



CHRISTMAS CAROL

By

Ellen Fisher

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Chapter 1

Swift Creek, Virginia

White icicle lights dripped from the eaves of the small houses lining the road as Jackson Parker drove slowly through the blue-collar neighborhood. Christmas trees draped in multi-colored, twinkling lights stood proudly in the front windows, and bushes bowed beneath the weight of thousands of small light bulbs. He passed three lighted Nativity scenes, four roofs adorned with Santa and his reindeer, and two giant glowing snowmen. Only one house on the street stood dark and undecorated.

He turned into the dark house's driveway.

How typical of Dad to not bother decorating for Christmas, he thought resentfully. His father had been a Scrooge of the worst sort who hadn't bothered with Christmas decorations during most of Jackson's childhood. And it figured he'd manage to go and drop dead less than a week before Christmas. Really, it was just like the old man to screw up a perfectly good holiday.

He shook his head at himself. It was stupid to resent his father because his heart had chosen this week to stop beating. He was reasonably certain Dad hadn't meant to ruin Christmas for him.

Dad had done his best to wreck his life, but even he wasn't capable of making his heart stop at the worst possible time. Not that he wouldn't be

grimly amused by the irony of it all, dragging Jackson away from his condo, his IT job, and his routine during a time of year he already found excruciatingly painful.

Ho, ho, ho.

Jackson got out of his Lexus, slammed the door, and stalked toward the house.

Merry fucking Christmas, he thought to himself.

* * * *

The house was quiet and still when he entered, in the eerie way of houses that have lost their inhabitant. Jackson felt a chill go down his back that had nothing to do with the cold nighttime air.

Great. Now he was getting imaginative. He knew Dad's ghost wasn't haunting the house. In the first place, everyone knew ghosts didn't haunt little brick ranches in the suburbs, only creepy-looking gothic mansions. Brick ranches just weren't a popular ghost hangout. Anyone who'd seen *Beetlejuice* knew that.

In the second place, he was pretty damn sure Dad's spirit wouldn't be lurking around anyway, because it would have headed straight for hell like it had an anvil weighing it down.

Even so, the creepy sensation that he wasn't alone didn't go away. He shoved the house key, which he hadn't used since college, into his jeans pocket. Leaving the door open behind him, he reached out, groping for the light switch next to the door.

The lights went on, flooding the room in light and making him squint against the sudden brightness. Something zoomed toward him and between

his feet.

Startled, and admittedly a little creeped out, Jackson let out a bloodcurdling yell. He stumbled backward, hit the raised doorsill, and fell backward, all the way down the four concrete porch steps. He slammed onto the ground, all the breath leaving his lungs in a grunt of pain.

For a long moment he lay there, eyes closed, mentally assessing the damage. At last, deciding nothing was bruised except his dignity, he opened his eyes.

Only to find himself looking right up a woman's skirt.

* * * *

Carol Bell cuddled Silver in her arms and glared down at the strange man who was lying on the ground, staring up at her with a peculiarly blank expression. He was obviously still alive, but he looked totally zonked out. She wondered if he'd gotten a concussion after that spectacular tumble down the stairs.

If so, it served him right, breaking into Robbie's house just a day after poor Robbie had passed on. The guy had probably seen the obituary and decided to break in looking for valuables. Good thing the attack kitty had caught him in the act.

The attack kitty purred in her arms, apparently dismissing the whole ugly incident and reminding her to provide dinner, which of course was why she was here. In fact, as far as the cat was concerned, providing food was her sole purpose in life, aside from the occasional rub behind the ears. As far as Silver was concerned, humans existed to serve cats.

Which was just fine with Carol. She didn't have a clue what the point

of her existence might be otherwise.

She glared down at the guy, deciding to bluff, just in case his head cleared. A burglar might be dangerous, after all. Although this one obviously wasn't a criminal mastermind, if he couldn't break into a house without falling down the steps. *Moron*. "I just called the cops," she announced. "They'll be here any minute."

He continued to look blank, but strangely entranced, and she realized he wasn't suffering from a concussion--he was just looking up her skirt. *Ugh*. A perv as well as a burglar. She took a step back, still clutching the cat defensively.

He sat up, looking disappointed, and looked up, at her face this time. There was something slightly familiar about him, she thought, but he was just outside the rectangle of light that spilled from the open door, and in the near darkness she couldn't get a really good look at him. "Did you say the cops?"

"Yeah, the cops. What kind of person are you, breaking into a dead guy's house?"

He rubbed at the back of his head, looking befuddled. "You think I'm a burglar?"

"You're obviously not the maid."

"No, I'm not the maid." He studied her for a long, thoughtful moment. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm a friend of Robbie's. I'm renting the house next door."

"Robbie? *Robbie*?" He stood up and stared at her incredulously. Even in the near darkness she could tell he was a nice-looking guy. And big.

Very big. She took a cautious step back, still cradling Silver in her arms.

“I’ve never heard anyone call him Robbie before.”

“Everyone called him Robbie,” she informed him. “He was a dear old man. I can’t believe anyone would be low enough to break into his house.”

“A dear old man, my sore ass. He was a flaming son of a bitch.”

“*What?*” She felt hot rage flood through her. She wished she had brought her cell phone along, because she’d love to call the cops and have them lock this guy up. She decided to run back to her house and call 911, and cheer when they snapped the handcuffs on him. “You--you *jerk*. How can you talk about a sweet old man that way?”

“He wasn’t sweet.” The guy flashed a heart-stopping grin that would have made her melt, if he wasn’t a criminal. Criminals didn’t make the best dates. And a dumb criminal was even less likely to be good relationship material. “He was a bastard. And I should know. I lived with him for eighteen years.”

All the wind suddenly went out of her sails. She’d thought the guy looked familiar, and now she knew why. He was a younger version of Robbie. Besides, she’d seen his face in photos. Lots and lots of photos. He’d been much younger in those pictures, but there was no doubt who he was ... the same guy whose high school and college photos were all over Robbie’s house. Just a lot more rugged. And more muscular. And generally more gorgeous. *Totally* gorgeous. That was evident even in the semi-darkness.

Her cheeks heated, and she had to fight the urge to fan herself, despite the December chill.

“You’re Robbie’s son,” she said with surprise. She honestly hadn’t expected him to show up. He hadn’t ever bothered to come see his father when the man was alive, after all. Yet here he was, in the very impressive flesh.

“Yeah. Unfortunately.” He turned around and studied the small house with its weedy, overgrown front flower beds, disintegrating roof shingles, and chipping white trim. “Which makes this my house now, I suppose. Oh joy.”

A pang shot through her. “I guess that makes Silver your cat, too.”

He turned and stared at her incredulously. “You mean my father owned that--that ball of lint?”

“That’s a terrible thing to say,” she reproved. “He’s a silver tabby, and really very pretty.”

“Sorry. I guess I’m prejudiced against any animal that tries to murder me on first acquaintance.”

“He didn’t try to murder you.”

“Sure seemed like it to me. He tripped me on purpose. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d whipped out a sword, like that cat in *Shrek 2*. I’m telling you, he was trying to kill me.”

“Pity he didn’t succeed,” she said under her breath, but she knew he heard her from the sudden glint of amusement in his eyes. She raised her voice. “His name is Silver Bells, or Silver for short. I gave him to your dad last Christmas, when he was just a kitten. I thought your dad seemed kind of lonely.”

“The old bastard deserved to be lonely.”

She gritted her teeth. “He was lonely,” she growled, “because his only son couldn’t be bothered to come see him for Christmas. Or his birthday. Or any other holiday.”

He gave a long sigh. “Look,” he said, “it’s damn cold out. You want to come inside, so we can talk? And maybe you can call off the cops, or it’ll be a damned short conversation.”

“I was bluffing. I didn’t call the cops.”

“That’s nice to know. Still, I’d like to talk to you.” He hesitated. “My name’s Jackson, in case you didn’t know.”

“I know. Your dad talked about you all the time. In fact, I’m the one who gave the funeral home your number. I guess I should have called you myself, but I--” *I didn’t much want to talk to you because I hated the way you ignored that dear old man.* “Anyway. I’m Carol. Carol Bell. Your dad probably mentioned me.”

“We didn’t talk all that much, I’m sorry to say. But if you gave the funeral home my number, you must have known I was coming.”

“No,” she said shortly, letting a wealth of disapproval fill her voice. “Somehow I didn’t think you’d come. You’ve never come before.”

Jackson had the grace to wince at her tone. “Nice to meet you, Carol,” he drawled, sarcasm lacing his deep voice. “Come on in. You can bring the ball of lint, too.”

* * * *

Jackson had to admit that in the light the cat bore less resemblance to the stuff that came out of his dryer’s lint trap. It was actually a fairly handsome animal, its long, furry coat marked with light, silvery-gray stripes

alternating with black. Its eyes were a bright green and seemed to regard him with extreme distrust.

Like he could possibly be any worse than his old man. Knowing Dad, he'd probably used the poor animal for a footrest.

He looked around at the living room, seeing it hadn't changed much since he was a kid. The sofa was still a hideous shade of rusty orange, the walls still a revolting lettuce green. A collection of cheap plates depicting every state's flower hung on the wall over the ancient TV set. Mom had loved those plates, and he supposed his dad had held onto them for sentimental reasons. Assuming there was any room for sentiment in the old man's wizened heart.

The only change he could see from his childhood was that the cat had apparently been using the furniture to sharpen its claws. The end tables his mother had cherished had been scored multiple times by the animal's claws, so that the legs of the tables were practically worn into shreds.

Good thing his mom hadn't lived to see *that*, or the cat would have spent the remainder of its life outside, cold or no cold.

He looked around at the place. "So," he said. "You've known my dad for a year?"

Carol put down the cat, which stalked into the kitchen and proceeded to make pathetic yowling sounds. Jackson guessed that meant it was hungry, although it sounded like it was trying to sing Wagner and yodel at the same time.

"I met him last Christmas," she said. "I'd just moved in, and I was pretty lonely too. Your dad was nice to me."

How nice? Jackson wanted to ask, but didn't. The thought of this pleasant young woman and his old, decrepit father ... well, it was just disturbing. Surely they hadn't been anything but friends. She was a lovely woman, he thought, looking at the way her dark blonde hair fell around her slim shoulders in curly disarray. It looked like spun gold. In fact, she was golden all over, with pale honey-colored skin and wide eyes that were an unusual shade of amber. She was of average height, maybe five foot five or so, but her slender, shapely body was anything but average. He glanced at the silvery cat hairs decorating her black T-shirt, where she'd been cuddling the cat against her chest.

Lucky cat.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said, following in the cat's wake.

"Thanks," he said, walking behind her and admiring the view. It was a good view, and he doubted it had been lost on his father, either. Dad might have been old, but he hadn't been dead. Not till yesterday, anyway. "But it was probably more of a loss for you than it was for me. Sounds like you and Dad could at least stand to be in the same room together."

"Oh, your dad was a great guy," she said warmly, opening a can and dumping something that smelled truly revolting into a flowered bowl. She put the bowl on the floor, and the cat began bolting it down eagerly. Jackson had always heard cats were supposed to be finicky, but this one ate like it thought it would never eat again.

"What *is* that?"

"Uh..." She glanced at the empty can before she dumped it in the covered trashcan. "Turkey and gravy dinner."

“Christ. It smells like sewage.”

“You’re not a cat.”

“Thank God for that,” he said, and headed back toward the living room. Anything to get away from the ghastly odor. She followed behind him, leaving the cat to its disgusting dinner. Morbid curiosity spurred him to ask the question. “What exactly did you and my father do together?”

“Oh, we just hung out together,” she said. “We watched old movies together, played chess, and listened to Frank Sinatra.”

He couldn’t think of the last time he’d talked to his dad. It was something he tried to do as rarely as possible, since he always wound up grinding his teeth together for two days after a phone call from his father. He seemed to remember he’d called around Easter, in one of his misguided efforts to make a connection with his father. But they sure as hell hadn’t bothered with any friendly small talk. Dad wasn’t the sort to chat. Not with him, at any rate.

He hadn’t been back to this house since he’d graduated from college, but he couldn’t remember his father ever playing any kind of game with him when he was a kid. But sure enough, as they walked back into the living room he noticed a fancy wooden chess set sitting on the coffee table.

He plopped down heavily in his dad’s old, ratty recliner and looked around more carefully. There wasn’t a single decoration in here to suggest it was Christmas. Not so much as a stocking over the fireplace. Typical, he thought grimly.

Then again, he hadn’t gotten around to decorating his own condo in Richmond, either. But at least he had the excuse of being too busy with

work. Admittedly, he was always too busy, and he hadn't actually managed to put up any Christmas decorations since he'd graduated from college eight years ago. But still, it wasn't at all the same thing. Dad had been retired, so if he hadn't bothered to decorate it was just because he was a Grinch.

Big surprise there.

Carol perched lightly on the frayed couch and watched him with sympathetic eyes. "So you grew up here, right? In this house, I mean?"

"Yeah," he said with a crooked grin. "Looks just the same, except..."

She cocked her head when he trailed off. "Except what?"

"The chess set," he said. "I never played chess with my dad. And ... where did all those pictures come from?" He stood up and walked over to the old-fashioned console TV. Sure enough, they were pictures of him all over its plastic fake wood top. Pictures of him as a kid, pictures of him in high school, pictures of him right up through college.

"You're surprised because your father has pictures of you?"

"Hell, yeah, I'm surprised. My father couldn't stand the sight of me."

"You're wrong," she said in her soft, gentle voice. "Your father was very proud of you. He talked about you all the time."

He grinned ruefully. "Talked your ear off about what a loser I was, huh?"

"Not at all. He thought you were wonderful."

Jackson grunted. "Look," he said, "I know you're trying to spare my feelings and all, but I know perfectly well what my father thought of me."

She blinked at him. "You honestly think he didn't like you?"

"That's a bit of an understatement. I think he hated my guts."

“Then why do you think he had all those pictures of you where he could look at them every day?”

Jackson shook his head slowly. “I really don’t have a clue. Maybe to impress young ladies with what a devoted father he was?”

“He wasn’t trying to impress me. We were just friends.”

He lifted an eyebrow as he looked at her, and she bristled. “What, did you think we were having an affair?”

“I guess I thought it was possible.” He walked back across the room and flung himself back down in the recliner.

“Ugh. That’s disgusting. You have a dirty mind.”

“It’s not that disgusting. Old people have affairs too, you know. Dad may have been old, but he was still a guy. And you’re a nice-looking woman.”

Some of the irritation faded from her eyes. “Thanks. But I don’t think your dad was interested in dating. He missed your mom too much.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Uh ... no. He talked about her a lot, too.”

“My dad didn’t care about anyone. I don’t know what kind of stories he was telling you, but he didn’t--“He broke off as the cat stalked into the room, its fluffy tail high in the air. It paused, regarded him through narrowed green eyes for a long moment, and then jumped. Jackson yelped as its furry weight landed squarely in his lap.

“Look at that. Silver likes you. Even if you did call him a lint ball.”

“I doubt he cares about me one way or the other. I bet he’s used to sitting in my dad’s lap in this chair.” Though he didn’t care that his dad was

gone, it occurred to him that the cat probably did. Animals bonded with their owners, right? Even if their owners were obnoxious bastards?

He wasn't much of a cat person, but a vague feeling of sympathy stirred him, and he reached out and rubbed the animal's ears. A sound like an outboard motor rumbled in Silver's chest, and he settled down into Jackson's lap.

"I told you," Carol said, looking pleased with herself. "He likes you."

Jackson gritted his teeth as the cat dug its needle-like claws into the worn layer of denim protecting his thigh. "No, he hates me. He's clawing me."

"He's just kneading his paws. It's something cats do when they're comfortable."

"It hurts like hell."

She grinned evilly. "Just part of the fun of owning a cat, like smelly canned food and cleaning litter boxes."

Lovely. He was now the proud owner of a rundown house in a blue-collar neighborhood, and a fuzzy ball of lint with needles for claws. Although maybe the neighborhood wasn't all that bad, if such a beautiful woman was living next door.

He yanked his mind away from that line of thinking instantly. Gorgeous neighbor or not, he wasn't planning on staying here. He wanted to get away from this house, and everything it represented, as fast as he could.

He sighed. Carol shot a glance at him, then stood up.

"Look," she said, "I guess I need to get going. But listen, can you let me know when the funeral's going to be?"

“Yeah, sure. I’ll drop by and let you know. I need to get it out of the way as soon as possible, because I have a lot of work back home I’d like to get off my desk before New Year’s.”

She raised a golden eyebrow. “How sentimental of you.”

“Look,” he said, irritated, “it’s not like anyone misses the guy. Except maybe you. I mean, he didn’t have any other friends, did he?”

“Are you kidding? Everyone at church loved him. You are going to have the funeral service at his church, right?”

Jackson blinked. “Dad went to church?”

“First Lutheran on Main Street, every Sunday.”

Unbelievable. Dad had found religion. The closest he’d ever gotten to religion when Jackson was a kid was saying “Jesus Christ” every time he stubbed his toe.

“Um ... okay,” he said, figuring the memorial service might as well be in a church as in the anonymous chapel of a funeral home. Who knew, maybe Dad’s soul wasn’t headed straight for hell after all. Although if Dad could get into Heaven, the neighborhood there must really be going downhill. “I’ll talk to the minister there.”

“His name is Pastor Goodman.”

“Great. Thanks for the information.”

“And make sure you let me know the date, okay?” She looked down, twisting a curling lock of dark blonde hair between her fingers. “I’d really like to be there, to say ... to say goodbye to Robbie.” She sniffed, and he looked at her, alarmed.

“Are you *crying*?”

“No. Of course not,” she said hastily, turning her back to him. He saw her swipe at her eyes. “I’m sorry I dropped in on you, but I--“*Sniff*. “Have things I need to do.” *Sniff*. “If you want me to, I can keep coming over to feed the c-c-cat....”

Her voice broke on a sob. Jackson started to stand up, but discovered that the cat wasn’t in favor of that idea. It dug its claws in and refused to let go. *Ow*. Jesus God, now he knew exactly how the end tables felt. He grabbed the cat around its fluffy middle, managed to pry it loose, and dropped it unceremoniously on the floor. It scooted under the coffee table with an annoyed hiss.

Carol was already heading for the door, still sniffing, and he caught her by the shoulder. “Hey,” he said gently. “Look, I’m really sorry about this. If you and Dad had been friends for a year, it can’t be easy on you.”

“I--I was the one who found him yesterday,” she whispered. “J-j-just sitting there, watching the TV.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, awkwardly patting her shoulder.

“I knocked on the door and he didn’t answer, and when I came in, I discovered he w-w-was....”

Stiff as a board, the more irreverent part of Jackson filled in. But he had better sense than to say it out loud. She was already upset enough, and he could easily understand why. Finding a corpse couldn’t be easy, particularly when the corpse had been a friend. “I see,” he said instead, continuing his patting.

Faced with his sympathy, she gave in to the tears and began sobbing, rather noisily. “I miss him so much!” she wailed.

Jackson swallowed a curse. Crying women did not make him comfortable. But she seemed like a nice enough woman, and he couldn't let her go home when she was so upset. He put his arms around her, rather awkwardly, and she turned her face to his shoulder and uttered a wrenching sob.

For some reason, he discovered that tears were swimming in his eyes too, although he couldn't begin to imagine why. God knew he didn't miss the old man. Maybe he was grieving for the relationship he should have had with his father but never had. Whatever the reason, a hot tightness swelled in his throat, and his eyes burned with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry," he muttered again, stroking her hair. It was odd to be stroking the hair of a woman he'd met barely fifteen minutes before, but she had extremely strokeable hair. It smelled like roses, and was much softer than he'd imagined curly hair could be.

Something odd stirred in his gut. It took him a moment to realize it was lust.

Christ. He was a pervert, getting a hard-on for a grieving woman. And a complete stranger, at that. His reaction surprised the hell out of him. He wasn't exactly celibate--okay, he'd been celibate lately, but ordinarily he wasn't a monk. Either way, he didn't make a habit of bedding women he'd just met.

Then again, he hadn't met many women this beautiful, either.

"No," she gasped against his shoulder. "I'm the one who should be s-s-sorry. You've lost your f-f-father, and I'm carrying on like I'm the one who lost a parent."

“It’s okay,” he said roughly, swallowing against the thick knot in his throat.

“No. It’s not. I can tell you’re upset.”

“I’m fine. Really.”

She pulled back her head to look at him, and to his immense horror, a tear chose that moment to leak out of his eye and roll down his cheek.

“Oh, no,” she whispered, brushing it away. “Poor thing. I’ve upset you.”

“Not upset,” he said gruffly. “Just allergies.”

Despite his words, he felt another tear escape his control, and she stood on her tiptoes and brushed her lips across his cheek, kissing the tear away. The immense sweetness of that gesture melted something inside him he hadn’t been aware was frozen. He stared down at her, speechless.

Her cheeks flushed as she hesitated, glancing up at him from beneath the heavy fringe of her dark gold lashes. She had the most gorgeous eyes he’d ever seen. Wet, and slightly red-rimmed, they glittered like golden topazes. “I’m sorry,” she said at last, in a small voice. “That was awfully forward of me.”

“No,” he said. “It was nice. *This* is forward.”

And he bent and captured her lips with his own.

Chapter 2

Carol decided she must be out of her mind to be kissing a complete stranger this way. Of course, she thought, in a way he wasn't really a stranger. She'd looked at his pictures a hundred times or more, listened to Robbie sing his praises over and over again. She knew all about him--what he did for a living, where he lived, even what model car he drove.

She also knew he was a bastard who'd neglected his father over the years. Or at least she'd thought she knew that. But the sight of those two tears running down his face made her suspect she'd been wrong. Jackson Parker had just lost a parent, he was obviously grieving, and she really should offer what consolation she could.

Which was, the sane part of her mind realized, a complete and total rationalization. But at the moment she didn't much care what the sane part of her thought. Being insane felt better than she could have imagined.

His lips were firm and masculine, his tongue bold and assertive, and his big hands held her firmly by the waist. His body felt warm and solid against hers, and she could feel the swelling ridge of his erection pressing against the worn denim of his jeans. She tilted her hips forward, let her lower belly rub against him, driven by instincts she had almost forgotten over the last couple of years.

It had been a very long time since she'd spent any amount of time

with a man, with the notable exception of Robbie. Robbie had been a good friend to her, but by virtue of his age he'd been harmless. Safe.

His son, on the other hand, was anything but safe. Being close to him made her as nervous as if she were playing with a stick of dynamite.

A low moan rumbled in Jackson's chest, and his hands lifted, tangling in her hair and pressing her mouth against his more firmly. The intimacy of his tongue tangling with hers was overwhelming, and heat spread through her veins, melting her body like a candle, until she was soft and malleable in his arms.

One hand slid down from her hair and gently began to stroke her ribs. She sighed at the feel of his fingers against her back.

"You're not wearing a bra," he whispered against her mouth.

"I just came over to feed the cat. I figured he wouldn't mind."

"I don't mind either. I wasn't complaining. Honest."

His hand slid around her rib cage and cupped her breast through her t-shirt, and heat rushed over her in a wave. She could almost feel her breast swelling to fill his hand. He stroked her nipple, and it went so rigid it ached. A soft, keening sound emerged from her throat, with absolutely no conscious control from her.

Her voice wasn't the only thing out of her control. Her entire body felt like it had decided to leave her brain behind. Ordinarily she'd no more have sex with a stranger than she'd dance naked on the interstate, but this obviously wasn't an ordinary night in her life. Logic, reason, common sense ... her body didn't care about things like that tonight.

Her body wanted to get laid.

His thumb was continuing to caress her nipple, sending dizzying stabs of pleasure through her with every light caress. And then he pulled his mouth away from hers, lowered his head, and pushed up her t-shirt with an impatient shove. His mouth closed over her taut nipple, and pleasure swelled through her, almost overwhelming her.

His lips suckled her relentlessly. She felt her knees go weak, felt liquid on the inside of her thighs, and her hands dug into his thick, inky-black hair, asking for more. *Demanding* more.

He cooperated. His mouth was relentless, drawing on her, pulling fire from the deepest regions of her body and flooding her nerves with flame, until she was utterly consumed by it. She felt moist heat gathering at her core in a tightly wound coil of tension.

It was crazy. It was mind-boggling. She didn't know this guy at all, yet he was able to make her body respond like he'd made love to her every night for the past year. Like he knew every inch of her intimately. Like he'd touched her a thousand times before.

His big hand slid down to the waistband of her plain black skirt, and then lower, delving under the hem of her skirt, and she jumped.

"Relax," he said, and she heard the humor in his deep voice. "Or hasn't anyone ever touched you there before?"

She bristled. "I've had plenty of men. Just not recently."

"Define *recently*."

His hand slid between her thighs, so gently that the light brush of his skin against hers almost tickled, and he began kneading her softly through the filmy fabric of her panties. She bit back a groan and tried to concentrate

on what he was saying. “Uh, two years or so.”

“No kidding. You too?”

She blinked, lifted her head, and met his gorgeous dark green eyes.

“Are you telling me you haven’t had sex in two years, either?”

“Afraid not. I guess we’re soulmates.”

“Or just similarly pitiful.”

“I’m not pitiful. I’m just, you know, busy.”

“Riiight,” she said, ignoring his fingers, which were in fact very busy, as best she could. “Too busy to find ten minutes out of the day in which to have sex.”

“Ten minutes?” He sounded insulted. “Geez, give me some credit. I wasn’t on that short a fuse when I was a teenager.”

“Fine. Fifteen minutes, then. You really can’t find any time whatsoever to have sex?”

A slight smile touched his finely carved lips. “That’s my story and I’m sticking to it. So what’s your excuse? The same as mine?”

Her fingers dug into his shoulders and gripped him tightly as the coil within her wound ever more tightly. She’d never tried to carry on a conversation with a guy while he did *that* with his fingers, and she was having a very hard time concentrating on his words.

“I...” Her voice squeaked, and she cleared her throat and tried again. “No, I’m an administrative assistant, and I work normal nine to five hours. It’s just that I haven’t felt much like having sex since ... my divorce.”

His fingers paused in their slow, careful dance, moving an inch or two away from her, and she almost sobbed at the loss. *Might as well get it all*

out in the open, she told herself, trying to quell her disappointment. Not that he was asking for a lifetime commitment or anything, but he might be a little put off by the fact that she had a lousy romantic history. Some guys were.

He didn't back away, though, just looked down at her with those dark, serious eyes. "You were married, huh?" he said. "What happened?"

"The usual. He was a jerk. I just didn't figure it out till after we were married."

"He didn't treat you right?"

"He wasn't abusive, but he didn't treat any women right. He just treated me badly more often because we were married." She lifted her head, looked up into his eyes. "Does that bother you?"

"What, that you're divorced?" He shook his head. "Of course not. At least you took a chance on someone, even if he didn't turn out to be the right person for you. I haven't been married. I haven't even thought about it."

"Your dad hoped you'd meet someone."

He grinned, a wicked flash of white teeth that made her breath catch in her throat. "I'm really not sure I'm the marrying kind."

His fingers began to move against her again, and every coherent thought flew out of her brain. She didn't really care if he was the marrying kind or not. For the first time in her life, she was perfectly okay with a more casual approach.

God, what he was doing to her ...

Leaning forward, she pressed her head against his chest. She could hear the rapid thudding of his heart, the harsh rasp of his breathing, and she

realized he was almost as turned on as she was. The knowledge thrilled her. She quivered and moaned as his relentless, stroking fingers brought her almost to the verge of orgasm, despite the thin layer of fabric between his fingers and her flesh. At the last possible instant he paused.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered, barely aware that she’d spoken.

He chuckled, a low, sexy sound, then lowered his head to her nipple and began sucking as his fingers began caressing her again.

Almost instantly a wave of pleasure flooded over her, so intense she could barely stand it. She cried out as she came, long and hard, while his fingers played over her, drawing out the pleasure for as long as possible. Spasms of heat racked her over and over again, until her legs shook and her knees went weak, until her body was wet with sweat. At last she collapsed against his shoulder, panting.

“It *has* been a while for you,” he whispered.

Wow, she thought. He’d just given her a totally fulfilling, incredible climax, and yet all she wanted was to feel him inside her. Deep inside her ...

But not here. She opened her eyes and blinked at her surroundings, realizing she’d been engaging in heavy petting in the same room where she’d found Robbie’s corpse. *Ewww*. The grief welled up in her throat again, threatening to choke her.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she said softly, letting go of her death grip on his shoulders and backing away a bit. “It’s just... this isn’t really the place.”

He looked around, and the sensual light in his eyes flickered and went

out. “No, I suppose not. I guess we just got carried away.”

“I’m not saying I don’t want to go on,” she said hastily, the fantasy of him moving inside her still at the top of her mind. “Just not ... here.”

Although, she realized, the thought crept her out less than it had a moment ago. It should have felt like desecration to make out in a dead man’s house, and yet upon reflection it felt almost as if Robbie had blessed their actions, somehow. As if Robbie wanted them together.

She shoved the romantic, silly notion away impatiently. Jackson was a complete stranger, after all, and he didn’t live here in Swift Creek. *Together* could only be a very temporary thing. A single night of pleasure.

And she was okay with that.

Jackson pressed his lips together. “Yeah, well. About that. I don’t have any protection on me.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, damn. Damn, damn, damn. I don’t suppose you have any, either.”

She shook her head.

“No. I figured you wouldn’t. We really are soulmates, aren’t we?” He frowned. “I guess I could drive over to a drugstore. It’d only take a couple of minutes.”

“This is Swift Creek, not Richmond. Nothing’s open at ten o’clock at night, not even during Christmas shopping season.”

He looked down at her with a rueful expression. “I suppose I should let you go, then.”

No. *No way*. She remembered the rasp of his rapid breathing, the

thunder of his heart against her ear as he brought her to climax, and she realized she couldn't do that to him. Not after what he'd done for her.

"Come on over to my house," she suggested.

He lifted a dark eyebrow and regarded her dubiously. "You sure you want me in your house? You don't know me from Adam."

"I know all about you. You're Robbie's son." Although it occurred to her to wonder if Robbie had really known his son all that well. Certainly it appeared they hadn't gotten along all that well. "Anyway..." She broke off, her cheeks flushing. After what he'd done for her with his talented fingers, she thought it was a little late to worry about whether he was a psycho or not.

"Yeah. I see what you mean. But still, are you sure? I mean, we can't ... you know..."

She was amused to note that he was the one stammering now.

"Maybe not," she said softly. "But I can think of a lot of other things we can do."

The sensual light rekindled and smoldered in the depths of his eyes.

"Yeah. Me too."

"So. Come on home with me."

She held out her hand. He hesitated a moment, then wrapped his fingers around hers.

"Okay," he said.

Chapter 3

On the outside, her house looked a lot like the house he'd grown up in--small, brick, unremarkable. But the inside fairly popped with eccentricity. Wicker chairs, Chinese rice-paper screens, bamboo shades, and a zebra skin rug in front of the fireplace gave the house, so ordinary on the outside, an unexpected jolt of character. The only light in the room came from the small multicolored lights twinkling on the Christmas tree in the corner.

“Nice,” he said.

She blushed slightly. “I know my decorating style is a little eccentric.”

“I wouldn't say that. It's not boring, at any rate.”

“I try not to be boring.”

“I'd say you succeed.” Some sort of odd, exotic Christmas music was playing softly on the stereo, he noticed. Sort of a wind-chimes-and-flute kind of ensemble playing “Joy to the World.” It was pretty, if not exactly the kind of music he himself favored. “I haven't known you very long, but you don't strike me as the boring type.”

She chewed on her lip, looking slightly--and adorably--uncomfortable. “So,” she said at last. “You want to come into the bedroom?”

“Maybe later. Right now I’m having a really interesting fantasy involving that zebra skin rug.”

“It’s not really a zebra skin,” she said.

“I’m glad to hear that, actually. I think a real zebra pelt would be kind of itchy. It looks nice and soft.” He abruptly swung her up in his arms, and she squealed with surprise and amusement.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” he said softly, looking down into her eyes. She had the most incredible eyes, a dark gold color that made him think of late afternoon sunlight, or smooth whiskey. Her eyes were as unusual, as striking, as the rest of her.

She didn’t hesitate. “I’m sure.”

Hot damn. This sure as hell wasn’t what he’d expected when he drove up to his dad’s house tonight. But he wasn’t complaining, that was for sure.

He crossed the room, brushing past the small Scotch pine in the corner, laden with blown-glass ornaments and tinsel, and the pine branches strung along the mantel, studded with little golden angels. The pleasant, spicy fragrance of evergreen filled the room. She might have unusual style, but she was traditional enough when it came to decorating for Christmas.

He turned his back on the tree, kneeling next to the rug and dropping her gently onto it. The glittering Christmas tree made him think of family and commitment and tradition, and he didn’t want to think about those things tonight. The rug, on the other hand, was a perfect metaphor for what he was looking for from this encounter. A night of wild, untamed sex. No strings attached, no commitment. Just a long, dark night of sheer physical

pleasure. Something he hadn't allowed himself to have in one hell of a long time.

"Now," he said. "My fantasy involves seeing you naked against this rug."

Her eyes went wide. "Naked?"

"Yeah, naked. You know. Nude. Uncovered. Bare of clothing."

"I'm familiar with the term," she retorted. "It's just that ... well..."

"Look," he said, "I know I'm a stranger, but after what we did a little while ago..."

"It's not that," she assured him. "Well, not much. I just happen to be really shy."

"Shy," he repeated dubiously. Somehow the way she'd decorated this house didn't make him think *shy*. And the way she'd let him touch her earlier didn't exactly project shyness, either.

"Not exactly shy, I guess. Just not really comfortable with my body."

"I don't know why you wouldn't be comfortable with your body." He shot her a lascivious grin. "I'm planning on being very comfortable with it."

At the light tone in his voice, she relaxed a little beneath his hands. He got the odd impression that humor wasn't what she'd been expecting from him. He waited for her to tell him more about what was bothering her.

"My ex was always critical," she said at last, softly. "*Really* critical."

"Of your body?" Privately, Jackson thought the guy must be a moron. It didn't take a genius to recognize perfection when you saw it.

"Of everything. But yeah, he criticized my body a lot. He said I was too bony."

Jackson let out a gust of breath. “Odd that you and my dad got along so well, then. He was just the same way, don’t you think?”

“Robbie?” She blinked up at him. “I never thought so.”

“Are you kidding me? He spent my whole childhood harping on everything I did. It was never good enough. If I brought home a B+, he wanted to know why I didn’t make an A. If I made an A, it should have been an A+. I could never do anything right, according to him.”

“Really? He wasn’t like that to me.”

“Oh, that makes me feel better. I guess he just saved it all for me.”

“Maybe he was critical because he loved you and wanted to see you do your best,” she suggested in a gentle voice.

“Maybe he was just a nitpicking bastard.”

She was silent a long moment. “I think we’ve gotten a little off topic here, Jackson. Weren’t we talking about your fantasy?”

With an effort, he dragged his mind away from his issues with his father. Just thinking about his dad pissed him off. But he was beginning to wonder if he wasn’t pissed at least partly because the old man had dared to drop dead before they’d had a chance to work things out between them.

Which was stupid, because he knew intellectually they’d never have managed to work things out between them, no matter how many years they’d had.

He firmly yanked himself back onto the subject at hand, reminding himself he had a willing woman in front of him. An *eager* woman. He looked down at her, seeing her dark gold hair flowing like spilled honey across the zebra rug.

It was a delicious sight, especially for a man who hadn't had a woman in two long years, and carols rang out in his head.

Joy to the world.

He was suddenly assailed by a violent yearning to see her smooth skin glisten against the black and white fur. "Take off your shirt," he said softly.

She lifted her torso slightly and tugged, and the t-shirt slipped off over her head. She tossed it away, then leaned back against the rug.

Sweat broke out on his skin. Her ex must have been a complete moron, because there wasn't a thing to be critical about here. Any man in his right mind would be brought to his knees by the lovely shape and symmetry, the sheer loveliness, of her breasts.

"Beautiful," he said softly.

Carol looked briefly taken aback by the reverence in his tone, then her lips tilted up in a smile.

"Glad you approve."

"Approval isn't a strong enough word for it." He cupped her small, round breasts lovingly in his hands, caressing the opalescent skin, and she shivered beneath his touch. "I'm totally blown away."

"So I live up to your fantasy?"

"You *are* my fantasy, Carol." He ran a thumb across her nipple, feeling it harden beneath his touch, and she shivered. Not from cold, but from desire. But her reaction made him think of the cold, wintry air outside.

"The only other thing I'd like," he mused, "would be to see you in the firelight. But I guess it would be a lot of trouble to build a fire, assuming you even had any wood."

She grinned. “Grab me that remote.”

He reached over and handed it to her, and she pushed a button. Immediately orange flames sprang to life behind the glass.

“I had it redone as a gas fireplace,” she said. “It’s easier.”

He put the remote back on the table. It wasn’t quite the image he’d had in his head--a crackling fire, the hiss and pop of burning logs, and the smell of wood smoke in the room. But she did look gorgeous in the flickering yellow light, her skin a pale shade of gold and her hair dark amber.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Unable to resist her wordless invitation, he bent and pressed his lips to the soft, delicate skin of her throat. The sweet rose fragrance of her skin filled his nostrils, and she moaned and wiggled against him, lifting her hips so that they brushed against his erection.

“Don’t,” he said hoarsely against her throat.

Her eyes opened, and she looked at him with puzzlement. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t...” Her leg shifted against his hard-on, and he groaned. “Don’t wiggle like that.”

A wicked gleam lit her eyes. “Like what?” She brushed her thigh over him again. “Like that?”

He swallowed. “Yeah. Like that.” She did it again, and he shuddered.

“Stop,” he said, pinning her thighs beneath his, and taking a wrist in either hand, so that she couldn’t move. Then he began kissing her throat

again. She sighed beneath him, alternately tensing and relaxing as his mouth moved across her skin.

It was the first time he'd made a woman sigh in pleasure in the past two years. Not counting a few moments ago. The memory of the way she'd shuddered in his arms as he stroked her was almost enough to send him right over the edge. It had been too long since he'd made love to a woman, he decided. Way too long.

He wasn't even sure why he'd decided to remain celibate for so long. It hadn't been a conscious choice. After he'd broken up with his last girlfriend a couple of years ago, he'd just let himself get lost in his work. It wasn't that his heart had been broken by their split, or that Sharon had meant that much to him. In fact, in six months she'd never gotten under his skin the way Carol had in less than an hour. Which maybe explained why he'd quit dating, because he hadn't found a woman who made him feel anything. He hadn't *wanted* to feel anything.

Till now, anyway.

His lips slid down across Carol's collarbone. Prominent, but certainly not what he would call "bony." She didn't have a lot of extra fat on her, but that was okay with him. She was sleek, lithe, and muscled, making him think of a panther. Wild and sensual.

He brushed his lips across the swell of her breast, watching as her nipple grew harder and crinkled in the firelight. Suddenly he wanted to taste her nipple more than he'd ever wanted anything. He let his tongue trail across the tempting hard flesh, feeling her buck against him, despite his restraint of her hands and legs.

He did it again, and a high, keening sound of pleasure rose from her throat.

Unable to restrain his aching need to taste her any longer, he drew her nipple into his mouth and sucked hard. She writhed violently against the restraint of his body. His hands slid down to the waistband of her skirt and fumbled with the zipper. There was a slight rasp as the zipper gave way, then he yanked off her skirt and her panties, throwing them aside.

He lifted his head, gazing at the sight of her lying on the zebra skin rug, her thighs parted in a suggestive pose, every inch of her smooth golden skin exposed. Dark blond curls at the apex of her thighs half hid the shadowed region of her sex, which glistened pink in the firelight.

She returned his gaze steadily. The expression in her eyes, a look of calm anticipation, caught at his heart in a totally unexpected way. He was a complete stranger to her, and yet she trusted him. Being naked with him obviously didn't bother her, now that she'd gotten over her initial reluctance, and she trusted him not to force her into anything she didn't want to do. He'd never had that kind of trust from a woman so early in a relationship, and it floored him.

Even stranger, he realized, she trusted him because he was "Robbie's" son. Because she'd learned all about him from a man he hadn't thought gave a rat's ass about him, but who'd apparently been bragging on him to this woman for the last year.

Evidently everything he'd thought he knew about his father had been wrong.

He felt tears sting his eyes again, and lowered his head, both to

conceal his uncharacteristic emotional state, and to avail himself of the gorgeous body stretched out before him like a lush sensual banquet. Her belly was flat and toned in a way that suggested she did some serious crunches every day, and he let his lips trail across her admiringly. And then he moved lower, finding her most sensitive flesh.

She yelped, and he lifted his head. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she said between her teeth, “but I’m going to hurt you if you stop.”

He let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding and lowered his head, stroking her with his tongue. She twisted beneath him, making soft sounds of pleasure, and then her hips jerked, hard, and she cried out.

He could almost hear the power sizzling through her body in an electric rush as she climaxed. He hadn’t expected her to come again so soon, and the knowledge that he’d pleased her so thoroughly made his head swell, along with other portions of his anatomy. The cries she uttered excited him, and the scent of her arousal, a rich fragrance of spicy roses, was almost enough to send him over the edge himself. He gritted his teeth and managed to stop himself from exploding. Barely.

When her cries had died to whimpers, he lifted his head and grinned up at her. “I take it that was all right?”

“Oh ... my ... *God.*”

He laughed softly, both amused and oddly touched by the breathless wonder in her voice. She sounded like she hadn’t had a really good orgasm in a long time, and the fact that he’d been able to give her one--no, two--pleased him on a deep masculine level. “Glad you liked it.” He sat up,

between her thighs, and studied the languorous sprawl of her body against the striped rug.

“God,” he said softly. “I could look at you like this all night.”

Her eyes looked sated, almost drowsy, but her lips curved in a sensual smile.

“I’m afraid I can’t permit that. I have some other ideas.”

“Really,” he said. “What sort of ideas?”

She stretched, slowly and deliberately, giving him a thorough, mouthwatering look at the lush curves of her body, and then smiled wickedly.

“Now it’s time to take off *your* clothes.”

Chapter 4

Carol could hardly believe she was lying here on her zebra-striped rug, letting a complete stranger feast his eyes on her naked body. It was as if her usual restrained, subdued self had suddenly been replaced by Marilyn Monroe or Aphrodite. She felt incredibly sexy--a weird sensation, considering she'd hardly thought about sex since her marriage ended.

But she was sure as hell thinking about it now.

And she wanted more. She must be getting greedy, she thought with perplexed amusement. He'd given her two spectacular orgasms, yet all she could think about was letting him make love to her. Taking him inside her and letting him fill her totally.

She reminded herself firmly that they couldn't do that. Not tonight, at any rate. But the unexpected thought slid into her mind that he'd be here at least a couple more days, because of the memorial service, and maybe eventually they'd get around to what her body ached for.

A faint hope glimmered in the back of her mind, the thought that maybe he'd stick around for Christmas, but she pushed it away. She was a big girl, after all. She could be alone for Christmas. She'd be lonely without Robbie, but she was used to being lonely. She'd be okay.

But she had the weirdest feeling that when Jackson left, she'd be missing him even more than she missed Robbie.

Jackson was still sitting there, watching her, his mouth slightly open. Obviously her demand had startled him, though she wasn't sure why, since she was already stark naked. She lifted an imperious eyebrow, looking as haughty and queenlike as she could, considering her supine sprawl on the rug. "What are you waiting for? Let's get those clothes off."

"Uh...." He blinked.

"Do you think it's fair that you get to see me, but I don't get to see you?"

"I guess not," he admitted. He stood up, looming over her, and his big hands reached down, caught the hem of his T-shirt, and pulled it up. Her mouth watered hungrily at the fabulous sight of sharply hewn abs. He raised the shirt a bit more, giving her a glimpse of firm pecs, dusted with dark hair, and coppery male nipples. He peeled the shirt off over his head, displaying his solid, thickly muscled shoulders and some seriously carved biceps.

"Whoa," she said, fanning herself. All of a sudden the fire was much too hot. "You do that very well. You don't work as a male stripper by any chance, do you?"

"If you and my dad talked about me, you know I'm an IT manager. Not a real sexy profession."

"I think you missed your calling. Put it back on, let me get up and put on 'I'm Too Sexy for My Shirt,' and you can take it off again."

"Uh ... I don't think so."

"Spoilsport," she grumbled. "Fine. On with the show, then."

He lowered his hands to his braided leather belt and began to unbuckle it. She noticed his hands fumble slightly. In fact, it almost looked

as if they were shaking. “Hey,” she said. “Are you shy too?”

“Not shy, no.” He met her eyes and grinned ruefully. “Just a little, well, *uncomfortable* with my body.”

“You?” She stared at him in shock. “But you’re built like Zeus, Hercules and Atlas all rolled up together!”

He shrugged, dropping his gaze again. “Thanks. But I’ve never felt real comfortable with it. I guess that’s why I work out so hard.”

She was beginning to realize there was a lot he wasn’t comfortable with. Had Robbie really done such a number on his son’s self-esteem? She could hardly believe it. To her, Robbie had always been a great guy, supportive and kind. But she clearly remembered the bitterness in Jackson’s voice when he’d said, *He spent my whole childhood harping on everything I did. It was never good enough.*

“Trust me,” she said, trying to keep her voice level. It wasn’t easy. The thought of Robbie telling a little dark-haired boy with vulnerable green eyes that he wasn’t good enough distressed her, making her throat ache. “You’re perfect.”

He took a deep breath, as if preparing to dive into deep water, and unbuttoned his jeans, then dropped them to the floor. He stepped out of them, and her mouth went dry. Wow. His legs were just ... *wow*. Long, muscled, and dusted with dark hairs. Zeus, Hercules and Atlas had absolutely nothing on this guy.

And how many guys who looked like this didn’t strut around like they were God’s gift to women? His slight lack of self-confidence, his faint air of diffidence, only made him sexier in her eyes.

“Nice,” she said, keeping it light so as to not blurt out what she really wanted to say: *You’re the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen and I want to keep you forever.* Not the response of a sophisticated, sexy woman. But the truth. A truth better kept to herself. “Now how about the underwear?”

He wore plain navy-blue briefs. There was a bulge in front that made her ravenous to see more. He hesitated again, then pushed down the briefs.

And once again, all that came to mind was *wow*.
Wowwowwowwowwow. Maybe it was just because she hadn’t seen a naked guy in the flesh for two years, but she didn’t think so. She was pretty sure she hadn’t seen an erection like that since ... well, ever.

She had to force herself not to jump up, push him over, and make it her own right now.

Jackson stood looking down at her, that odd expression of uncertainty still on his face. She pushed the last of her orgasm-induced lethargy away and rose up on her knees.

“All for me?” she purred.

He looked down at her, quirked a dark eyebrow. “You can have as much as you want.”

“Oh, I want it all,” she assured him.

“Okay. I can live with that.”

His erection was long and full, throbbing with arousal, its ivory length etched with blue veins, and the palm of her hand itched to hold it. She reached up and pulled it down slightly, wrapping her fingers around him, feeling the sizzling heat, the smoothness of his skin, the solidity and heft of him. The fire scorching her palm reminded her that he wasn’t a battery-

operated sex toy, but a real live man.

She felt a spasm of need between her thighs but did her best to squelch it. *Not tonight*, she told herself firmly. *Maybe tomorrow*.

In the meantime, there were plenty of other things they could do together. And she wanted to do every one of them, she thought, her mouth watering at the sight of him close up and personal. She leaned forward and stroked her tongue over the rounded head of his penis, tasting him for the first time. He tasted hot and spicy against her tongue, and a sharp-edged pang of desire shot through her like an arrow.

At the light touch of her tongue, a low, resonant groan rumbled from his chest. A glance upward showed her that his eyes were clenched shut, his jaw set hard. Emboldened, she caressed him again, moving her hand up and down as she brushed him with her tongue, and he hissed between his teeth.

“Christ,” he murmured, his fingers entwining themselves in her hair. “It’s been so long. *So damn long.*”

The sheer melting pleasure in his voice stole her breath away. She’d kissed him at first because she was missing Robbie and feeling a hole in her life, but now she realized how genuinely, deeply lonely she’d been, for a long time. And judging from his reactions, he was every bit as lonely as she was.

They were both alone, both starved for sex, and somehow they’d found each other, if only for a night. She didn’t dare hope for anything more. One night was enough.

It would have to be.

She stroked him with her tongue and lips, tasting every inch of him,

brushing her fingers over the thick shaft of his erection and the heavy weight of his testicles, until he panted for breath as if he'd just run a marathon. Soft growls of pleasure rumbled from his chest, his penis throbbed in her hand, and she realized how very close to a climax he was. Small wonder, if it had really been two years since he'd made love. It wouldn't take much to send him plummeting over the edge.

The fact that he hadn't had sex with a woman in two years, and had chosen her to break his long fast, made her feel sexy and powerful in a totally unfamiliar way. Her discomfort with her own sexuality slipped away, leaving her feeling like a sex goddess.

She took him into her mouth, the hot, thick shaft slipping surprisingly easily between her lips, and drew on him hard. He roared with pleasure as she sent him over the cliff.

* * * *

Afterward Jackson stretched out on the rug with her, enjoying the heat of the fire, as well as the unaccustomed warmth of sexual satisfaction that filled him. Her head was pillowed on his chest in an intimate posture that should have scared the hell out of him, but oddly, didn't.

"That was great," he said.

She turned her head and smiled at him. "Glad you liked it."

Something about the pleased, almost surprised, tone of her voice caught his attention. "Didn't your husband like it when you made love?"

She sighed. "Not really. I told you, he didn't like my body much. But he didn't have any problem liking other women's bodies."

"He was screwing around?"

“He referred to it as playing the field, but yes, he was screwing around.”

A surprising anger coiled in Jackson’s chest. “Bastard,” he said in a soft, vicious growl.

She closed her eyes so he couldn’t see the expression in her eyes, but he heard the hurt in her voice. “I guess it was just one of those things. He wasn’t happy with me. Maybe in a way it was ... sort of my fault.”

“Bullshit. Even if a man’s not happy, he’s got no right to screw around when he’s married. He should have tried to work things out with you.”

Her eyes narrowed, as if she was trying to understand the suppressed rage in his voice.

“You’ve never been married, right?”

“No. And I’m never going to be married, either. Marriage isn’t for me. But that doesn’t stop me from having an opinion.”

“Sounds like you have a pretty firm one.”

Jackson sighed. He looked away from her, into the golden depths of the fire. “My father screwed around on my mom,” he said softly.

She blinked. “*Robbie?*”

“Yeah. He was diddling one of our neighbors, the goddamned old son of a bitch. It wrecked our family.”

“Are you sure?”

“I caught him at it,” Jackson said bitterly. “I mean, he was just kissing her, but it was obviously more than that. It was obvious even to me, and I was just ten. He had his hand up her blouse, for Christ’s sake.”

“Did your mom ever find out about it?”

“She walked into the room right behind me.” He swallowed, remembering the icy tension that had filled the room, tension he’d barely understood at age ten. He understood it a lot better now. “My parents were having a party. I guess my dad got a little sloshed.”

“So he wasn’t really sleeping around on your mom.”

“I don’t know,” Jackson admitted. “Not for sure. But my parents were really cold with one another for the next few days. I think my mom felt like he’d betrayed her. And then, just a few weeks before Christmas, my mom died of a stroke.”

Carol looked at him a long moment, as if deciding what to say. “You know it wasn’t your dad’s fault she died, right?”

“Of course it was his fault. The bastard.”

“I don’t think so, Jackson. It sounds like the two things were totally unrelated. People don’t die of broken hearts in real life. She just happened to suffer a stroke, that’s all. If she’d lived, she and Robbie probably would have worked through it eventually.”

“Just like you did with your husband?”

He instantly regretted the unintentional harshness in his voice, but Carol didn’t blink.

“I don’t think the two situations are the same. My husband wasn’t at all apologetic for what he’d done. He intended to keep on doing it. Your father was very sorry for what he did to your mother, Jackson.”

“Is that what he told you?”

Carol shrugged. “He never told me the whole story of what happened.

But he did tell me that something had gone unresolved between him and his dead wife, something he wished he'd been able to fix."

Jackson growled deep in his throat. "He didn't have any regrets about it. Trust me. No matter what he told you, he never regretted what he did."

"I'm beginning to understand why the two of you never got along," Carol said softly, "if you had this problem standing between you the whole time you were growing up."

"Look, I didn't have a chip on my shoulder or anything. But I knew he'd screwed around on my mom. He knew I knew. It's not like I could respect him or like him. He was a jerk."

"No. I suppose not."

Despite her even tone, her answer sounded vaguely accusatory to him. Naturally she figured he should have forgiven his old man. Let bygones be bygones and all that. But she didn't know jack. He could no more have forgiven his father for what he'd done to his mom than he could have flown off the Empire State Building.

"What about your husband?" he challenged. "You didn't forgive him, did you?"

"No. But he wasn't sorry for what he did to me, Jackson. Your dad regretted what he did every day of his life."

"No," Jackson said firmly. "He didn't."

"He did," she insisted. "He would have given anything to make things right with your mom before she died. And he would have given anything for your forgiveness, too. He really hated the fact that he almost never got to see you. He was so proud of you, Jackson."

The fact that she was defending his father irritated him. All of a sudden the fire, which had seemed warm and cozy mere moments before, made the room seem stifling and claustrophobic. Jackson stood up and began yanking on his jeans.

“Look,” he said, “this has been fun, but I need to get going.”

She propped herself up on her elbows and looked up at him, one eyebrow raised. “Fun?”

Okay, not fun. Earth-shatteringly pleasurable. He’d never felt so much ecstasy with a woman before, never had a woman rock his world the way she had. Sex with her had been almost a religious experience. Almost... sacred.

But he wasn’t about to admit that. He didn’t even want to admit it to himself. “It was nice,” he said. “But I better get back...” He almost said home, then caught himself. The house next door wasn’t home, and never had been. “Back next door.”

Yanking his T-shirt over his head, he looked down at her, trying to think of a polite way to end this interlude. The pleasure had been scorchingly intense, but the conversation afterward had bared more of his soul than he’d expected. It was like she’d stripped him naked inside and out. It made him damned uncomfortable.

“Uh....” he said. “Thanks.”

She looked up at him, her eyes molten gold in the firelight.

“Thank *you*,” she said.

Jackson opened his mouth to say something else, then figured he’d just make an ass of himself if he kept talking. Silently, he turned and headed

out the door.

Chapter 5

The next night Jackson sat alone in his dad's living room, staring at the lettuce-green walls. Except for the floral plates, the walls were blank, which suited him all too well. The house felt empty despite the cat purring on his lap. Without the acidic anger that had always burned between himself and his father, a weird kind of buffer, when he was a kid, the place felt too empty.

And, he admitted, it felt too empty without Carol.

It wasn't as if she'd come to mean anything to him, he hastened to assure himself. Last night had been merely a one-night stand, for both of them. He knew that. And yet he found it surprisingly difficult not to dump the cat off his lap, dash next door, and ring Carol's doorbell.

Everything they'd done together kept flashing through his mind. The way she'd smelled like roses, the way her skin had felt like silk under his hands, the way she'd tasted. The way she'd tasted *him*. As the memory flashed through his mind, his body stirred with a primitive, aching hunger.

And yet the physical aspects of their night together weren't all he was thinking of. He couldn't seem to erase the memory of her big golden eyes brimming with tears. The way she'd listened to him talking about his fucked-up relationship with his father. Her gentle voice assuring him that his father had been very proud of him.

He'd spent two hours today talking to the pastor about his father, and he was still no more convinced that his dad had been proud of him than he'd ever been. Carol had been wrong. Of course she'd been wrong. And yet her stubborn belief that Robbie had been proud of him soothed him, filling the empty places inside him with an odd, unfamiliar warmth.

The doorbell rang, jerking him out of his introspection. Lintball--Silver, he corrected himself--immediately rose to his feet, stretched, and leaped lightly to the floor, heading for the door like the savage attack kitty he was. Jackson followed in the animal's wake, opening the door to find Carol standing there, looking slightly embarrassed.

A sensation of warmth, not unlike the fire they'd made love in front of last night, glowed in his chest. He felt a big dumb smile curve his mouth and didn't even try to suppress it. "Hi."

In response to his stupid grin, the vague anxiety slid from her face, and she smiled in return. She wore jeans and a red sweater, and her curling blonde hair fell loose around her shoulders in sexy disarray. It was chilly out, but not quite cold enough to require a jacket. Christmastime in central Virginia could be very cold or quite warm, but most often it was sweater weather.

"Hi yourself," she said. He saw the breath puffing from her mouth like white smoke and wondered if she should have worn a jacket after all. "Can I come in?"

"Of course." He stepped back, and she stepped into the house. There was a big cardboard box in her arms.

"What's that?"

Her smile broadened. She had a nice smile, he thought, warm and totally contagious. It made him feel an uncontrollable urge to smile back, and rendered him totally incapable of frowning.

“Christmas decorations,” she said.

Despite his previous thoughts about the irresistible quality of her smile, the smile slid from his face, and he scowled. “I’m not decorating the house, Carol. I don’t have a tree.”

“I have an artificial one at my house in another box. I’ll go back and get it now. I just couldn’t carry everything at once.”

“That’s really nice of you,” he said, aware of the coldness in his voice but unable to make himself sound any more welcoming, “but I really don’t want to go to that much effort. I’m not going to be here that long.”

She bent and placed the box on the floor, and when she straightened up he noticed her sweater was embellished with a glittery beaded Christmas tree. She looked very Christmasy. But the warmth of her smile had dimmed a bit in the face of his obvious displeasure. “You grew up here, didn’t you? I sort of figured maybe you’d be keeping the house.”

He felt his upper lip curl. “You figured wrong. I work in Richmond. I have a condo there.”

“It’s not much of a commute to Richmond. It’s less than an hour from here.”

“I love my condo. It has a terrific view of the rapids of the James River. Anyway, I’m not really interested in living in a blue-collar neighborhood.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t realize you were such a snob. This is

a nice neighborhood. There are nice big lots, and the houses are pretty well put together, even if they're old. And there are lots of families here with little kids."

Abruptly he realized his remark had been unforgivably tactless. And he didn't want her to think of him as a snob, even if perhaps he was. "I phrased that wrong, I guess. It's just that I'm not a suburbs guy--I like the city. I like living in my condo. And I don't like this house. I can't live in a house that's so totally devoid of any kind of architectural design. It's a brick ranch like a million other brick ranches. Just not my kind of place."

"And besides that, it reminds you of your father."

Just like that, she cut through all his artifice and slashed right to the heart of the matter. He bristled, annoyed, because she found him so transparent. "That has absolutely nothing to do with it."

"Uh-huh. I'm sure." He noticed she was opening the box, despite his objection. He could see the glitter of glass ornaments beneath crackling, yellowed newspaper. "I suppose your condo does suit you better."

"It's a great place. They built nice open lofts in an old department store."

She grinned wryly. "Sounds very modern."

Modern was a good word for it. His sleek, spare furniture was scattered sparsely across the open floor plan of his condo. The place was small, only about eight hundred square feet, but he wasn't planning on having a passel of kids anyway, so who needed a big yard and a lot of bedrooms? It was okay for a guy who lived alone. His condo wasn't warm or homey, maybe, but he liked it.

“Better than lettuce green walls,” he muttered, a little defensively.

Her mouth curved. “Yeah, the walls in this house are a pretty hideous color. But you know, you could always paint them.”

“Painting the walls won’t give this house character or individuality. It would take some serious redecorating. Maybe even rebuilding. And I don’t need the space, because I’m not planning on having kids.”

“Okay,” she said, pulling out an ornament, an old-fashioned green glass ball striped with glitter. She held it up for his inspection. “So you don’t want to stay. But you’re going to be here a couple more days, right?”

“Yeah. The memorial service is the day after tomorrow.”

“So we should go ahead and decorate the house. Otherwise you might as well have stayed in a hotel. It’ll make it feel more like home.”

“It won’t make it feel like home to me.” He sighed, then blurted out, “My dad and I never had a Christmas tree.”

Her amber eyes went wide. “Never?”

“Not after my mom died. She died a few weeks before Christmas, and that year we just let the whole thing slide. It was just, you know, too much hassle. After that we never bothered again.”

She reached out and placed a hand on his forearm. “That’s terrible. So you never had a Christmas tree after you turned ten?”

“No,” he said shortly.

“That’s so sad.”

He saw the sympathy in her eyes, and it grated on him. “Christmas was kind of a hard time of the year for both of us.”

“Even more reason to put up a tree,” she said. “To remind yourself

that there are good things in life as well as bad. If you celebrate Christmas, then you should put up a tree.” She nodded with sudden decisiveness. “This settles it. We absolutely have to decorate a tree tonight.”

He could think of other things he’d rather be doing with her--in fact he *had* thought of many other things, in vivid and creative detail, the minute he’d opened the door to find her standing on the porch. He pulled out his last argument.

“You claim my dad had found religion, but he didn’t bother to put up a tree. Why should I?”

“Your dad was an old-fashioned guy,” she said, her eyes soft. “It used to really bug him that people decorated for Christmas even before Thanksgiving. He was waiting till a few days before Christmas to put up a little tree. In fact, we were planning on going out to look for a tree when...”

She blinked hard. “I see,” Jackson said gently. Now that she’d mentioned it, he remembered from childhood his dad’s insistence on waiting practically till Christmas Eve to decorate. They’d always been the last house on the block to get a tree. It had driven him nuts as a little kid. “So my dad was going to use our old Christmas decorations?”

“Yes, he used them last year. They’re around somewhere. Probably in the attic. I don’t know where they are, so I figured I’d bring mine over.”

Jackson swallowed, touched despite himself by the thought that his dad had wanted a Christmas tree. “That was ... very nice of you. Thank you. I guess decorating a tree would be ... okay.”

Her eyes brightened at his lukewarm acceptance. “Terrific,” she said, sounding much more cheerful. “I’ll bring the tree.”

She headed out the door. Moments later she was back with a box full of artificial Christmas tree branches. “It’s nice and warm in here,” she said, putting down the box and rubbing her hands together.

“It seems a lot warmer now that you’re here,” he said.

Carol flashed him a brilliant smile, then began putting up the tree. She put it together quickly, but she insisted that they take a lot of time decorating it. Jackson couldn’t see why it mattered if there were two ornaments on one branch, or how gracefully the silver tinsel was looped around the tree, but she treated every branch like a work of art, hanging glass ornaments up high and wooden ornaments on the lower branches, where Silver Bells batted at them inquisitively. And her method must have been right, because two hours later, a glittering tree sat in his father’s living room, so beautiful that it made his eyes water.

“It looks okay,” he said gruffly.

“It looks terrific,” she said. “I mean, for an artificial tree. And considering all the spare lights I had were white. I don’t like white lights much. And I already have my favorite ornaments on the tree at my house, so these aren’t very--“

“Carol. Stop.” He held out his hand and looked down into her eyes. “It looks gorgeous. Really.”

A smile broke out on her face. “You like it?”

“I love it.” And he did. It was shocking how much it meant to him, how much more like home the old house felt with a tree sitting in front of the windows.

It was as if she’d worked some sort of Christmas magic with a ratty

old plastic tree and a boxful of castoff ornaments. The house felt more like home than it ever had before.

Not, he reminded himself, that this was his home. In a couple of days he was going to leave the place for good, turn it over to a good real estate agent, and sell it.

But for a night or two, it was nice to feel he belonged somewhere.

He mentally rolled his eyes. That was a silly thought. Of course he belonged somewhere--he belonged in Richmond, in his own condo.

Which you didn't even bother to decorate for Christmas, a little voice in his head reminded him.

Totally beside the point. The point was, that was home. Not this old, rundown place, even if it did feel oddly like home with a twinkling Christmas tree and Carol beside him.

Shaking off the disquieting thoughts, he glanced at his watch. "That took longer than I figured it would. Want to get a snack?"

"Have you eaten dinner?"

"Yeah. I grabbed a burger on the way back from the funeral home."

"I guess you're not too hungry, then. How about some hot chocolate?" She headed for the kitchen, leaving the cat batting at the lower branches with an inquisitive paw. Jackson followed in her wake. Sure enough, she found some Hershey's cocoa and sugar in a cabinet and started putting cocoa together.

His father had kept the makings for something as warm and homey as hot chocolate around. Go figure.

He sat at the table and watched her bustle around the kitchen, and in a

few minutes she brought him a mug and sat down across from him.

“Mmmm,” he said. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had hot chocolate.”

“Your dad loved it,” she said.

“Really?” He grinned without a trace of humor. “He never made it for me when I was growing up.”

She frowned. “You never did Christmas stuff together. He never made cocoa for you. What *did* the two of you do together?”

“Uh ... not much. He watched a lot of TV in the living room, and I read a lot of books and hung out in my room. We mostly avoided each other. Whenever we tried to talk, we’d start fighting.”

“That’s so sad.” She sighed. “When I got married, I imagined spending a lot of time with my kids. Being with them a lot. Being there for them a lot. Listening to them talk about their days at school. That kind of thing.”

“I bet you’d be a great mom.”

“I guess I’m not going to get the chance now.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “Just because of your divorce? One relationship that went bad? You’re not ancient, Carol. You can still get married and have kids.”

“No. I guess I kind of lost my nerve. I don’t want to get back into the dating game again. I might choose the wrong guy again, and I just don’t want to put myself through that again.”

“I can understand that,” he said. He was afraid to have kids, afraid he might screw up the way his dad had. But Carol didn’t deserve to live the

rest of her life alone. “It’s a risk to get involved in a relationship. So you’re just going to have casual sex with strangers for the rest of your life?”

Annoyance sparked in her eyes. “I don’t plan on doing this again, no.”

“Surely you’re not planning on being celibate for the rest of your life.” He leaned forward and brushed a drop of chocolate from the side of her mouth with his forefinger, and she closed her eyes and moaned softly. He smiled at her instant reaction to his touch. “You’re not the celibate type, Carol. You’re a sexy, vibrant woman, way too sexy to close yourself off from the world for the rest of your life.”

“I’m not sexy, and I’m not vibrant.”

“Sure seemed that way to me last night,” he said with his most wicked grin.

“Last night was great,” she admitted. “But before that, I’d been dead inside for two years. I hadn’t even thought about men. Shoot, I’d hardly thought about my vibrator. I just didn’t care about much of anything.”

“Except for my dad,” he said softly.

She nodded. “Your dad was a good friend to me, at a time when I needed a friend. I guess he really was a jerk to you, if everything you say about your childhood is true, but the two of you obviously had some issues standing between you.”

“Hey, it wasn’t my fault. It was his.”

“Maybe so. And I’ll admit, it doesn’t sound like he was a great father to you. But maybe he changed. Maybe somewhere along the way he figured out he screwed up. Because he was always willing to listen to me, to

give me a shoulder to cry on, when I needed one.”

“I can’t imagine my dad changing.”

“People change sometimes, Jackson.”

“I guess they do.” God knew that two days ago he would never have visualized himself sitting quietly in a kitchen with a woman, talking and sipping cocoa after decorating a tree. Having hot sex with a woman was one thing. Having hot chocolate with her was another.

Intimacy wasn’t his thing. Never had been. But this situation felt a whole hell of a lot like intimacy to him.

She was looking at him over her cocoa mug, her eyes sultry and heavy-lidded. He felt something stir inside of him in response to her expression, something more than mere lust. He felt a connection with her. Whether it was born of the varying relationships they’d had with his father, of the way they’d both been betrayed by someone they loved, or of something else entirely, he wasn’t sure. But he couldn’t deny it was there.

Wordlessly, she reached out her hand to him. He wrapped his fingers around hers and looked down at their hands, thinking that he hadn’t held a woman’s hand since high school.

But he didn’t want to let go of her hand.

He didn’t want to let go of *her*.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be back tonight,” he said softly. “I took care of the arrangements for the memorial service today, and I guess I should have stopped by the drugstore and gotten some condoms, but I didn’t. After the way I left last night, it seemed kind of presumptuous.”

Her eyes brightened with amusement. “I guess I’m presumptuous,

then.” She reached into her pocket with her other hand and tossed something into his lap. Looking down, he saw it was a small foil packet. A condom.

“Merry Christmas,” she said.

* * * *

For someone who’d felt dead inside a few days ago, Carol felt pretty damn alive now.

The moment she’d tossed down the condom, Jackson had picked her up and carried her toward the back of the house. She’d objected briefly--surely he wasn’t going to make love to her on his father’s bed?--but he’d opened a door to what she’d always assumed was a guest room and flipped a light switch.

And paused.

“Hell,” he said in a strained voice. “It hasn’t changed a bit since I moved out.”

Carol twisted her head away from his shoulder and looked at the small room. A twin bed adorned with a baseball comforter sat in the corner, and a small bookcase sat against the wall, laden with books and trophies.

“My baseball trophies,” Jackson said, crossing the room in three strides and putting her down on the bed. “Jesus. He kept my baseball trophies. I thought he’d thrown those out years ago. He never even came to my games.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. I always told him....” He hesitated. “I always told him not to bother.”

“Maybe he thought you didn’t want him there.”

“Maybe.” Jackson walked across to the bookcase, picking up one of the trophies and turning it over and over in his hands. She could see a shadow of regret in his jade eyes.

“You didn’t even know the trophies were here?” she asked. “Are you telling me that you haven’t returned to this house once? Not a single time?”

He looked abashed. “My memories of this house were less than fabulous.”

“Still. You haven’t been here to visit your own father since you graduated high school?”

“I came back a few times in college. No more than I could manage, though.” He looked over at her, apparently seeing her shock written on her face. “My dad and I met up a few times a year. But on neutral ground. We met for lunch every now and then. It was safer that way. Less chance that we’d start screaming at each other.”

“Still,” she said again. “Your father loved you.”

He looked around the room, which looked very much like a shrine to his childhood. “Yeah,” he said softly, his eyes solemn. “I’m beginning to realize that.”

Shaking off the somber mood with a visible effort, he placed the trophy carefully back on the shelf, then walked back to the bed and smiled crookedly down at her. “It seems kind of wrong to make love to you here.”

“Because it’s a twin bed?”

“Well, that too. We’re probably going to roll out and break our necks. But no, because I slept in this bed the whole time I was growing up. If I’d

ever smuggled a girl in here, my dad would have killed me.”

“Your dad can’t object now,” she said heavily.

Jackson put a hand against her cheek, his warm fingers curving against her face. “I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t object, even if he could,” he said in a soft voice.

The idea that Robbie would approve of their relationship brought tears to her eyes. She’d thought something very similar herself yesterday. Perhaps the fact that both of them had thought it meant it was true. She blinked hard, and he sat down next to her.

“No,” he said. “Don’t cry. If you cry, I’m going to start crying, and then we’ll just dissolve in a puddle on the floor.”

She laughed shakily. “That’s the first time I’ve heard you admit you might cry for your father.”

“Yeah. It’s the first time I’ve ever admitted it to myself, but I guess the old guy did mean something to me after all. I just wish I’d realized it before now. Maybe we could have gotten to the point where we didn’t want to kill each other when we got together in the same room.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But it sounds like you had an awful lot of stuff standing between you. And maybe your personalities just didn’t mesh somehow.”

“That seems so wrong. He was my *father*. If I loved him, I should have been able to get along with him.”

“Don’t go blaming yourself,” she said. “It sounds like there was plenty of blame on his side too. And you know, it’s possible to love someone a great deal, but not like them much.”

He lifted his head and gazed at her, his eyes wide, as if the idea surprised him. “I never thought of it that way.” He tilted his head. “Did you feel that way about your husband?”

She blew out her breath in a sigh. “I’m not sure I ever really loved him. But after we’d been married for a while, I discovered I didn’t like him that much either.”

Jackson looked at her a moment longer, then wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her against him, pressing his face into her hair. “I like you, Carol,” he said, his voice muffled. “I like you a lot.”

She leaned against his chest. “I like you too, Jackson.”

They sat that way for a long moment, then she slowly became aware of a change in the atmosphere. His breathing grew faster and more ragged, his heart pounded audibly beneath her ear, and she felt the muscles of his back grow taut beneath her hands. A sudden awareness of his nearness swirled through her, filling her veins with heat, making the sensitive flesh between her thighs ache.

She lifted her head, pulled his face down, and brushed her lips across his.

They kissed softly for long moments, gentle, tender caresses meant more to express affection than to arouse. Then, slowly, almost reverently, Jackson slid his tongue between her lips. Heat arrowed through her at the intimate caress, and she moaned, burying her fingers in his hair and clutching him, clinging to him like she’d never let him go.

They quickly divested each other of their clothing, then their hands roamed freely over each other’s bodies, questing, discovering. She let her

hands investigate each heavy ridge of muscle, from the thick shoulders to his gorgeously rounded butt. At last he collapsed back onto the dark blue coverlet.

“I can’t wait any longer,” he said in a low, hoarse voice.

“Me neither,” she whispered.

She heard the faint tearing sound as he ripped open the packet, and lifted her head to watch as he rolled the condom on over his massive erection. The memory of him thrusting that thick column into her mouth, frantic with pleasure, sent another wave of heat through her. She felt moisture on her thighs and squirmed restlessly, aching for him.

Fully sheathed, he reached over, picked her up, and lifted her onto his thighs. She reached down and guided him into her, leaning her head back and breathing heavily as he slid inside her for the first time.

* * * *

She felt incredible. Like hot silk. Jackson gritted his teeth as she took him inside herself, inch by inch.

She was wet and aroused, and he could feel her stretching to accommodate him. Her body clutched him, searing and snug, her tightness a testament to how long it had been since she’d last made love, but at last she totally surrounded him. The heat was intense, the pleasure so brutal he almost came then and there. For two long years he hadn’t let himself think much about what he was missing, but now it all came back to him. He’d missed having sex.

But sex had never been quite like this before.

It was more than just physical pleasure, he thought as she threaded her

fingers through his and began to move on him with torturous slowness. This was intimate in a way sex never had been. He wasn't even kissing her, and yet he'd never felt so close to anyone.

He arched his head back as she slid down on him again, his muscles taut, his heart pounding, his skin slick with sweat. His whole world seemed to have shrunk to the hot contact point of their bodies, to the soft sounds she made as she rode him. He struggled to hold back, wanting her to come first.

She rose up, then down, faster and faster, and suddenly he heard her give a long, quavering cry, felt her tight body spasm around him. He couldn't wait any more, didn't want to wait a second longer. Ecstasy shuddered through him in a long, drawn-out wave.

Afterward, she collapsed on top of him. They were silent for a long while. At last she lifted her head and smiled down at him.

"So I guess we survived making love on a twin bed."

"We'll see," he said, and grinned wickedly. "We're not through yet."

She returned his smile. "I was hoping you'd say that."

Chapter 6

Jackson had made love to her for the past three nights, but now their brief affair was over. Sitting in a crowded pew at Robbie's memorial service, Carol looked across the sea of heads, seeing Jackson sitting stiffly in his pew at the front of First Lutheran, staring straight ahead, his shoulders squared. A huge lump burned her throat. The three nights she'd spent with Jackson had meant more to her than she could imagine, but he'd made it quite clear he'd be leaving after the service. She'd be spending the rest of Christmas Eve alone.

Tears stung her eyes. For Robbie, for Jackson, and for herself. She'd lost her best friend, and now she was going to lose her lover as well. A lover who'd come to mean a lot to her, in a mere three days. A lover she'd never get the chance to know better. Sorrow flooded over her full force.

The pastor was speaking, reminding the congregation of Robbie's service to the church, quoting gloomy words from Ecclesiastes and more hopeful verses from the book of John. At last he fell silent and sat down.

Carol felt her knees shaking as she stood up and walked up to the front of the church. Afternoon sunlight slanted in through the stained glass windows, shading the carpet beneath her feet with a glorious rainbow of color.

It was silly to be so nervous, she thought. As a member of the choir

and a cantor, she often sang in front of the entire congregation, but this was different somehow. She didn't want to mess up Robbie's memorial service. It was the last thing she'd ever do for him, after all, and she wanted to do it right.

Glancing over at Jackson, she saw a flash of surprise in his eyes as she began singing "Amazing Grace" to the accompaniment of a piano. She'd asked Pastor Goodman to tell Jackson a soprano soloist would be singing the song, and apparently the pastor had done so without volunteering any additional information.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me ...

She poured her best effort into the song, controlling her grief so that her voice wouldn't shake, trying to convey to Jackson and the congregation everything she had felt for Robbie. Robbie might have been a wretch, but somewhere along the line, he'd changed. Maybe not enough to ever get along with his son, but at least Jackson was coming to realize he hadn't been all bad.

I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see ...

If she left Jackson with nothing else, she hoped she'd managed to heal some of his childhood wounds, opening his eyes to the possibility that his father hadn't meant to hurt him. Because Jackson was a good man, a decent man who didn't deserve to walk around wounded for the rest of his life.

'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far... and grace will lead me home.

She finished her solo and walked back to her seat, letting a tear slide from her eyes. Jackson stood up and strode toward the front of the church,

which was decorated for tonight's Christmas Eve service with red poinsettias, as well as a towering Christmas tree decorated with the handmade, gold and white religious symbols called Chrismons.

Jackson began to speak, and Carol closed her eyes, letting his deep, rich voice roll over her.

"Pastor Goodman asked me to say a few words about my father," he said. "At first I refused. My father and I didn't get along, as I'm sure many of you are aware, and I thought I knew everything there was to know about the man. After speaking with several of you today, I've realized how little I knew about him."

He paused, cleared his throat roughly, and went on. "My father worked in a factory from the time he was sixteen," he said. "He never made much money, which I think is why he was so hard on me as a kid. That, and the fact that he was raising me without my mom. He wanted me to do better than he'd done, to find a better job. I've realized from talking with many of you that he was proud of me, so I guess..." He cleared his throat again. "I guess he thought I'd succeeded."

He hesitated a moment. "But the truth is, work isn't everything. My life is really pretty empty. The irony is, the man I thought was cold and harsh had many more friends than I do. Obviously he wasn't the ogre I thought he was, or there wouldn't be so many of you here today. I really wish I'd taken the time to try to come back to Swift Creek and get to know the man you all knew, rather than the man I remembered."

Carol saw him swipe hastily at his cheek. He went on, "Someone told me a couple of days ago that it's possible to love someone without liking

them very much. That thought had never occurred to me before, but it's true. I have to admit I didn't like my dad much, but maybe that was as much my fault as his. Or maybe not. Either way...." His voice broke, and he turned his head to look at the urn containing his father's ashes.

"I love you, Dad."

* * * *

Shit. He was a fucking coward.

Jackson drove his Lexus sedan toward Richmond at precisely five miles over the speed limit. Swift Creek was only about fifty minutes away, but the moment the memorial service was over, he'd lit out for home like a fox being pursued by a pack of hounds.

He'd dropped by his dad's house to get the cat, found a traveling cage in one of the closets, and managed to get Silver into the cage despite the cat's extreme opposition to the idea. He had a few scratches on his hands as a reminder of that little argument, but the cat was just fine. It sat on the passenger seat, glaring at him with narrowed green eyes from behind the metal bars.

"You don't have to look at me that way," Jackson said, glancing at the cat and then looking back at the road. He knew he should have left Silver with Carol, in a more or less familiar setting, but he hadn't wanted to leave behind the only link he had to his father. "I know running off without saying goodbye to her was wrong."

The truth was, he just hadn't been able to bring himself to say goodbye to Carol. He'd had too much emotional turmoil for one day, between the memorial service for his father and the reception afterward.

He'd talked to members of the congregation, both before and after the service, and discovered that his father had a lot of friends there. He'd even been a leader of the youth group.

Maybe Carol was right. His dad had realized what he'd done wrong in raising Jackson, realized he'd let the bitterness he felt over his wife's death taint his relationship with his son. It had been too late to fix it, but he'd atoned as best as he could, which forced Jackson to feel a reluctant admiration for the man.

The problem was, there wasn't much Jackson could do to atone for his own mistakes at this point.

Or perhaps there was. He thought about the numerous people who'd sat in that church, tears for the loss of his father streaming down their cheeks, and wondered who the hell would attend *his* funeral if he died. Off the top of his head, he couldn't think of a single person. Maybe his co-workers would be there, but most likely they'd just be checking to make sure he was dead before competing for his position as manager.

Carol would be there.

Unbidden, the thought slid into his head. He might not mean much to anyone else on God's green earth, but he meant something to Carol. If nothing else, they were friends. Intimate friends. And he'd run off without saying goodbye as if their three nights together had been nothing more than cheap, anonymous sexual encounters.

He had an unpleasant feeling he'd cut her to the bone. And on Christmas Eve, no less.

The sound of her sweet voice singing "Amazing Grace" still rang in

his ears. She had a beautiful voice, and the thought of never hearing it again made his throat ache. She'd been singing for his father, but also for him, he thought, trying to convey her belief that Robbie was a better man than he'd believed. Trying to let him know that his father wasn't the wretch he'd always believed him to be.

After everything he'd learned today, he was pretty sure she was right.

He turned into the parking garage and parked, pulled out Silver's cage, and headed for the elevator, listening to the cat's unhappy yowling. Technically, he wasn't supposed to have a pet. That was a problem, because he wasn't giving the ball of lint up. In just three days he'd gotten kind of used to having the animal around.

Of course, he'd gotten used to having Carol around too, but he was giving *her* up easily enough.

He unlocked the door of his condo, walked in, and flipped the lights on to ward off the gathering gloom of twilight. Shutting the door, he looked around. He'd lived in the unit for three years now, and yet it looked totally unfamiliar to him, like he'd never seen it before.

Strange. Where the condo had looked sleek and modern a few days before, now it just looked sterile and cold.

Sighing, he bent down and opened the cage. Silver Bells shot out and disappeared under the couch, where he began to wail piteously.

"Come on," Jackson said, kneeling down and holding out his hand. "It's all right."

Silver felt it wasn't all right, and said so loudly.

"It's all right. I promise. This is home."

The cat glared at him and made a spitting noise that conveyed his dissenting opinion quite clearly. Jackson sat down on the hardwood floor and let out his breath in a long, defeated sigh.

Sitting there in his dad's memorial service this afternoon had been excruciatingly painful. He'd had to come to grips with the fact that he'd screwed up his relationship with his dad, never admitting he might have been wrong till it was too late to fix it. He'd been hardhearted as well as hardheaded.

He didn't want to screw up things that badly again. He'd been given an unexpected Christmas gift in the form of a lovely, kind, sweet woman, and he didn't want to mess it up. Suddenly the notion of sitting alone in a dark condo on Christmas Eve, with only a cat for company, seemed worse than foolish ... it seemed idiotic. A flood of loneliness enveloped him.

"Hell," he said to the cat. "You're right. It's not home, is it?"

Chapter 7

Carol sat on the floor next to the Christmas tree she and Jackson had decorated together two days before. He'd made love to her last night, and the night before. She'd seen him briefly at the reception after the funeral, but he'd been distant, as if his thoughts were elsewhere. Which hadn't surprised her, considering he was thinking of his dead father. Of course his thoughts were elsewhere.

But then he'd gotten into his gray Lexus and driven away. She'd come over to feed Silver tonight and discovered he was gone, along with the cat's litter box and food.

She'd realized then that Jackson had left without even saying goodbye, and her heart had cracked in two, which was absolutely ridiculous. She felt that she'd come to understand Jackson's aversion to Christmas. He'd lost both his parents during the Christmas season, just as she'd lost her husband. It was a time of year filled with bad memories of loss for both of them, and it was nothing short of amazing that they'd been able to open up at all to one another, given the associations of the season.

But she'd known from the beginning that their relationship was going to be short-lived. Just two lonely people connecting, healing their wounds a bit, and then going their separate ways.

And yet she still felt miserable.

A few days ago, she'd been resigned to living her life single. She hadn't wanted to take a chance on a relationship. And maybe she should have kept her heart sealed off, because now she keenly felt Jackson's absence, missing him the way she'd miss an amputated limb.

When she'd come into the house and found it empty, she'd plugged in the tree's lights and flipped on the radio to listen to Christmas carols, then sat down next to the old-fashioned wood-burning fireplace as if she were waiting for Santa. She knew Santa wasn't coming, and that there wasn't going to be any Christmas magic, but she just couldn't bring herself to go back to her empty house.

The clock over the mantel chimed the hour, and she looked up. Twelve o'clock. It was midnight. Christmas day.

At that moment, a key rattled in the door. Her heart jumped into her throat, and she scrambled to her feet, walking quickly to the door. It opened, and Jackson strode in, along with a blast of chilly air.

He hesitated at the sight of her. She lifted her eyebrows, barely managing to cling to her dignity and not throw herself at him. "Did you forget something?"

He had the grace to look abashed. She noticed he was holding a squirming armful of attack kitty. "Uh, hi. I'm glad you're here. Can we talk?"

She'd never been so happy to see anyone in her life, but she fought to keep her soaring emotions in check. Odds were he'd just come back because he'd forgotten the kitty litter or something. "Sure," she said, stepping back and letting him in.

He walked into the living room and put down Silver, who made a beeline for the dangling ornaments.

“He’s going to destroy our tree,” Jackson said.

A warmth bloomed in her chest at the words. *Our tree*. Hope blossomed inside her like the crimson petals of a poinsettia.

She spoke gruffly, trying to conceal her reaction. “Never mind the tree. What are you doing here?”

Jackson sighed. “I took Silver back to my condo. But he didn’t like it much there. In fact, he hated it. So I wondered--do you want him?”

Her soaring hopes sputtered and crashed, and her heart seemed to stop beating. She swallowed. “Um, I’m not sure. Maybe.”

“Well, there’s a little problem. I kind of like Silver, too, and I think he likes me, even if he doesn’t care for my condo.”

Her heart started beating again. She knew it, because she could feel it pounding in her chest. “That’s a problem, all right. What do you suggest? Joint custody? I get him for a week, then you get him for a week? Something like that?”

He shook his head. “That seems like a lot of trouble. I was thinking maybe we could just both move in here with him.”

“Live with Silver on a permanent, fulltime basis?” She tilted her head and looked at the cat, who was batting furiously at a wooden angel. “I don’t know, Jackson. He’s so ... insecure. And emotionally needy.”

“But you can put up with that in someone who needs you so much, can’t you?”

She looked up into his dark green eyes. “Yes,” she said softly. “I

think I can.”

“Good. Because I really don’t think he’s complete without you.”

Carol looked dubiously at the cat, who had managed to knock down one of the wooden ornaments and was now batting it around the floor like a quadrupedal soccer player. “You think?”

“Yeah. I think.”

“But I thought your father’s house wasn’t modern enough for you.”

“I’m willing to make the sacrifice.” Jackson fixed a solemn look on his face. “For Silver’s sake.” He glanced over at the glittering tree. “By the time you’re done redecorating the place, I don’t think it’ll look quite as old-fashioned, anyway. Maybe we can work together to make it into something we both can live with.”

She looked up at him. “Is that what you really want, Jackson? To stay here?”

He sighed. “When I grew up and moved out, I just wanted to forget the past ever happened, Carol. But now I guess I’d rather hang onto the good parts of the past, and change the present to make it better. Does that make sense?”

She nodded. “Yes. It does.”

“I’ve always been afraid to take a shot at marriage and kids, for fear I might screw it up as badly as my dad did. In fact, it took me a long time to decide to come here. I sat in my condo a long time, thinking about you. I finally realized it’s stupid to let fear rule my life that way. You know?”

Carol nodded, thinking of her withdrawal after her divorce. She’d been scared stupid too. “Yeah. Believe me. I know what you mean.”

He took her hand. “The truth is, you’re the only good thing that ever came out of my relationship with my dad.”

She swallowed. “Is that why you want me? Because I’m like a link to your dad?”

“Hell, no. I want you because....” He grinned. “I like you. A lot.”

Her throat clogged with tears. “I like you too, Jackson. I don’t want to scare you off, but I think I could love you, given a little time.”

“You’re not scaring me. I think I’m already half in love with you, too. But there’s no rush. Time is something we have plenty of.”

She nodded slowly. “Okay, Jackson. Tell you what. I don’t think I’m ready to move in with you and Silver just yet. But if you move in here, I’ll be right next door, and you’ll have the chance to change my mind.”

“Sounds fair to me,” he said. The radio began playing a choral version of “Joy to the World,” and he lifted his head. “Hey, this carol was playing the first time we made love on the rug.”

“Really?” She grinned. “I wasn’t paying a lot of attention to the carols that night.”

“Me neither. I was more interested in *this* Carol.” He squeezed her hand, then sighed. “Well, if we’re not going to live together yet, maybe you’d better get going before I try to change your mind. Say goodnight, Silver.”

Silver shot him a look of contempt that said clearly, *I don’t talk, moron*, and continued to bat the ornament.

“I don’t think he wants you to go.”

“Well....” she said. “It’s Christmas. Maybe I can make an exception.

Just this once.”

Jackson flashed his heart-stopping grin. “Maybe if I really impress you, you’ll make an exception for tomorrow night too. And the night after that.”

“I guess that could happen. You never know.”

He swept her up in his arms and headed for his bedroom.

“Let’s find out,” he said.

The End