



PHAZE
HEAT SHEET

Smuggler

SUSAN DIPLACIDO

*Twas the Night
After Christmas*

'Twas the Night After Christmas

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eBook ISBN 1-59426-579-8
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Phaze is an imprint of Mundania Press, LLC.



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It was December twentieth, and they were looking for something new to do. Tired of the same old hangouts in their own neighborhood, they drove around the city, looking for some new excitement—or at least some new scenery around them—as they did the same old thing. "Hey, let's go in there, man, shoot a game of pool, decide what to do," his buddy suggested.

Turning his head to look out the passenger window at the bar, Joe Lopez questioned his pal's decision. "What do you wanna go in there for?"

Shrugging, Eddie answered, "I dunno. I'm thirsty, and there's a parking spot. How often you find a spot like that?"

Joe agreed. "Alright, let's go have one in there. But if it sucks, we're outta there after one."

He saw them as soon as he walked in the door, and was immediately thankful for the serendipitous parking spot. He noticed the redhead especially. Her back was to them, but she looked at them as they entered, and he caught a glimpse of her face before she turned away, a mass of flowing auburn hair falling down her back, warm and inviting above snug fitting, dark Levi's. Elbowing Eddie and nodding in their direction, Joe said, "Nice scenery in here."

Whistling slightly, Eddie agreed. "Not bad at all. Nice to check out the view in new sections of town sometimes, huh? Hey, go rack 'em at that table. I'll grab us some beers."

"Nah, nah, nah," Lopez smiled at him. "I know what you're up to. I don't want you wrecking our chances right off the bat by saying something stupid."

"I won't say anything dumb! Fuck you, man. Like you're some hotshot Latin Romeo anyhow. We're here to shoot a game of pool. Go rack 'em."

Like all customers in a not-so-crowded bar, the women had turned around to see who was entering when the two strangers came in. Taking a quick glance as they walked through the door, Marie had already been impressed by the stranger on the right. He was medium height with broad shoulders, short black hair, and gleaming dark eyes. Unfortunately, the one on the left was making his way to the bar while his buddy was taking off his jacket and settling near the pool table in the back. She liked the way he moved, a self assured swagger that began in his shoulders and moved with a subtle rhythm throughout his torso and legs as he walked. She found it sexy, and a bit cocky.

Halting next to her, Eddie ordered a couple of beers then turned his gaze on her and immediately broke his promise to Lopez by uttering one sentence: "So, what's your sign, baby?"

She answered crisply, "Yield."

As the answer registered, a slow grin broke across Eddie's face and he chuckled to himself. *Stuck up bitch*, is what he thought about her. So he looked past her and to her friend. Eyeing her, he licked his lips as she returned his gaze. He winked at her. She laughed, and he thought that was a good sign. The bartender placed the bottles in front of him and he paid, but lingered until he heard his name being called from the back.

"Yo, Eduardo," the voice rang, with perfect Spanish enunciation on his name. "I got 'em racked back here, come on." Slowly, eyes on the blonde, Eddie scooped up the bottles in one hand and turned and headed toward the back.

Throwing a long curl of red hair over her shoulder, Marie turned and looked toward the back of the bar. The one she previously noticed was chalking a stick. Never removing her eyes from him, she told her roommate, "You know, that's our table. We won it, our quarters are up there. Our names are on the board."

"Oh, come on, Marie. Let 'em have it. We aren't playing anymore."

"No, it's the principle of the thing," she said. "Besides, it's getting late. It's gonna get busy soon. If they hog that table, we'll never get it back."

"No, you just want to go back there and hassle them."

Dropping her jaw and looking at her friend with mock offense, Marie raised a hand to her chest and exclaimed sarcastically, "Who? Me? Hassle someone? No, what's fair is fair. They want the table, they have to beat us. Come on," she instructed, picking up her drink and striding toward the back.

As she got close, she saw the one she was interested in hovering over the end of the table, his left arm stretched out over the railing as his other one aligned the stick with the cue ball, the sinewy muscles of his forearm stretched taut. Just as he moved back, preparing to strike and break, she reached down and snatched the white ball off the table.

He rose and stood ramrod straight, fixing his gaze upon her. She wondered briefly if she had miscalculated as she saw the knit of his brows and shadow of anger move across dark eyes. Not flinching, she realized she hadn't made a grave error as he looked at her face and the

hostility dissipated as rapidly as it had appeared. A grin crept across his features, revealing defined cheekbones and softening his dark eyes.

"What, you got rights on that cueball or something?" he asked as one brow arched.

"No. I have rights to the table," she replied, nodding to the chalkboard behind him. "These," she pointed to the quarters on the railing, "are mine. And I last won on the table. If you want it, you have to beat me." Her friend smiled at Eddie apologetically behind her.

Turning around, he inspected the chalkboard, and read the only name not crossed off. "Marie, huh? Okay," he said simply. "I'm Joe."

When she didn't answer him, he asked, "You wanna break, Marie?"

"Well, you shouldn't break your own rack, and it is my table," she answered, stepping closer to him and placing her hand above his on the stick, slowly pulling it away from him.

"So that's your stick, too, huh?" he asked cockily.

"Yeah, pretty much everything around here that I want is mine. Thanks for chalking it for me, though." Dropping the white ball back on the table, she leaned over the railing and adjusted it with the tip of the stick. Then with one fluid motion, she struck and sent the balls rolling around the table.

She dropped the two on the break, called low balls, and leaned over to align a shot on the one ball at the opposite end of the table.

Crossing his arms in front of him, Joe taunted her, "I dunno, lotta green there, you sure you wanna take that shot?"

Carefully aligning the shot, when she was satisfied, Marie turned her head and looked at him, catching his gaze. Never taking her eyes off his face, she pulled the stick back and shot, sending the one ball into the chosen pocket, then smirked victoriously as his face dropped into shock.

Behind him, Tracey and Eddie erupted into laughter.

Winning the first game, Marie raised the stakes. "Play for shots, loser buys."

After buying her four shots and drinking with her, Joe felt his own head humming and face warming. Watching her lean over the table and bank the eight ball in, costing him another round, he leaned into his friend and said quietly, "She's hot, man."

"Yeah, forget it, Lopez," Eddie warned. "You got no chance there."

"The fuck does *that* mean?"

"Look at her," Eddie said. "She's not from our 'hood. She's got class. I think we're a little too, uh, *ethnic* for these chicks. You ain't getting

nowhere with that *chiquita*. She's just taking you for free liquor, my man."

Glaring at Eddie, Joe noticed Tracey slide up next to them. He switched to Spanish, not wanting to be overheard, but also not willing to let the subject drop. "*Yeah, I'll bet you I can nail her. She digs me,*" he said as he watched Marie stride to the bar, appreciating her catlike saunter in her Levi's as she ordered another round, compliments of him.

Eddie, still in Spanish, said, "*No way are you taking her home tonight.*"

"Maybe not tonight, but soon. If I want her, I can have her."

"Yeah? What's the bet?"

"Cientos," Joe said. *A hundred bucks.*

Looking at the girl at the bar who had suckered Joe all night, Eddie answered, "You're on. I'll give you 'til Christmas. 'Tis the season and all."

"Gracias," Joe said with a nod and walked up to the bar to pay the bill he owed.

Sliding next to her at the bar, Joe placed a hand in the middle of Marie's back, checking to see if she would move away to evade his touch. She didn't. Instead, she shook her head once, sending the long tendrils of dark red hair over her shoulder to brush against the back of his hand. She turned to face him, raising a full shot glass. Still not removing his hand from her back, he picked up his shot with the other and looked her directly in the eyes. They were curled up, glistening green, and betraying the effects of the liquor.

Marie could tell he was getting a little drunk, but she didn't care. She gazed into his dark eyes, certain she knew exactly what he was thinking as his mouth slowly curled into a smile. He was cocky, probably looking for an easy lay, but he seemed to like her in spite of himself.

Never breaking eye contact, Joe raised his shot glass and clinked it against hers, speaking in a soft low voice, "'Tis the season," he said. Then they placed the glasses against their lips, tilted back their heads, and allowed the sharp liquid to rush down their throats with heat and intoxicating bite.

Hours later, Tracey tugged at Marie's sleeve and Eddie at Joe's. They stumbled to their feet gracelessly from their perches at the bar. As he stood up, Joe realized just how drunk he was. He'd been talking her up, bickering the night away while drinking shots and hadn't even noticed just how looped he had gotten. She seemed in better shape than he was, even though she matched him shot for shot. She was one feisty

chica. Pushing a muscled arm through the sleeve of his black leather jacket, he staggered slightly as he tried to pull it up around his shoulders.

Next to him, Marie was fairly well composed, her body not detailing just how furiously her mind was humming. She liked him, alright, and he was hot. Normally, she'd let him walk her home, and then if he asked her out again, she'd let him do much more the next time.

"C'mon, man," Eddie said. "We gotta get going. You're fuckin' drunk as shit. Gimme the keys."

Unable to deny it, Joe fished in his pocket, pulling the keys out and then gravely looking at his friend. "Don't crash," he warned. "That's a new car." Turning to Marie, he asked, "You girls need like a ride? We'll take you home."

"No, that's okay. We just live around the corner. You can walk us out, though," Tracey said to Eddie.

Walking to the door, Marie stopped to adjust her coat and pull soft leather gloves out of her pocket and onto her hands. She looked up at Joe, leaned close, and brushed her lips against his. Hesitating there, she waited for him to respond, for his mouth to press against hers. When his lips parted slightly, she drew back, glancing up at the ceiling above them. His eyes followed hers, noticing the cluster of mistletoe suspended above them.

"'Tis the season," she said.

Walking out into the cold, he reached for her, slid an arm around her waist, and roughly pulled her close. Nose to nose, he looked in her eyes, as if making sure it was okay. Then, he leaned in, titled his head, and kissed her. Hard.

Lips pressed tight, Marie's head hummed and she responded immediately. Her mouth parted, her breath escaping her as his arms squeezed her tight. Drunk, her head whirring, she liked it. Cold air whispered across her cheeks, but his mouth was warm and moist, his tongue flicking out against hers. She sucked on it, and he groaned. He pulled her tight and kissed harder, heating her up from the inside out. Marie reached up and took hold of his shoulders as he turned her and pressed her against the brick wall.

The chill of the cold building permeated her jacket and brought her to her senses. He was hot, yes, and she was drunk, yes. But maybe she was too drunk and she had let him get far enough for tonight. She pressed the heels of her palms against his shoulders and pushed to back him off. That's when he moved from her mouth and sucked on her neck.

Joe could feel her face and neck flushing under his kisses, the warmth of her skin egging him on. She took hold of his shoulders, first pushing gently as he kissed her neck. But when he sucked just below her earlobe, her hands pulled him in more closely. She tasted great; boozy, but subtle and warm, just a slight sweet smell to her hair. So different from the strong perfumes on most women. He licked her earlobe and sighed in her ear. She shivered, but he knew it wasn't from the cold. Drunk and eager, he moved back to her mouth and went to work there, one arm wrapped tight around her waist, pulling her into him while his body pressed her against the wall. His other hand started to roam. First, he moved down, boldly cupping one cheek of her ass.

Marie opened her eyes to get her bearings, lifted her mouth away from his. Looking up, the dark sky was clear with dizzying stars. His hand, strong and bold, massaged her buttock, and he panted and kissed her neck. Marie shifted her weight and lifted her leg. His hand slipped to her upper thigh and pulled her against him, aligning her hip with his crotch. There he was; she could feel him under the fly of his pants, stiff already. She knew she should back off, but something about him being so drunk and yet being so easily and quickly turned on held her in place, riveted, lapping up his attentions.

Joe stopped kissing to catch a breath, white plumes of smoke escaping both their mouths in unison. His pulse already racing and his cock at attention, he pulled her leg closer and ground his hips against her, delicious friction getting him higher—pressing his cheek against the softness of hers, panting in her ear.

"Joe," she whispered to him. "Wait." She put her hands on the front of his shoulders, subtly pressing him back.

Coaxing, he pushed closer to her. He let go of her leg and moved his hand to the front, between them. Brazen, daring, he held her tight around the waist, kissed her ear, and reached between her legs, planting his hand against her crotch. Marie gasped. Joe rubbed.

And behind them, Tracey coughed. Loudly.

Joe, his hand still buried between her legs, froze, remembering where they were. Marie took hold of his wrist and moved his hand off her when Eddie called Joe's name. Both of them grinned at each other, but when Joe leaned in for another kiss, Marie pushed back on his shoulders and shook her head.

"You sure?" he asked, his voice husky. When she nodded, he stepped aside and she slipped out of his grasp.

She backed away, moving to her friend's side. He stopped her by taking hold of her hand and asking, "Hey, can I call you or something?"

"You know where to find me," she said, and then turned, let her hand slide out of his grasp, and left him to watch her walk down the street, headed for home.

Sliding into the passenger seat, Joe pressed his forehead against the cold window and shifted uncomfortably, the heat in his hard-on turning to a dull, unsatisfied ache. He pressed his cheek against the cool glass. Taunting, Eddie spoke first. "You didn't bag her, *amigo*. Hundred bucks."

Turning to glare at his friend, he said flatly, "Yo, fuck you, man. You said by Christmas. I got a few days."

Eddie taunted again, saying, "You're too drunk to fuck tonight anyhow."

"I ain't never too drunk to fuck, asshole," Joe muttered, using the opportunity to grab his dick in a show of bravado, but actually enjoying the sensation. When Eddie dropped him off, he told him to take the car and drive himself home, not really caring, just dying to get inside and rub one out before he passed out.

Marie, she walked home with Tracey, the cold winds doing nothing to calm the heat Joe had created between her legs. In fact, the seam of her snug jeans created a pulsing friction. And even when Tracey told her what she'd heard, her hopes sank, but her body pulsed with the thought. And when she climbed into her bed, her head spun, but she closed her eyes and let her own hand finish what Joe had started, imagining it was him and they were back on the street corner.

* * * *

The next night, Eddie didn't want to return to that part of the city. Joe prodded him to go, teasing, "Come on, man, that blonde kinda dug you."

"What's with you, Lopez?" Eddie asked him. "One night and you're all cow-eyed over this chick already?"

"No. Fuck you. I want my hundred bucks."

"Ah, forget it, I told you, that was a sucker bet. You ain't gonna get nowhere with that chick. You're gonna make an ass outta yourself."

"No, I won't. I'll get her."

"You like her. That's why you wanna go back there."

"I want my money. You don't wanna go there, then the bet's off. I gotta see her to fuck her."

"I don't wanna go back there, Lopez. I'm gonna be bored. No. I ain't goin' back there."

"Ah, man, fuck," Joe hissed. "You don't wanna pony up the cash when I *do* nail her."

"No. Fuck it, I ain't goin back there. You wanna go, you go by yourself. I'm not going."

An hour later, Eddie and Joe were shooting a game of pool at the bar, and Eddie sourly remarked, "See, she ain't even here. She ain't coming here again."

"She'll be here," Joe said.

"Yeah, how you know?"

"You're here, ain't you?" Joe said cockily and turned as he heard the door open. He couldn't help but smile as he saw her. Nodding at him, she walked over to the bar and took off her coat, draping it over a chair. He knew he should wait, make her come over to him, but he didn't. He strolled over to the bar and grinned at her through upraised eyes.

"How you doin'?" he asked.

Smiling, she answered, "I'm fine, now. I was a little hungover this morning, though."

"Yeah, me, too. You, uh, you want a beer or something?" Polite, he bought one for Tracey, too.

They played some pool, had a few drinks, and Eddie started coozing up with Tracey, using his brand of doltish charm to grow on her. The place stayed nearly deserted though. Wondering why they had the place to themselves, Joe moved to the front of the bar and peered out the window. "Oh, shit," is all he said.

"What?" Marie asked, as she moved up behind him, placing a hand on his back as he had done to her the night before.

"Look at that. That's why no one's coming in. Shit, I gotta drive home in that."

"Wow, that sucks," she said, surveying the street outside. Drizzling sleet was coming down, hitting the pavement and slicking it as the cold temperature worked to turn it into sheets of ice. Car windows were beveled with a thin layer of ice, and nary a vehicle was moving through the streets. Tree branches lining the sidewalk were bending under the weight, as icicles kept dripping and growing longer as more rain hit them. The small piles of snow on the side of the road glistened as if covered by glass.

"Man," he said. "I better get going. It's only gonna get worse out there."

"Oh," Marie said. "Well, look, it's starting to snow, that should help. Give you some traction over the ice. Maybe you should wait until some more has fallen."

Turning to look at her, he understood. She didn't want him to leave. Her eyes were cast down at the ground, and he waited for her to raise them and look up at him. When she did, he held her gaze for a long moment. Licking his lips, he answered her, "Yeah, maybe I oughta wait. Traction."

When they stepped out into the cold air later that night, they began laughing at each other. Even with the snowfall, the ground was treacherously slick, and they couldn't get solid footing. Tracey kept clutching Eddie's arm for balance, trying to steady herself. Suddenly, Joe broke into a run, then pulled up and slid a good ten feet down the sidewalk. Not to be outdone, Marie sprinted a few steps, then pulled up, feeling her stomach lurch as she glided swiftly toward him. Holding out a strong arm, he caught her as she slid next to him, giggling like kids. "Oh, man, we need a car to come by," she said.

"What?"

"One of my favorite things to do, go schitzing. It's the perfect night for it."

"Again, what?" Joe asked.

Almost as if on cue, a car slowly rounded the corner, the driver aiming it with care over the dangerous streets. "Oh," she laughed, "here, watch." She made her way to the curb, and as the car passed by, she ran behind it and grabbed hold of its rear bumper. Holding tightly, she skated across the ice behind it until it began to round the corner. She let go and slid into the side of a parked car to stop herself.

Alternately running and sliding back to the group, her breath came out in white puffs in the cold air. "Isn't that cool?"

"Man, I gotta try that," Eddie spoke. "Next car's mine."

They stood on the corner, blowing into their hands to warm them and shuffling their feet as the icy snow crunched beneath them. When the next car came by, Eddie hitched onto the back of it, skating behind it for nearly a block as the other three spotted another car coming down the street. "This one's mine," Joe said, then his face dropped. "Oh, shit, man, it's the heat."

Up ahead, Eddie had slid another block, then let go and crashed to the ground. Picking himself up, he laughed as he trudged back to the group. When he looked up, he saw the black and white stopped in front of his friends and muttered curses under his breath as he walked over.

The officer stepped out of the car, approached the group. Asked, "What's going on here?"

"We're just out going caroling, officer, spreading some Christmas cheer," Joe replied smartly.

"I saw what you were doing. That's very dangerous you know."

"Uh, yeah," Marie interjected. "We're sorry. We won't do it anymore."

"Well," the cop said and eyeballed them, "Get home. It's nasty out here tonight. And don't be taking any more rides on the back of cars. It's illegal you know."

"Yes, officer. Sorry," she said.

The cop crawled back in his car. Apparently concerned with his footing, he didn't look back at the group, as three of them stood watching him while a fourth carefully snuck behind the car. When he pushed the car into drive and began to pull away, the three of them struggled to keep straight faces as Joe clung to the back bumper of the car. Looking over at them and grinning, he slid behind as the cop slowly pulled away. He held fast to the cruiser's bumper for a few blocks before letting go and gliding to a stop as the officer drove away oblivious.

When he made his way back to the group, they were all laughing at him, and Eddie slapped him on the back in salute. "You're an asshole, man. That was funny as shit."

Joe's cheeks and nose were pink from the cold, and he blew on his hands in discomfort before shoving them in his pocket and moving next to Marie again. "Want us to walk you girls home?" he offered.

Marie nodded with a shy smile.

With Tracey and Eddie up ahead, he nudged her shoulder as they walked. "I think they kinda like each other," he pointed at the couple in front of them.

"Yeah, things work out like that sometimes," she said, and then ran a few steps and fell into a fast slide. Unable to balance, she tumbled to the ground, falling into a small pile of snow. He stood over her, laughing.

"Shut up. Help me up," she said, raising a hand for him to pull her up. As he clutched her hand, she yanked him down, and with the ice

beneath him, he couldn't stop his fall. He tumbled down on top of her, and she laughed at him.

"You think that's funny, huh?" he asked her.

"Yeah, I do." She looked up at him, and his grin faded along with hers. Snow crunched softly beneath them, and she was intensely aware of the weight of his body upon hers. A few flurries fell from the clouded sky, one dropping onto his eyelashes and settling for a moment before melting. The pink of his cheeks deepened, turning to a ruddy flush of anticipation. Still not moving, they gazed at each other, a momentary truce in the competitiveness. No cars hummed by, no other people were out making noise. In the giant, populated city, at that moment, it felt as though not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

He saw the mist of her breath as she exhaled and felt her chest beneath his rise as she drew it back in. She could faintly smell the leather of his jacket, mixing with the still present hint of beer upon his mouth. Closing his eyes, Joe kissed her. Soft and yielding, Marie parted her lips. The warmth of his tongue played upon her lower lip, then prodded her open even more. She could taste beer, but under that, a slight saltiness. His teeth razed her upper lip as he let out a shuddering breath when her hands wound up to his face and she drew her fingers down behind the back of his ears. He forgot the chill outside as he sucked her lower lip, her cheeks warm against his own. She grasped at the short hair on the back of his head, and he responded by pressing more deeply, moving his tongue against hers.

Under him, Marie squirmed, so he lifted up, trying to make her more comfortable. Just as he was going back in for another kiss, unexpectedly, she grabbed hold of his crotch, returning the favor from last night. Shocked, eyes widening, Joe lurched and stared at her.

"You don't like that?" Marie asked, leaning up and kissing his neck.

He turned his head, exposing more skin for her to work on. She nibbled, her hand went to work, stroking against his leg, then higher, against his fly, as he rapidly hardened.

"Yeah," Joe sighed. Nodding, "I like that."

Marie kissed him on the mouth as she worked her hand under his pants, taking hold of him through his underwear.

Hot and cold tumbled and mixed through them, shivering them inside and out. Marie was pressed into the snowbank, but the heat of Joe on top of her kept her tingling. And the cold draft on Joe's back wasn't able to break the spell of Marie under him, her warm palm circling the

heat of his erection. The winter prickle of icy air, being breathed into their hot lungs, mixed with the sultry exhales from each other's mouths.

Marie moved again, this time not squirming, but lifting her knees, cradling him against the softness of her body as she tongued his mouth and gently stroked his penis. Joe started moving, undulating his hips, pumping himself into her hand.

He was jolted out of the delight by shockingly cold wetness upon his neck, and he jerked away from her and grabbed at his own neck.

She was laughing at him again, having shoved a handful of snow down his collar. She wondered if she would see the mercurial flash in his eyes. But she didn't. She released his dick, pulled her hand out of his pants, and struggled out from under him as he pulled a handful of snow out of his collar and tossed it at her. She pushed him aside and struggled to her feet, brushing snow off herself. He stood up and blew on his hands. They were really pink, having been buried in the snow as he was lying on top of her. Feeling sympathetic now, she gently wrapped her hands around his and drew them to her mouth, breathing heavily on them and rubbing them softly.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm just cold," he said with a shiver. "And hot," he added with a wry grin.

"Come on. It's not much further."

When they got to the front door of her apartment building, Eddie and Tracey were standing in the lobby, waiting for them. She turned to face him and sunk her hands into the pockets of his leather coat. He responded by lowering his head to kiss her again. It was brief and simple this time, and then he drew back and looked at her. "Gonna invite me in? Show me your Christmas tree?" he asked. Again, he allowed her entrance into his thoughts by permitting her to search his eyes.

He didn't blink or shift his gaze. *Good Lord*, she thought, *he is beautiful*. She shivered as she inspected his face. She took a deep breath, drinking in the warm scent of his leather jacket. She intended to send him home right then, but he leaned closer and kissed her again. He pressed against her, let her feel his erection against her abdomen, showing how the cold jolt to his neck did nothing to stop the heat of his passion.

When he pulled back, she glanced behind her, she saw Eddie inside with his arm against a wall, leaning into Tracey as she smiled coyly and looked down.

She had a better idea than just sending him home.

"Well," she told him, "I would invite you in, but our tree isn't decorated yet."

He just shrugged, said, "Maybe I could help you, uh, get your lights on. Or something."

Marie looked him directly in the eye. She said, "Well...I'd also hate to see Eddie lose a hundred bucks."

"What?" Joe asked, completely stunned.

"Tracey," Marie explained. "She's a teacher. She teaches Spanish to high school kids, Joe. She heard you, last night."

He fumbled, speechless for a moment before babbling out excuses. "Oh, baby," he said. "I'm sorry, Marie. That was just stupidity. It's...that's not what this is about. Yo, fuck that bet, man," he said, circling his arms around her waist.

She backed away. "How do I really know that?"

"C'mere," he said, pulling her tight again. "Can't you feel that? Does that feel like I care about the money?"

"Mmm," she nodded, eyeing him warily. Looking inside, she saw Eddie and Tracey climb into the elevator to go upstairs.

Figures, she thought. If only she didn't want him so bad.

She invited him up.

In the apartment, Tracey was pulling a beer from the 'fridge for Eddie. Joe noticed their stark tree in the corner of the living room, boxes of lights and ornaments stacked neatly beside it. Bypassing them, Marie led Joe into her bedroom. The smartass in him couldn't resist looking back and smirking to Eddie on his way in. Inside, he closed the door and shrugged out of his coat, letting it fall to the floor, taking a seat on her bed. When he started to pull his shirt over his head, Marie stopped him.

"No, Joe," she said. "Slow down." Taking a seat on his lap, she gave him a deep kiss. Pulling back, she asked, "Do you want me?"

"Are you kidding?"

"I mean it," she said. "Are you just horny? Or do you want *me*?"

"Marie," he sighed, running his hands along her back, trying to soothe her. "I want you."

"I'm not a wager, Joe."

"I know," he said, cockiness draining.

Marie stared at him, and he didn't flinch. In the dim lights, his eyes seemed bottomless. She believed him. Almost.

"You aren't a bet," Joe said again. Earnest, throbbing for her. "I don't care about that bet. I'll call it off and pay him right now."

"No, no," Marie shook her head. "A bet's a bet. If you fuck me before Christmas, you win. Well, you aren't going to win," she informed him, and stood up. Quickly, before he could answer, she pulled her sweater over her head and stood in front of him, letting him look at her. She kicked off her shoes and peeled off her socks, then unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans. Turning her back to him, she slipped them down over her hips, bending and giving him a full view of her bottom.

She almost couldn't believe she was doing it. Well, not undressing in front of him. But what she was going to do. She wasn't shy, but she wasn't a tease either. Usually. But she still didn't know if he was playing her. If he was, he'd learn a lesson. And if he wasn't, this would definitely get him coming back for more.

Her hair fell down her back in thick red curls, but when she leaned over, Joe was enraptured by her ass. It was every bit as luscious as he'd imagined, it looked even plumper and smoother than he thought from feeling it through her jeans the other night. When she kicked her jeans aside, she came back over and straddled his lap, settling herself on his knees. Brushing her cheek against his, she whispered to him. "Take off my bra, Joe," she instructed.

Joe gulped. She said he wasn't going to win the bet, but if this was what she called losing, he'd be happy to be the world's biggest loser. He reached behind her but didn't find a clasp. She was watching him, and he brought his hands up to her front, dragging them across her stomach before unhooking it at the base of her cleavage.

"Take it off," she told him.

Breath coming shallow, he slid his hands under the cups, cradling her tits in the palms of his hands. Pulse racing, her nipples hardening under his touch, he leaned in to kiss her neck.

Marie evaded his kiss and rose up off his lap. Standing in front of him, she removed the bra the rest of the way and let it fall to the floor, allowing him to take a long look at her body. She could tell he liked what he saw, and that gave her the courage to go on. His face was flushed, his hands on her had been strong but gentle. She bit her lip to keep her resolve. She crawled onto the bed next to him, then further up, settling her back against a stack of pillows, laying out beside him.

"Joe," she said. "Get up. Take your clothes off."

She watched as he hurriedly stripped. His skin was smooth and golden, his upper arms and chest just as defined and cut as his sinewy forearms led her to believe. His stomach was tight and flat, his erection

standing at attention. When he was finished, he moved to climb on the bed on top of her.

"No," she said. "Stay there."

Looking at him, she wanted him to touch her. She wanted his hands all over her, and his body pressed close to hers. She wanted to kiss him, she wanted to lick him, she wanted to run her hands along his muscles and feel them, all of them.

Looking at him, letting her eyes roam where her hands wanted to go, she reached up and touched herself, imagining it was his hands running all over her body. First her neck, then her stomach, then she smoothed her hands across her breasts, stopping to massage her nipples, pretending it was his mouth on them. Looking to his face, she saw his eyes glued on her every movement, the rhythm of his breathing increasing, the hot flush coming back to his face.

Taking a deep breath, scared and shy, but knowing it would really set him off, she closed her eyes and dipped a hand under her panties. She parted herself with a few fingers and found the hot nub where her tension was centered. Already slick, she expertly worked her clit, opening her eyes to check his reaction.

When she looked up at him, he took hold of himself and made a move toward her again.

Breathy, low, she just said, "No. Stay there."

He obeyed. Stunned, riveted by her gorgeous body, he stared at the deliberate movements of her hand beneath her underwear.

She turned and buried her face in the pillow, hiding her shame. She meant to turn him on, figured she'd put on a show. But in the process, watching him undress, seeing his body and how it responded, she got genuinely excited. Now, her clit pulsing, she didn't know if she could follow through if it was real, but she was throbbing beneath her hand and didn't know if she could stop either.

Joe was throbbing, aching to climb between her legs. But he didn't dare cross her for fear she'd stop. So he touched himself. Rubbing, it was dry. So he licked his palm and took hold of himself again, slowly pulling down while he imagined entering her.

Marie watched out of the corner of her eye, saw the speed of his hand increase upon himself. "If you don't stop," she warned him, "I will." She pulled her hand away from her slit and hooked her thumbs around the edges of her panties, pulled them down over her hips, rising to slide them over her butt, then sat up to kick them down her legs.

She tossed them aside and leaned back, one hand went to her breast, massaging, the other back between her legs. Joe kept stoking himself. "I mean it," she warned. "Stop it."

Raspy voiced, "Marie," he pleaded.

"You can hold yourself," she cut him off. "But nothing else. If you try to touch me, this is over. If you try to get yourself off, this is over. Just watch."

As she started working her hand again, he moved, closer to the bed. She glared at him and reluctantly stopped. He halted, gripping himself tightly, his cock pulsing in agony.

Marie held his gaze and went to work again. She meant to prolong it, to tease him with slow touches, to put on a show. But she couldn't fake it, because it was real. Her crotch was aching for release, and watching his frustration only made hers increase. She went to work, gliding her fingers over her hot spot, each stroke demanding another. Pressing harder, rubbing more quickly, she began to undulate her hips, grinding against her own movements.

Joe was ready burst, strung tight as a piano wire. Clutching himself, the veins in his neck standing out, muscles in his arm and neck cording with tension. Marie looked at his erection, his fist curled around the shaft. She gave up massaging her breasts and used that hand on herself too. Reaching down, sliding a few fingers inside herself, she bucked as she closed her eyes and imagined it was Joe entering her.

She was going at herself with both hands, working furiously. Her hips grinding, a few fingers inside, her other hand slick and sliding, pleasing herself. Joe knew she was close to getting herself off. It was the hottest thing he'd ever seen. He couldn't take it, he needed relief. He couldn't keep watching, he'd explode, but he couldn't tear himself away. Her eyes closed, her body flushed, he dared to pump himself. Lightly at first, but the more Marie bucked and bit her lip, the faster her hands worked, the more he picked up the pace.

Edgy, Marie opened her eyes. Joe was watching, jerking himself with growing fervor. She locked eyes with him, drove her fingers deeper, pressed and rubbed, and let out a long, low moan as she started to come. It was a hard one, rushing through her veins, shaking her body, her one hand still working away, dragging it out. Even with him watching, she didn't stop. She coaxed the aftershocks, shivering, writhing with them.

When she'd had enough, she lay panting, exhausted. But above her, Joe was starting to really go at himself. She forced herself to sit up. Pushing the hair off her face, she said one word: "Stop."

Joe gritted his teeth and grunted. His hand slowed, but didn't relent.

"Joe," Marie said. "If you don't stop, you'll never touch me."

Sheer willpower, looking at her body, thinking of possibilities yet to come, Joe inhaled sharply, let it out slowly, and released himself.

"Did you like what you just saw?" Marie asked him.

He swiped a hand across his brow and gave a terse nod, teeth still grinding together.

"Joe," Marie said and waited for him to look her in the face. When he did, she told him, "I'm worth much more than a hundred bucks."

He nodded.

"Now get dressed," Marie told him. "And go home."

As he pulled his boxers back on, he was silent. He was furious. He was embarrassed. But mostly, he was frustrated. Silently, he left, slamming the door behind him.

In the living room, he nodded to Eddie and said, "C'mon. We're outta here."

Sitting on the sofa, his arm around Tracey, Eddie didn't move. He just smiled and took a long drink of his beer. Tracey spoke up. "He...um, he can stay here."

Now Joe felt like his head was going to explode on top of everything else that was throbbing. He huffed out, slamming that door, too.

Outside, he slipped on the icy sidewalk and fell hard onto his back. "Shit!" he shouted up to the clouded sky. Joe picked himself up, his hands once again digging into the crunchy snow as he lifted himself and cursed. Once up, he glared up at Marie's apartment, saw the light in the living room flip off. "Son of a bitch," he muttered, bubbling inside. He grabbed a handful of snow, packed it tight, and hurled it at the window, yelling, "*Son of a bitch!*"

It felt good. Hurriedly, he patted another one together and launched it. He took a deranged glee as it splattered against the window with a satisfying *thwomp* and left plenty of white and watery shrapnel. As he was packing another one tight, the light inside flicked on, and he saw Marie, draped in a robe, her red hair waving wildly, coming toward the window.

"Shit," he hissed as he ducked, turned, and scampered away.

Back at his car, he climbed in, breathing heavy from the run. He turned over the ignition and cranked up the heat, his whole body was freezing, except for his throbbing cock. Still clutching the unused snowball, he leaned back and put the arsenal to new use. He unbuttoned, unzipped, and shoved it down his underwear. He jolted with the shock, but it did its job.

By the time he got home, his pants and boxers were soggy, and he was turned on again. How, how, *how*, did she get him like this? She was hot, yes. And watching her was hot as hell. But she was mind-fucking him something awful. He'd be damned if he was going to get jerked around like that, even for her. He really liked her, and she seemed cool, fun to hang out with. But to pull that tease even after he offered to cancel the bet was a bad sign. He promised himself he'd never see her again.

Upstairs in his own place, he jerked off mechanically, but couldn't push visions of Marie out of his head, and he came quickly. Relaxing with the release, he laid back on his bed. She was one gutsy *chica*, that's for sure. He did like that about her, among plenty of other things. Was he really going to let his pride get in the way and give up on her? Mind calmed, his body unwound, and he was close to drifting off to sleep. That's when he came up with a much better plan than never seeing her again.

* * * *

On December twenty-sixth, Joe and Eddie went back to the bar. This time, Eddie didn't fight him on it. Tracey was there. Marie wasn't. Joe broke and asked Tracey where her roommate was, trying to sound casual.

"She's at home. Didn't feel like coming out, I guess."

"She still pissed off at me?"

Shrugging, she answered him, "You'd have to ask her."

Pulling on his jacket, he said, "I guess I'll do that."

"Shit," Tracey muttered into her drink when he was gone. "I just lost a hundred bucks."

"Huh?" Eddie asked, confused.

"She bet me he'd be back."

When Marie heard the knock on the door, she figured it was either her drunk roommate who forgot her keys, or, it was Joe. She expected to hear from him, she even bet Tracey on it. But when he hadn't called or come over to see her, her hopes slipped. She rose from the sofa and threw back the door without even asking who it was.

He stood there, hands in his pants pockets, shoulders drawn up, head slightly lowered, looking at her sheepishly. "Christmas is over," he said. "But, uh, I'd still really like to see your tree."

She smiled and moved aside. He walked in slowly, hands still in his pockets. Wandering by her, he went over to the tree and looked it up and down. "This real?" he asked and took a deep breath.

"It's real," Marie said, closing the door. "It's a, ah, Blue Spruce."

Squinting, he fixed her in his sight, "You allowed to have a real tree in this building?"

Laughing, she answered, "No, no we aren't." The golden lights from the tree reflected in his shining eyes. The soft light illuminated his strong features and cast gentle shadows in the hollows of cheeks, pronouncing his jaw line, and making his dark hair seem even more lustrous and rich. *Good Lord*, she thought again, *he's beautiful*.

Clearing his throat, he spoke softly, "So, it's uh, after Christmas."

"Yep."

"I lost."

"Yep."

"I don't mind. I mean, I didn't mind waiting."

Arching a brow, she took one step closer to him. "What makes you think the wait is over?"

"You let me see your tree," he said, taking a step toward her.

The electricity was palpable as they moved within inches of each other, still neither one reaching for the other. "It's a really nice tree," he murmured, then leaned down and pressed his lips against hers, kissing her softly at first, his hands still deep in his pockets. When she reached inside his jacket, encircling his waist, he kissed her more urgently, felt her tongue emerge, coaxing his mouth open against hers.

Removing his hands from his pockets, Joe grasped her face as he explored and tasted her more deeply. He moved his hands along her neck and kissed a line across her cheek, toward her ear, suckling on her earlobe and inhaling the vanilla of her neck.

His skin was soft against hers, and Marie realized he must have just shaved for her. Her hands moved up his chest, enthralled at the hardness and definition of his muscles beneath them. She moved to his shoulders, pushing back his jacket. He released her to shake free of the coat, let it to fall to the floor. Then he took hold of her again. One arm circled her waist, drawing her closer to him as the other tangled in her auburn hair, pushing it away from her throat as he dove to kiss her there.

Shivering under his touch, her nerves were wired, each one crackling as his hands and lips brushed over that part of her body. Reaching lower, Joe untucked her shirt, fumbled with the buttons until he got it peeled back. He ran his hand across her stomach, feeling her belly contract under his touch, and he knelt down to kiss her navel. On his knees, working his tongue around the pliant skin, he clutched her around the waist and used his other hand to unzip her pants, taking his time. Pulling them down, he reached between her legs and rubbed her over her panties, smiling when she shifted her weight. His cock started to rise. Letting go of her waist, he started rubbing himself through his pants, working himself up, still working her, burying wet kisses into her stomach.

Marie got impatient. It'd been a long enough wait, and him on his knees was too much. He wanted *her*, she was sure of that now. She shimmied out of her pants the rest of the way and kicked them aside. Falling on her knees, kissing him, she fumbled with his belt. Joe broke their kiss long enough to pull off his shirt. Hurriedly, fevered, they got out of their clothes, carelessly tossing them aside.

Once naked, she pushed him back against the carpet. Joe barely noticed the prick of wayward fallen pine needles in his back, against his ass.

Marie straddled him and looked down at his sculpted body as he fumbled in pants and pulled out his wallet. From inside it, he got a condom. Marie took it from him and ripped it open with her teeth. Carefully, she placed in on top of his erection. But instead of smoothing it down, she wiggled and sat on his knees, dipped her head, and used her mouth.

When she put her mouth over him, Joe banged his head back against the carpet, inhaling sharply. She went slow, it easing down the length of his shaft with her mouth. Opening his eyes, he watched her do it, cracking inside. He'd thought of her sucking him off at least twenty times in the past couple days. He knew if he let her go, he'd come too quickly though, and that's not what he'd really been waiting for. So he tugged on her shoulders, urging her to rise.

Marie complied. Smiling, she moved back up his body and kneeled across his waist. She lowered herself and undulated her hips, rubbed along the length of him, fully hard, eliciting a libidinous growl from deep in Joe's throat.

Unable to withstand anymore taunting, he reached up and caught her hips, sat upright, and flipped her underneath him. Reaching down, he stroked himself against her as she had done to him, watching her grow breathless with anticipation, seeing the golden lights twinkle and sparkle in her green irises. She was wet, ready for him. She reached for him, raising one leg around his waist, and guided him into her. He halted, refusing full entry as he gazed into her eyes. She was breathing hard, obviously wanting it. He hovered there, gazing at her face, teasing her for a change.

Locked by his sight, it took her by surprise when he suddenly thrust into her.

Deep, forceful, making her gasp, her whole body contract. Above her, Joe reeled, his head swimming, the spark catching fire.

When Marie thought he was in, she began to exhale slowly, and he suddenly ground in deeper, making her gasp, himself shuddering in her arms. Just as fast as he entered, he drew out, nearly all the way, then suddenly rocked her back with another strong stroke. She sighed in his ear.

"You like what you feel?" he asked her, cocky. Teasing, he pulled out.

Under him, silent, she thrust her hips up to meet him as he slid back in.

"Yeah, you like that," he said, withdrawing and pushing again, wanting to hear her moan. She bucked underneath him with each forceful stroke as he made slow, painfully deliberate movements. "You like that," he said again, then adjusted his hips above her, moving more quickly, but with less depth. "Or you like this?"

She answered with a labored sigh, then crooned in his ear, admitting, "I like it, Joe."

Tiny beads of sweat formed on his upper lip as he rocked her under him, her hips undulating against his once she caught the rhythm. "Tell me," he panted, "tell me what to do. Tell me what you want," he commanded as he increased the pace.

"Harder," she sighed, scraping her teeth along his shoulder when he obliged. Dragging her clenched fingers across his back, she directed again, "Faster." Again he obeyed, eyes closed now, brows knit in concentration as he drove into her, feeling her contract around him.

Clenching his teeth to hang on, Joe said, "I like it. I like it when you tell me what to do."

So Marie did. "Fuck me," she told him. "Fuck me hard."

And he did. Rocking into her, getting her higher. Her legs clamped around his waist, writhing against him. Marie watched him, got off on seeing him strain. Joe closed his eyes, watching her would push him over the edge too quick. He bit the inside of his cheek to distract himself. He kept it steady, held it together until Marie started calling his name. Breathily, getting louder, "Joe," she called and clamped her hands around his neck, ground herself against him with each stroke. "Ooh, Joe."

Hearing his name drove him wild, and he placed his hand under her ass, pulled her to him as he drove in again. He felt her hard nipples pressed into his chest, her skin was slick, and she kept saying his name, not even giving him commands anymore, just saying, "Joe, yes...Oh, Joe." He couldn't take it much longer, knew he wouldn't hold out. She was tight around him, hot. It almost felt too fucking good.

It was too good for Marie. It was even better than the night he watched her. Her body in knots, pulsing around him, she was set to explode. "Uh, Joe," she stuttered. Warning him, congratulating him, "I'm gonna come, Joe. Joe. I'm close. I'm..." And then he drove deep, and the spark caught fire.

When she shuddered, he lost it. Joe opened his eyes and watched her come. Her back arched under him, her head was thrown back, her eyes were hazed but looking at him, and her hands dug into his arms. She didn't call his name any more, she just groaned. That finished him off, electric tingles raced up his spine and spread through his body. Edgy, she shuddered again, pushing him over. His breath caught, his muscles clenched, he drove deep, and finally, finally, finally, it was merciful, thundering release. She bucked and contracted around him as he stayed deep, shooting hot and forceful inside her.

When she was done, Marie relaxed around him. Boneless, he slumped down onto her as they caught their breath. She stroked his back, and he shifted his weight, worried he was becoming too heavy on top of her. Softening, he pulled out and flipped onto his back.

Exhausted, satisfied, he pulled her close, leaned over, and kissed her mouth. "Thanks," he said.

"Hmmm," she sighed. "For what?"

Clearing his throat, he looked over at her, her green eyes heavy with sleep. "Lettin' me see your tree," he answered. "It's a great tree."

"Yeah? You like it?"

"Mmmm. Best one I ever saw."

"So it was worth the wait?" she prodded.

"You bet," he said, putting an arm around her shoulders.

Marie nestled into his side, reached down and peeled the used condom off him. Tossing it aside, she stroked his stomach. "I'm sorry I made you lose a hundred bucks," she said.

"Ah, that's ok, baby," he replied, absently rubbing her arm with his thumb. "I made Eddie go double or nothing I'd get you by New Year's."

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About the Author

Susan DiPlacido is the author of three novels: *24/7*, *Trattoria*, and *Mutual Holdings*. *Trattoria* was nominated for the Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice award for Best Small Press Romance. Her short story, "I, Candy" won the Spirit award at the 2005 Moondance International Film Festival. Her short stories have been published or are forthcoming in a number of anthologies, including Zane's *Caramel Flava*, Susie Bright's *Best American Erotica 2007*, and Maxim Jakubowski's *Mammoth Book of Erotica 6*. "'Twas the Night After Christmas" is her first story with Phaze, and she's thrilled to be part of the family.

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