

Brian crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes, what of it?”

“Hey, dude! Back down. She’s the happiest I’ve seen her in all the time I’ve known her. I figured it had to be a guy.” He held his hand out. “Jason, I have the studio next to hers.”

Brian shook his hand. “Well, Jason, lets get back to the meeting and see if we can find a solution.”

\* \* \*

“How dare he!” She muttered out loud. Ignoring the ringing of the cell phone beside her. If it wasn’t for her daughter, she’d shut the damn thing off. When would she learn she was better off without a man, first Brian, than Daniel, and then she’d been dumb enough to let Brian hurt her again. At home, she parked the car and entered her house. Jilly and her mother were watching TV, and she didn’t even go in to them, heading straight up to her room. Once there, she shut her cell phone off. The last person she wanted to talk to was Brian Hurley.

A knock on her door was followed by Jilly’s head around the corner. “Hi mom.” She crossed the room and climbed onto the bed. “Are you sick?”

“Not really, sweetie. I do have a headache. I came home early to go to bed.”

“Do you want me to stay with you?” She asked, “It helps me feel better if you stay with me?”

Kirsten kissed the top of her daughter’s head. “How did I get so lucky to have someone like you for a daughter? Thanks, but you go on to bed, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Jilly jumped off the bed and ran to the door turning back as she opened it. “I love you mommy.”

“I love you too, baby.”

As she lay there in bed, she heard the phone ring downstairs and her mother answer it. If it had been Brian, and she had no doubt it was, her mother obviously told him she was sleeping. Although she tried, sleep eluded her that night and just before sunrise she headed down stairs. Her mother had already made coffee and was sitting there waiting for her. Kirsten poured herself a cup and sat down, she didn’t have to wait long before her mother spoke. “Are you going to tell me what happened last night? Brian said something about a meeting?”

“Oh yes, it was a meeting all right. Remember me telling you that someone wanted to buy the building where we rent space?”

“Let me guess, it’s Brian’s company?”

“Exactly, and he never told me. I found out when I walked through the doors of the office where we were meeting last night.”

“And you didn’t give him a chance to explain, did you?”

“He had plenty of chances to explain, once again Brian Hurley decides he has to be the one who knows best.” She didn’t want the coffee now. “I’m going back to bed, if anyone from the co-op calls, I’ll call them later.”

“What about Brian? What do I say if he calls?”

“I have nothing to say to him.”

\* \* \*

“What’s wrong with Uncle Brian?” Annabelle asked her grandmother. “He looked so sad this morning.”

“He had a little problem with work last night, that’s all.”

“Oh, I thought maybe he had a fight with Kirsten. He looks like daddy did whenever he and mommy had a fight.”

“Oh child!” Catherine pulled her granddaughter into her arms. “Sometimes I swear you were born ninety years old.”

“Yuck!” Annabelle squirmed, “That’s ancient!”

\* \* \*

Kirsten unlocked the door to her studio and turned the light on. She’d not been in for a few days, choosing instead to work from home. Picking her mail up she went over to catch her messages.

“So, you’ve decided to stop hiding?” Jason asked from the door. He entered carrying two mugs of coffee. “Here, I’d just made a fresh pot when I saw you pull up.”

“Thanks.” She took a sip, “How did the meeting go the other night?”

“If you ‘d stuck around you would have known. I do like your Brian, he’s a good guy.”

“He’s not my anything and he’s an ass.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Give the guy a chance, he’s trying to find a solution so we won’t be without a place to work in.”

“That’s Brian, he fixes things for everyone, but himself. And god forbid he ask someone how his decision affect them.

“Hey, don’t yell at me. We’re meeting him again after the New Year are you going to attend.”

“I have no idea. I may have to look for a new studio.”

“Kirsten, give the guy a chance.”

“I’ll think about it.” She muttered. Gathering her mail and messages up and putting them into her tote bag along with a few other things. “I’m working at home for a while, if anyone comes by they can call me on my cell phone.” She handed him the cup. “Thanks, I’ll call you in a few days.”



“Kirsten?” He stopped her before she walked out the building.

“Merry Christmas.”

“Yea, Ho-Ho-Ho.”

\* \* \*

Once again, Brian was running through the mall. This time he was looking for a present for his mother. Two days before Christmas and he was miserable. A few days ago, his life had been full of hope and promise. Kirsten loved him! Amazing how fast that changed. She wouldn't answer his phone calls, he'd gone by the house only to be told she wasn't there and she hadn't been in her studio either when he went there. He had to get her to listen to him. He thought of going by Santa's village but she'd only be working and definitely couldn't talk to him. A flash of red in the jewelry store window caught his eye. It was a pair of crystal earrings that matched that necklace Kirsten wore. The one she swore turned that red only when he was around.

“Pretty aren't they?” a voice next to him said.

He looked down to see Harry standing next to him. “Yes, they look like Kristen's necklace. The one she made from the stone you gave her.”

“He nodded, “The one that turns deep red when you're around?”

“That's the one, she thinks it's a reaction to my cologne or something.”

“Oh, it's a reaction all right, to you. That stone is magical and only turns colors when the wearers soul mate is near. Give her time my friend, she'll talk to you. You just have to believe.”

“Well Harry, this time I think you're wrong.” When he looked down the man was gone. He kept looking at the earrings and finally said, “What the hell.” and went in and bought them.

Harry headed back to the village and saw Annabelle waiting for him with her grandmother. The little girl held something in her hands. He introduced himself to Catherine Hurley before turning to Annabelle. “What's that sweetie?”

“My snow globe. Uncle Brian gave it to me to remember my mother and my daddy. See there is my mommy, my daddy and me.” She held the globe up to him. “Uncle Brian is sad Harry, can you help him and Kirsten?”

Harry looked at her grandmother who simply shrugged her shoulders. “The child wouldn’t let me rest until we came to see you.”

“That’s fine, I don’t mind. He took the snow globe from Annabelle and shook it. Gazing intently into the flakes fluttering down. The trio watched as the mother, father, and child turned to family with four children and then back to simply one. He handed it back to Annabelle, “I wouldn’t worry about anything, it will all work out.”

“Thanks Harry.” She smiled at her grandmother. “See, Nana, I told you Harry was special.”

She smiled down at the man. “He is indeed.”

Harry bowed low. “Merry Christmas to you both.” He said and was gone.

\* \* \*

Christmas had been quiet, or as quiet as it gets with a seven-year-old. Robert had called from France with news that her ex was marrying his latest conquest, who had come to work for him as a receptionist. “She’s welcome to him,” had been Kristen’s reply.

“So who do we have coming for dinner?” Kirsten asked her mother as she set the table. “Annabelle and her grandmother.”

“What about Brian?”

“Well, Catherine wasn’t sure if he was coming or not.” Margaret hurried out to the kitchen.

Kirsten followed her, “Mother,” she warned.

“Kirsten. It’s Christmas and for the sake of the girls you two will behave like adults. Do I make myself clear.”

“Yes mother.” She said, just as the doorbell rang. By the time she got to the door, Jilly had opened it, and left it opened. She and Annabelle were already in the living room, lost in the middle of her presents.

“Hello, dear.” Catherine said as she came through the door. She kissed Kirsten on the cheek. “Brian’s right behind us with some bags, can you help him.”

“Kirsten.” He said glumly. “Nice to see you are alive and well.”

She decided to ignore his last comment. “Hello Brian, let me take one of those.” She looked inside and headed out to the kitchen with the bag. “If that bag is presents, they can go under the tree.”

Both mothers stopped talking as soon as she walked into the kitchen so Kirsten knew just what they'd been talking about. “Don't worry, I haven't killed your son. Yet.”

“I do hope you two can get your differences settled.”

“I don't know Catherine, he has to trust me first.”

“Just remember one thing, Brian has always been the one to fix things for everyone.”

“I know, and I understand that, I just want to be included in the process. Not presented with his decision later.” She opened the fridge to put the dishes in there, not even seeing Brian standing just outside the kitchen, but his mother did and she waved him away.

Dinner went better than she thought it would. Brian and she actually managed to make some small talk. After cleaning up, they were to open gifts. She had found some cufflinks, the same color stone as her necklace and had bought them for him before she found out what he'd been planning to do. The doorbell rang just as she was going into the living room. She opened it to find Harry standing outside.

“Come in, Harry, please. We were just going to open presents.”

“No, my dear. I just came to say good bye. I'm going home today and I'm not sure I'll be back next year. I just wanted to tell you that I wish the best for you and your daughter.”

“Harry, you have to come back next year. What would Santa's village be without you?”

“We'll see dear. I'm not getting any younger you know?” He took her hand and kissed it. “You take care of yourself.”

Kirsten bent down and kissed his cheek. “You have a safe trip home and tell Helga I need you back here next year.”

“I'm afraid it isn't up to Helga, it's up to Santa, or Mrs. Claus.”

She shook her head. “What ever you say, Harry.”

“Who was that?” her mother asked when she came into the living room.

“Harry, he came to say good bye. He’s going home today. He said he’s not sure he’ll be back next year.. He’s still insisting it’s up to Santa or Mrs. Claus.”

“Well, of course it would be.” Jilly said.

“Yes, Kirsten,” Annabelle chimed in, “He is Santa’s Head Elf.”

“Oh, how could I forget?” Kirsten said, before sitting down next to the tree. “Do you girls want to give out the presents?”

Jilly gave presents to Brian, and his mother and Annabelle who passed out presents to Kirsten, her mother and Jilly. Soon there was a flurry of paper and ohs and ahs as everyone exclaimed over their gifts. Suddenly, Brian stood and pulled a box out from behind the sofa and handed it to Kirsten. “I was afraid if I put this under the tree, the girls would open it before you could.”

Kirsten swallowed hard, suddenly afraid to open it, not sure what she would find. “Thank you,” she managed to whisper.

“Hurry Mom, open it.” Jilly and Annabelle were bouncing with excitement.

She took the green wrapping off and found another box inside that, this one had red wrapping the color of her necklace when Brian was near. She unwrapped that and found an envelope inside that. Opening it she took out the paper and read, than read it again.

“What is it mom?” Jilly asked.

“Jilly, why don’t you and Annabelle, come in the kitchen with us.” Margaret said.

“If I have to,” Jilly said her tone leaving no doubt that she was doing this under protest.

Kirsten looked at Brian through tear filled eyes. “Why?” she asked holding up the deed to the co-op building, which was now in her name.. “I thought you needed that space for your warehouse.”

“Actually, only half of it, and I can rent that from my wife. Charles tells me the building next door is also for sale. I thought we’d bid for that one as well.”

“Wi-wi-fe? I don’t remember you asking me to marry you? Are you making decisions again, without me?”

“Not this one. I don’t even have a ring.” He took a box out of his pocket. “All I have is this,” He opened the box and showed her the earrings. “I’ve been miserable all week without you. I know I have to change and you’re just the person to help me do it. I love you and want you to be my wife, to keep me on the straight and narrow, to raise the girls together, and if you want maybe a few more children as well. I know it’s traditional to give a girl a ring when you ask her to marry you but.”

She flung herself at him and they fell back onto the couch. They kissed, lost in each other until they heard a voice at their side.

“Uncle Brian?” It was Annabelle, “Does this mean Kirsten is going to be my new mommy?”

“Well, princess, she hasn’t answered me yet.” He looked at Kirsten.

“Do you want me to?” Kirsten asked her

Annabelle nodded.

“Then I will.”

“Yippee!” She went running out to the kitchen screaming “Mrs. Claus did it Jilly! We’re going to be sisters!”

### **One Year Later.**

Kirsten rubbed her back, then her belly. This child was kicking up a storm. She still had another month to go before he was to be born. If she lasted that long. She sat in the chair next to the tree and Jilly brought a stool over to her. “Here Mom.”

Annabelle entered carefully carrying a glass of cold water. “Here Mom.” She smiled and Kirsten smiled back at both her girls.

She heard the front door open followed by Brian’s calling out “Where’s my girls?”

“In here.” She said.

He entered followed by a familiar little figure. “Harry!” She tried to stand up but he waved her down.

“Stay seated my dear. He came over to her and took her hand. “You look happy.”

“I am,” she said.

“That is good.”

“Harry, you were right,” Annabelle came running over to him. “Kirsten and I are sisters.”

“I told you that would happen, didn’t I?”

“Yes you did.” Kirsten smiled at him, “You were right about that and other things.” She looked up at her husband.

Brian took her hand and sat on the arm of the chair. “You certainly were my friend.”

“Do you still have the necklace?” Harry asked.

“Yes, but I save it for special occasions now.”

He took something out of his pocket, “Here’s two more stones for you. Helga sent them. She thought you might want to make necklaces for the girls, when the time is right.”

She took the stones from him and handed them to her husband. “Let’s put these away, for now. We have a few years yet before those two will start to think about marriage.”

“Not before they’re forty.” Brian muttered, putting the stones in his pocket.

“It’s time for me to go back. I wanted to see how you were doing. We missed you this year at the mall. But I think your days of playing Santa’s Elf are over.’

“For a little while anyway.”

“Rest up, those two will make their appearance soon and keep you hoping as much as these two do.”

“I think you’re mistaken Harry, the doctor said there was only one heartbeat.”

“Doctors have been known to be wrong. Trust me you’ll have twins and if I’m not mistaken they’ll be born soon.” He turned and walked out the door leaving a speechless Kirsten

and Brian behind him. Annabelle and Jilly walked to the door with him. “You two be good. Mrs. Claus sends her love.”

Thank you Harry and Mrs. Claus too. We should have known not to doubt her.

And neither should you dear reader. Never doubt Mrs. Claus, or any of Santa’s elves as Kirsten soon learn when just four days later on December 27<sup>th</sup>, little Max and Brian came into the world surprising everyone, except their sisters who knew Harry spoke the truth.

