

The background of the cover is a vibrant red with a subtle pattern of white dots, resembling snow or confetti. A muscular man is the central figure, shown from the waist up, crouching in a classic bodybuilding pose. He is shirtless, and his skin is a light tan. His right arm is bent, with his hand resting on his left thigh, while his left arm is also bent, with his hand near his chest. The overall aesthetic is festive and sensual, combining holiday themes with bodybuilding.

CHRISTMAS CANDY

ANTHOLOGY

MICHELLE BASKER
TINA BENDONI
SKYLER GREY
CANN INMAN
BARRI BRYAN
JAMIE HILL
SHERRILL QUINN
BARBARA BALDWIN
SUSAN M. SAILORS
RUSTY WICKS

CHRISTMAS CANDY ANTHOLOGY

by

**Barri Bryan, Rusty Wicks, Tina Bendon,
Skyler Grey, Michelle Hasker, Sherrill Quinn,
Barbara J. Baldwin, Jamie Hill, Susan M. Sailors
and C'ann Inman**

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *CHRISTMAS CANDY ANTHOLOGY*

“*Christmas Candy Anthology* places a whole new meaning to the phrase ‘*A hard candy Christmas*’. With plenty of peppermint sticks, sugar coated nut balls and cream filled bon-bons there is a story here for you whether your preference is funny, romantic, naughty or heartwarming. You will want to order copies for Christmas gifts once you have read *Christmas Candy Anthology*.”

~ Susan, TwoLips Reviews

“This Christmas anthology starts with a poem called *The Night Before Christmas* written by *Barry Bryan*. What follows are nine Christmas-inspired stories to read and enjoy...these stories will definitely keep you warm during those cold winter holidays. But of course you can read them at any time of the year. If you like erotic stories which are a bit different from the usual then try the *Christmas Candy Anthology*, it might just be exactly what you’re looking for.”

~Annick, Euro-Reviews

Dedication

Christmas candy, mistletoe, all things naughty and nice.
We wish our readers days that are merry and bright,
and nights filled with holiday romance.

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THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

by

Barri Bryan

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the cave
Not a creature was stirring; it was quiet as a grave.
One stocking hung on a peg by the head
Of Selena Good-Witch-Of-The-South's lonely bed.

Selena was nestled snug 'neath the cover,
In her brain danced visions of a hot, hunky lover.
She had written her letter to Santa and said,
This Christmas she wanted a man in her bed.

She was drifting to dream when a swooshing sound
Awoke her. She sat up and looked all around.
To the mouth of her cave she crept stealthily,
And peeked outside to see what she could spy.

In the sky a pale moon ghostly and white
Bathed the world below in a soft, eerie light.
Then wonder of wonders! There flew from on high
Santa's bright red sleigh straight down from the sky.

The driver was tall with a rugged face.
And a sensuous air of masculine grace,
He wore boots and a hat and jeans skintight
When Serena saw him, her heart took flight.

He called to the reindeer, "Slow your pace.

Christmas Candy Anthology

Prancer and Vixen, this is the place.
Now, Comet and Cupid, stop and rest.
Donner and Blitzen, we've ended our quest.

"This is the spot that's my destination."
In his voice was a note of anticipation.
The reindeer stopped on a dime—almost,
The sleigh came to a halt by Selena's gatepost.

The cowboy leaped from the sleigh with a bound
And with grace and agility hit the ground.
Serena watched as one in a trance
As he made his smug and swaggering advance.

As that gorgeous cowboy unlatched her gate
He vanished from sight. That was always her fate.
With a sigh and a sob and a low-bowed head,
She walked slowly back to her cold, empty bed.

In the wink of an eye, the man in the sleigh
Appeared from nowhere to smile and say,
"Merry Christmas, Selena. It is Santa's decree
That I fulfill your wildest fantasy."

His blue eyes danced as he turned back the cover
His smile was so sexy. "I'm your Christmas lover."
He was tall and dark and handsome as sin;
She asked, on a sigh, "How did you get in?"

As she looked him over, her gaze grew intense.
Whoopie! He was naked. Wow! He was immense.
Who cared how he got here? She laughed with delight.
Santa wasn't the only one coming tonight!

Christmas Candy Anthology

She shed her gown—tossed it in a chair,
Kicked off her slippers, let down her hair.
In the cowboy's eye was a wicked gleam,
He was long, stiff and hard—a witch's dream.

He spoke not a word as he lay down beside
The good-Witch-Of-The-South. Whee! What a ride!
From first kiss to last bliss, the trip was sublime,
Such bucking and pitching, the ride of a lifetime.

Early next morning as Selena arose,
Santa's cowboy got up and put on his clothes.
As he bade her goodbye the last words from his mouth,
“Happy Christmas, Wild-Wicked-Witch Of-The-South!”

GINGERBREAD ANYONE?

by

Rusty Wicks

Blaine swatted at the lock of long, blonde hair that tumbled into her face as she leaned into the oven. Despite the scrunchie that banged against the back of her slim neck, some of her thick locks had managed to free themselves from the simple confines.

She pulled out the perfect, golden scones from the industrial-sized oven and let the heavy stainless steel door hang open while she grabbed the tray of gingerbread biscotti that rested on the granite countertop. She slid the biscotti into the oven, pushed a second lock of hair off her warm cheek and closed the oven door. She glanced at the kitchen clock.

Six fifteen. Just barely time to get this batch of scones onto the cooling racks, pack the cranberry punch cocktail into the Rover and jump into the shower. How could I ever have thought that catering during the holidays would be a snap? I should have gone to Barbados like the smart people do. Only us working stiffs hang around Crane Hill at Christmastime.

Using a wide metal spatula, she carefully lifted each cinnamon-pecan scone from the baking tray. She put them in a neat row on the wire cooling rack and left the baking pan in the sink for later.

As she was rushing toward the stairs that led straight up to her bedroom suite, the phone rang. She debated not answering it.

Who else can it be? No one else knows I'd be up this early making gingerbread biscotti—but if I don't answer it, there'll be hell to pay. And who wants to listen to that? My day is going to be crazy enough without having to put up with random bitching. No, I'd better answer the damn phone.

Backtracking, with her eye on the clock, she lifted the receiver from the hook.

“Yeah?” she said, in what she knew was a less-than-inviting tone.

“Nice way to answer the phone, Blaine.”

She stared down at her party pink-tipped toenails, instantly remorseful. She shuffled from one foot to the other on the cold kitchen tile. She hadn’t dressed to bake, and since the kitchen got so hot when she used the oven, she was still wearing her nightgown. She had cotton panties on, but tugged them down as she looked longingly at the staircase.

I don’t have time for this, Kate... I’m going to be late if you don’t get to the damn point!

She lifted her arms and pulled the nightgown over her head. She pulled out the straining scrunchie and felt her hair fall down her bare back. The sensation made her nipples harden, and she ran her free hand quickly over her ass.

“Okay—well? What is it, Kate?” she said as she ran her fingers through the blonde hair that framed her sex. A small shiver passed through her, and her nipples got even tauter.

Yeah, I’m the only one who’s touching anything on me lately. But I don’t have time for that, either!

She knew she had a bark, but absolutely no bite. Even when she tried to sound impatient or act in a way her mother would never have approved of, she fell short. Not that her mother had turned out to be much of a role model, but still... She knew it wasn’t in her nature to be anything other than what she was, a nice person.

She hated that fact about herself.

Nice. Boring as hell but there it was. Her personality in a nutshell.

“Sheesh, Blaine. What are you so angry about so early in the morning? Obviously you didn’t get any last night...not like me and Craig. Oh Lord, can that man make me scream... I tell you, he has

the hardest cock I've ever seen and he knows how to use it, too. That's what you need, my friend. A good fuck to clear that rattled head of yours. Maybe then you wouldn't be so damn grouchy."

"I'm sorry, Kate. It's just that I'm in a rush to get out of here. The last of the gingerbread is in the oven, and I've got exactly..." She glanced up at the clock. "I've got exactly twelve minutes to shower and dress before they begin to burn. What's up?"

Kate had been her best friend since they were six years old and had squabbled over the attentions of Peter Prentice, the brown-haired devil of a boy who had lived down the street from the house Blaine still lived in. Peter Prentice had long since moved away from Crane Hill, but he was the first and last male the two had ever fought over. They liked to joke, usually after drinking a bottle or two of merlot, that they had met over a peter. They laughingly referred to him as a little prick.

"Just checking in to make sure you don't want any help with the brunch. Could you use an extra set of hands for serving? I'm off today, and I don't mind a bit," said Kate. She stifled a yawn that threatened to give her away. Sounding perky and awake so early was something that didn't come naturally for her. It was a labor of love. She had set her alarm clock intentionally, knowing that Blaine's assistant, Kara, was vacationing in Barbados with her latest boyfriend. Kara was never at a loss for boyfriends, especially at prime holiday times.

Kate wished Blaine would take a hint from the seductive, savvy college senior. Kara would never have spent Christmas alone baking cookies. Never.

By now, Kara and her latest conquest were probably rolling in the surf, being naked and naughty. They knew they would hear all about her fun in the sun when she got home after the new year. Kara was never shy about telling them just who did what to whom and where everything fit when they were doing it. No, Kara wouldn't be baking cookies.

But Blaine? Since the end of her last romantic interlude two years ago, she'd practically been a hermit. Kate supposed she couldn't blame her best friend for being upset with Brad's defection—after all, how often did a fiancé leave a woman for their mother? Yeah, that had been a rough time for everyone who lived in Crane Hill. The scandal had rocked the small community but no one had heard from Brad or his old-enough-to-be-his-mother girlfriend for over two years.

It was time for Blaine to move on.

The problem was no one could convince Blaine of that fact. Not even Kate. And she had tried nearly every tactic she could think of to get Blaine interested in dating again—all to no avail.

"Are you sure, Kate? Don't you have anything else to do? I mean, it's a week before Christmas. Don't you have shopping or wrapping or anything better to do than help me serve hot buns?" Blaine tapped her foot nervously on the white tile floor. Seven minutes. She'd better hurry if she planned to actually wash anything when she hopped into the shower.

"Not this morning. I'll help you serve at the brunch, then we can go shopping this afternoon. Deal?" *Ha! You can't say no, Blaine dear. You need my help and you know it's only right that you do what I want after we're done. I'll bet you haven't even seen any of the holiday decorations downtown yet, have you? Well that's going to change—today.*

"Well, I've got things to do this—" Blaine began. She shifted on the tile, tapping her toes on the grout lines. She searched her mind for an excuse—any excuse—that might get her out of Christmas shopping.

"They'll wait. Christmas won't. I'll meet you at *Hill House*, okay?"

"Fine," said Blaine. She looked at the clock. Four minutes. "And thanks," she said as she hung up and ran for the stairs.

* * * *

Hill House was festooned with thousands of sparkling colored lights. The brick mansion on the crest of a hill overlooking Crane Hill's ski slopes managed to look festive, despite the dreary winter day. The snow was piled high beside the long, tree-lined drive and Blaine made her way carefully up the slope. She had the Range Rover packed with all the necessities to make the Crane Hill Rotary's holiday brunch a success. She couldn't take a chance on sliding off the road with the food.

Blaine's catering business was bustling and the parties and dinners she catered kept her from ruminating on her own social life. Or lack of one. She didn't exactly like her life, but she had become resigned to it.

And she knew she wasn't ready for another relationship—not after what Brad had done. At least not now. Maybe not ever.

The last thing I'll ever do is trust another man again. I did that, and look what happened. I nearly died from shame, embarrassment, humiliation...and so many other things there aren't even words to describe. No, I'll never again trust a man with my life. Never.

The back door to the enormous building stood open. Florists, laden with huge arrangements of poinsettias and miles and miles of garland were making their way into the house.

Parking the black vehicle in the only available spot, Blaine forgot about her life and switched into her caterer's mode. She stepped onto the cobbled drive and reached for the first heavy tray of food.

Ho ho ho, here I go.

* * * *

"Oh, the food is beautiful, Blaine," the cultured voice gushed behind her. Blaine set the final tiered stand, filled with the now-cooled gingerbread biscotti, on the buffet table. She turned to see the owner of the voice, Mary Camden, standing behind her, smiling.

Mary Camden was the wealthiest woman in Crane Hill, and she looked the part. Even in the early hours of the morning, the white-haired, botox-faced grand dame was impeccably made up and draped in sparkling jewels.

You're putting the Christmas tree to shame, Miss Camden. A thousand strings of lights couldn't compete with your family's jewels. Or the glare from your bleached smile.

"Thank you, Miss Camden. I appreciate your kindness. And thank you again for contracting with me to cater this festive occasion. You know how I love holiday parties," Blaine lied with a smile that she hoped could fool anyone.

The elderly woman leaned forward in her thousand dollar alligator pumps. She patted Blaine's shoulder with one arthritic hand and Blaine got a whiff of something unpleasant coming from the old woman.

Decay. She's dying before she's lived.

"That's all right, dear. I know how it is for you around the holidays. You don't have to be brave for me. We'll save that for everyone else, won't we?" She leaned closer and Blaine felt her stomach give a dangerous lurch. "We lonely old spinsters have got to stick together, don't we? I know how it feels to be alone at Christmas... Money and memories, that's all I've got to keep me company." When she patted Blaine's shoulder a second time, the gold bracelets lined up on the wizened old wrist jangled beside Blaine's ear. "They'll do, though, in a pinch."

The dry, dusty laugh sounded like rocks falling down an empty well. The sound bounced around inside Blaine's head, unnerving her with its hollowness.

"Miss Camden?"

The butler appeared on whispery feet. He stood erect beside them, waiting patiently. They could hear sounds from the foyer.

"Yes, James?"

“The Rotary members are arriving, madam. Would you like to greet them in the foyer?” he asked. He knew that was the protocol for these events, but he was aware it was his place to ask.

“Yes, I would. I’ll speak to you again later, Blaine,” she said. Taking the butler’s extended arm in her crepe-like hand, the elderly woman tottered toward the foyer. Blaine watched her with a sense of growing horror.

Is that how I’m going to end up? Like old lady Camden? I wonder if anyone’s ever made love to the old biddy—besides herself?

* * * *

The brunch was nearly over when Kate came into the kitchen dragging a tall, handsome man behind her. She was grinning like a deranged lunatic and Blaine wondered what was going on.

She didn’t have to wonder long, though.

“Look who I found!” Then Kate giggled. She smugly pointed at the man who was grinning at Blaine as if he knew a joke she had never heard.

She stared at the two of them as if they had taken leave of their senses and shrugged. She continued packing the empty serving trays into a cardboard box. The food had all gone, except for a few random biscotti and half a dozen scones. Those she had put on a paper plate, covered with Saran Wrap and left on the kitchen counter for the staff to enjoy.

“Sorry?” she said with a smile. She didn’t have a clue who this man was, and honestly, she didn’t give a damn. She just wanted to get out of *Hill House*.

She had been busy trying to figure a way out of the blasted shopping expedition with Kate. So far, she hadn’t come up with an excuse she thought Kate would accept.

But she wasn’t done thinking, either.

“Honestly, Blaine! How could you not know who this is? You’ve had your head in your cake batter for too long if you can’t see who this man is—and at this dum—uh, at this *enchanted* Ro-

tary brunch, too,” said Kate. She was blushing by the time she finished, and it had nothing to do with the discovery of the man standing beside her. She had noticed the disapproving stare of the butler, James.

Blaine turned to him with an apologetic smile. He nodded and shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, *Good help is so hard to find these days, isn't it?* James headed for the dining room, shaking his head as he went.

“Nice going. I’ll be lucky if Miss Camden doesn’t hear about that one,” she said. She pushed a gaily-painted mistletoe-covered cookie dish into the carton. “I’ll take these out to the Rover. Why don’t you check the buffet table to make sure we’ve gotten everything? Thanks.”

“You got it,” said Kate. She turned to follow James into the other room, but before she did, she gave the stranger a gentle poke with her elbow. “Be right back,” she called as she left.

Blaine put her hands beneath the edges of the box and tensed to lift it.

“Let me get that for you,” the man said. “It looks heavy.”

“Oh, that’s fine. Thanks anyway. I’m used to carrying it—I don’t need any help. Thanks anyway,” she said.

His voice had startled her; she had nearly forgotten his presence beside her.

Since the infamous mother/fiancé fiasco, she had learned how to completely disregard the existence of men. She had conditioned herself to feel nothing for them. She had learned well from her experience; it would take more than an offer of assistance—which she didn’t need—to make her notice a man.

The box was heavy, but she pulled it against her chest and took a step toward the back door. The hands that reached to take it from her were big and the arms that scooped the box as if it was filled with feathers had to be muscular beneath the navy sports coat.

“Excuse me?” she said, surprised at his boldness. Didn’t he understand when she said she didn’t need his help—or anything else?

“It’s heavy. I can see you could use a hand,” he said in a sure, steady voice. It was difficult to dispute his reasonable assessment of the situation. “I don’t mean to be forward, it’s just I was always taught to offer assistance when I saw it was needed. Especially when the person in need of the assistance is a very pretty woman. So please, allow me.”

When she looked up at the tall, handsome man, she felt her heart thud. She hadn’t been affected by his looks so much as she was by the whole package of him. She hadn’t expected to feel anything for him; after all, he was merely another man. Another of the rotten, two-timing, can’t-be-trusted, cheating monsters who took up space on the planet.

Blaine felt as if her heart had betrayed her with its unexpected thud.

Gas. It must be gas, nothing else. Pay no attention to the traitor in your chest.

There was no way she could gracefully take the box from him. They both knew that a tug-of-war over the serving trays would be childish at best.

Resigned, she turned and held the heavy wooden door open for him.

They stepped onto the snow-covered back drive. During the brunch, a feathery, slow-moving snowfall had begun and the grounds were covered with a light dusting of whiteness.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” asked the man.

Looking up into his velvety brown eyes, she wondered for the first time who he was, exactly. *And why did Kate leave him with me? Is this another of Kate’s ridiculous attempts at matchmaking?*

Oh, Kate, when will you learn? I have no interest in men! None! Zip! Zero! Nada! I don’t give a damn that this guy is a hunk, that the smile on

his smooth lips is reflected in those deep, dark eyes, or that his shoulders are wide and strong, just the way I like them. Or used to like them. No, I don't give a damn about men. Any men. Not even this one, who is doing some strange things to my chest right now...

"Excuse me?" she said. It seemed to be all she could manage to say to this smiling stranger. Blaine saw snowflakes land in his thick, chestnut-brown hair and she resisted the urge to brush them from his head. Just thinking of touching him sent a shiver down her spine, made her lower belly heat up and her head spin.

I've got to get out of here. I think I must be coming down with something.

"The snow," he said softly. "It's pretty, isn't it?"

"Um...yes, I suppose."

"You suppose?" He furrowed his brows and blinked as one fat flake fell on one of his long eyelashes. If he had been a woman, he wouldn't need mascara because his lashes were that sumptuous. "Don't you agree?"

She shook her head and the glistening locks that had been tamed for the brunch began to break loose from their silver barrette. She reached up and undid the clasp, releasing the cascading curls so they hung down her back.

Blaine didn't see the smile that came over his face as he watched her fingers rake through her hair.

What the hell is going on here? My panties are wet just being near this guy. I feel all tingly inside and my...my...my nipples. My nipples could pound holes in a wall. What's happening to me?

"Well," she said as she walked to the Rover. "I suppose that if you like snow and all the Christmas cra—uh, *cheer* well, then I suppose the snow is pretty. But if you don't care much either way, then it's merely a bother, like the rest of the holiday season." She pulled open the tailgate door and motioned at the empty cargo area. "It goes there, thanks."

He put the box in place and clicked the door closed.

When he turned to face her, he wore a puzzled expression on his face.

“You’re not as I remembered you,” he said sadly. “Oh, sure, some things, like the way you run your fingers through your hair and the scowl you gave Kate...those things haven’t changed. No, they’re exactly as I remembered them from before. But I remember you loving Christmas, and the holidays, and snow and...” He searched for the right words before he continued. “Everything. I remember that you loved everything about everything, that there weren’t any suppositions back then. I guess maybe people change, or memories aren’t really reality-based, but...” His voice trailed off until the only sound they could hear was the whisper of snow on snow.

Blaine stared at him, a flurry of questions flying through her head.

Who are you, anyway? And what makes you think you know anything at all about me?

Finally, she spoke. “Well, I guess people change. I did love Christmas, you’re right, but I haven’t given a lot of thought to it since... Well, let’s just say that people change. You speak as if we know each other, or as if we’ve met before. I’m sorry, but I’ve got to admit that I don’t have a clue. I can’t seem to place you. So would you mind telling me who you—”

Kate emerged from the back door with the freshly-washed punch bowl in her arms. She came to where the pair stood and laughed, as if she had just heard the punch line of a hilarious joke.

“So weren’t you surprised to see him again, Blaine? Imagine...after all these years! Who ever would have believed we’d meet up with Peter Prentice again?”

* * * *

The *Crane Café* was jammed with holiday shoppers but they were fortunate enough to find an empty table in the far corner.

They dumped their packages on the extra chair and on the floor beneath the table.

Kate made her way through the crowd to the long counter while Blaine sat with the brightly-wrapped boxes and bags. Most of the gifts belonged to Kate, but Blaine had bought matching silk scarves for her two aunts. They were identical, wrapped by the store in snowbell-and-ribbon gift wrap and tied with matching gold ribbons. She would have had the store send them to her elderly aunts, too, if it hadn't been for Kate's insistence on the need for personalized cards to go with the packages. Blaine knew she'd jot a few lines on a card to each aunt, jam the cards into the mailing cartons and post the whole mess off in the morning. Then she would have fulfilled her obligation to the season and could forget about the rest of it without guilt or interruption.

"Hot chocolate," said Kate. She placed two whipped-cream-topped mugs on the table, along with two Santa Claus-shaped cookies. "Just what we need on a wintery day."

Blaine scowled at her cookie. She promptly broke off the jolly fellow's head and stuffed it into her mouth. She chewed viciously on the cookie, not bothering to taste the buttery richness of the dough or the savory sweetness of the vanilla icing.

"So now you've killed Santa. Nice work, Scrooge."

"I'm not Scrooge, thank you very much. I'm just not interested in the crap of the season. All the false cheer and phoney love—no, count me out of it all," Blaine said. She ate the rest of her cookie more slowly, and wondered what the unusual flavoring in it was. *Vanilla? Anise?* She didn't know but she knew it was good.

"So it looks like the holiday is looking brighter, don't you think?" asked Kate innocently. She grinned across the table. "I'm thinking you might be getting a little—or maybe a lot, who knows?—by the tree this year. And maybe you'll get some in a sleigh...and in the snow, although that might be kind of cold, depending on who was on top and who had their bare ass in it—"

“What are you talking about, Kate? Have you gone crazy?” Blaine asked. She scowled at the other woman for good measure.

“I’m talking, my dear, about sex. I think you’re finally going to get some. Get your pussy filled with a huge, hot hunk of hard manhood, throbbing and pulsing until he spills his wet, warm love juice in your—”

Blaine squirmed on the hard plastic chair. Again she felt the dampness in her crotch, and wondered why all of a sudden her pussy was overheating. It hadn’t happened to her since she’d—well, since her mother had wrecked her love life. She wasn’t sure how she felt about the sensations invading her now.

“You seem to forget, those sort of acrobatics require a man. And I neither have a man, nor do I intend to get one any time in the near future. Maybe not ever, so if you’d just stop with all of the heaving hunks of hard—well, you know. Just stop it.”

“What about Peter?”

“What about him?”

Kate sighed. “Don’t you think it’s interesting that we found him again after twenty years? Who ever would have thought he’d be at some boring brunch with a bunch of old women?”

Blaine sipped her hot chocolate and looked at her friend over the rim of her mug. She knew perfectly well what the other woman was up to.

It’s not going to work. I’m not interested in Peter Prentice, or any other man.

“I think the brunch went well,” Blaine said. She hoped the subject would change without her having to put the axe to Kate’s machinations. “The food went quickly. And Miss Camden gave me a nice bonus, too. I was surprised by it—she’s not usually so easy to separate from her money.”

Kate finished her drink and put her mug on the table. She crumpled up the bakery paper from the cookies and stuffed it into the empty mug.

“It’s all she’s got,” Kate said. “She doesn’t have anything else to keep her company, Blaine. Just her money, remember? If you’re not careful, you’re going to end up just like that moldy old woman. Tired and sad. Lonely and filled with regrets. Peter Prentice asked you out today—I was there—and you turned him down flat! I can’t believe you did it to him—he’s such a wonderful guy, and he’s moved back here—for good. He lives just down the street from you again, and you had the miserable audacity to be so mean to him. I honestly can’t believe you did that!”

“But, Kate—” she began. She hadn’t expected the tirade and had to scramble to defend herself.

“No buts, Blaine! I don’t want to hear them—I’m sorry to be so direct about this, but you’ve got to get over the whole dumped-at-the-countdown-to-the-altar thing. Just get over it already!”

In shock, Blaine watched her best friend gather up her parcels and storm out of the café.

They had just had their second fight in a lifetime. And Peter Prentice had been involved—again.

* * * *

For a week, the trio played phone games.

Blaine called Kate. Kate didn’t return Blaine’s calls or answer her machine. Blaine left messages...pleading for a chance for them to make up. Pointing out that the whole argument was ridiculous—not even a real argument at all. Asking if Kate had problems not related to the seemingly idiotic rift between them. Finally she left an angry message, informing Kate that if Blaine didn’t hear from her soon, they could forget about making up at all.

Peter phoned Blaine. He spoke to her machine time after time, but Blaine refused to reply to his messages. He asked for date upon date, but she was determined not to see him, or any other man. The row with Kate just solidified in her mind the fact that men were more trouble than they were worth.

The night Blaine left her frustrated, mean message on Kate's machine, she waited by the phone for Kate to return her call. She knew in her heart her best friend wouldn't let the threat of their friendship being dissolved stand between them. Blaine believed in the strength of decades of love and trust and knew Kate would call.

Wouldn't she?

When the phone rang, Blaine picked it up immediately. "Hello, Kate?"

There was silence for a fraction of a second before she heard the voice on the other end. It wasn't Kate.

"No, sorry. It's Peter," he said. "I'm glad to find you at home, finally. How are you, Blaine?"

She searched for a polite way to get rid of him. When she couldn't find one, she settled for honest.

Enough with the calls! Try getting it through your head that I'm not interested. Not at all—not even a teeny tiny little bit. Leave me alone!

"I'm fine, Peter," she said calmly. She was going to put an end to the whole annoying business right now.

Show no interest, and maybe he'll get the hint.

"That's good," he answered. "I was beginning to worry. I've been calling but you don't seem to be home, regardless of when I phone. And you're not returning my messages, so... Well, anyway, I've finally tracked you down, and that's all that matters. I'm wondering if you'd like to go to the Holiday Ball at *Hill House*? I realize it's kind of late to be asking, but I have been trying to ask you all week long. It sounds like it's going to be fun...so will you go with me?"

Not taking a hint, are you? Fine. You've asked for this.

"No."

There was silence for a beat. It was longer than the first silence but not so long as to make her think he'd hung up or dropped dead. When he spoke, he didn't sound happy.

"No? Just no? May I ask for a reason?"

"I just don't want to go, that's all," she answered.

"All right, I can respect that. How about if we go to see a movie instead? *It's A Wonderful Life* is playing at the *Crane Cinema*, or there's the multi-plex over in Landsdale, we could go there if you'd like. What night is convenient for you, Blaine?" The relaxed, amiable tone had returned to his voice.

He had accepted the first invitation decline well.

She wondered what he would think when she answered the movie issue.

"None, Peter. None. Thanks anyway," she said.

This time the silence was longer. She could hear him let out a pent-up breath before she heard the steely voice.

"Why? Just tell me why."

Blaine stared at the kitchen wall and made him wait. She knew she was being rude but she didn't much care. Suddenly, she realized she didn't much care about anything. It was becoming tougher to keep the hard shell in place around herself, to keep the world and its excitement, to say nothing of half its population, at arms' length.

She had a fleeting desire to let the walls down. Peter seemed like someone she could care for. If her banging heart was any indication, she might already care for him.

The last time I fell for someone, he ran off with my mother. I can't do this again. I just can't do it.

"I told you before in the parking area after the brunch. I don't like holidays. I don't want to get involved romantically with anyone. I tried that and quite honestly, it sucked. I won't do it again. I appreciate your interest, but I'm not interested," she said quietly.

"I think you are."

"What?"

"Interested. I think you're as interested in me as I am in you. I think we've been interested in each other since we were falling

over each other's shoelaces and skinning our knees. I think you're very interested, Blaine," he said.

"Well, you're way off base here. Maybe I was interested in you when we were children, but I'm a grown woman now and I'm not interested in you at all. So if you'll stop calling me, we'll both be much better off. Now good night, Peter."

She placed the receiver down gently. It wasn't until the connection had been broken that she felt the tears sliding down her cheeks.

* * * *

Kate didn't phone.

Blaine sat up all night by the phone, sure that her friend would respond to the implied threat. She hadn't known she was going to make the threat until it was out of her mouth, but once it was out and on the answering machine in Kate and Craig's apartment, there was no taking it back.

The hours passed so slowly the day after the angry phone message that Blaine felt like they were actually going backwards. She tried to keep herself busy, but the catering gigs she'd contracted for were over until after Christmas.

The fact it was Christmas Eve didn't occur to her until after she'd eaten her first food of the day standing at the kitchen sink. She shoveled Cheerios into her mouth mindlessly as she watched the snow fall in the backyard.

Christmas Eve! That's why Kate hasn't called—she's at Craig's mother's house for the next two nights—and she was there last night, too. That explains her silence. She's not angry, she just doesn't know I made an ass of myself.

When the doorbell rang, she put her half-empty bowl in the sink and walked through the house. She hadn't bothered to get dressed all day, so she pulled her pink chenille robe closed and attempted to tame her uncombed curls.

Blaine wasn't shocked to find Peter on her doorstep. The snow had left a fine coating on the shoulders of his brown leather jacket and across the top of his wavy hair. Her heart thudded as she stared at him for a moment before she spoke.

"Hi."

"Hi."

They stood like that while the world rotated around them. The snow fell, people laughed behind closed doors in houses on the street where they had both been born and colored lights twinkled festively. Yet they stood like two statues, he a god and she a fallen angel.

"Invite me in?" he asked.

Blaine held the door open wide enough for him to pass. When she turned around after closing it, she bumped right into his solid body. He had entered, but just barely.

"Oh!" she gasped.

It felt as if he had filled the whole space with his body, and her breath began to quicken. She wasn't sure how to get past him without pressing against him. There was no way for it to be done, and they both knew it.

A slow smile spread across Peter's face. His eyes twinkled and she breathed in the spicy scent of his cologne. Snow melted and ran in tiny droplets down the side of his neck. She considered wiping it off with her fingertips, but was instantly aware that if she touched him, she would lose herself to him. She stuffed her hands in her pockets and stared up at him.

"What can I do for you?" she asked. She heard the trembling in her voice; although she hated it, she was powerless to stop it.

"It's not what you can do for me so much as what we can do for each other, Blaine. I've waited to be this close to you for twenty years, and I'm not going to be put off any longer."

"But I don't think you understand what—"

"I do understand. Kate's told me the whole sad, sordid story. I know about the wedding that almost was, the mother who stole the groom, and the idiot groom who let you get away. I feel sorry for him, because someday, he's going to realize what he almost had with you. But I don't think you understand a few things, Blaine," Peter said. A muscle worked in his cheek as he stood looking at her. He appeared to be holding himself back from doing or saying something, but just barely.

"What don't I understand?" she whispered.

"You don't understand that I love you. I've always loved you. I will always love you. You can't imagine how I feel about you; how much I want to be with you," he said in a rush.

Love. I've heard that before.

"That's what people say. I've heard that before but it's not real," she said. The tears began to fall from her tortured eyes.

"That wasn't love. I don't know what it was you had with that fool, but it wasn't love. This, what I feel for you, is love. I promise you, Blaine," he said.

"But—"

"Trust me."

Her heart pounded and she felt the blood rushing to her head as he bent to kiss her. Their lips touched, and a divine melting occurred deep within her. Blaine felt her heart race and, as his lips danced on hers, she felt other parts of her body shudder.

It wasn't only her heart that was warm when he pulled his mouth from hers.

His voice was husky and she could feel his arousal pressing against the fabric of her robe. Blaine knew, in that moment, she had to at least give love, and life, a second chance. With Peter.

She reached down and cupped his erection in her shaking hand. His hardness filled her palm and she slid his zipper down without giving it a thought. She snaked her hand inside his jeans and

found his stiffness. She pulled him out and pressed herself against his hot skin.

Beneath the robe, Blaine wore only a nightgown.

In a rush of frantic fumbling, they pushed her clothing out of the way and he plunged his hardness into her aching center. She gripped him with her warm, wet folds as he began to carry her along on the dance that had been danced for as long as anyone could remember. With each thrust, they tumbled closer and closer toward fulfillment.

She felt the approach of her orgasm long before she wanted the dance to end, but was powerless to stop it. The waves of pleasure washed over her, and she clung desperately to the man who had saved her from herself. As she shuddered against him, she felt the first warm spurts of his release fill her.

Blaine had never before felt so connected to another person. She had never dreamed anything could be this intoxicating.

Peter grinned and reached inside his jacket pocket. She laughed when she saw what he held in his hand.

"I brought mistletoe," he said, laughing.

"I don't think you need it," she answered.

PEPPERMINT SURPRISE

by

Tina Bendoni

Jada Walker couldn't believe she was doing this. Less than a week before Christmas and she was following a blind date to a club she had never heard of before. She should be home, not walking into a door that looked like it hid all manner of things, a club not being one of them.

It wasn't that the date had gone badly. Well, if she were honest with herself, it hadn't gone very well either. But hell, she was thirty-three years old and about to spend Christmas alone with her cat. *This had to be better, right?*

She followed Barry, no, Gary into the club. Looking around, it looked like any other club she had ever seen. A little on the subdued side, but that was okay. She wasn't in the mood for dance riffs blowing out her eardrums. On closer inspection, she realized no one in the club looked to be under the age of thirty, and they all seemed familiar with each other. Definitely not a regular dance club, because even the music was low-key.

"What did you say the name of this place was?" she asked Gary as they passed a couple making out heavily on the dance floor.

"Um, I didn't." He didn't give her a chance to respond as he pulled her toward the bar. On the way, she saw more couples making out and dancing suggestively with each other.

Okay, she could handle this. A club for older singles or partiers. She'd seen similar, younger places in her college days. At least this club was quieter and cleaner than most of the ones she frequented back then.

Reaching the bar, Gary ordered for both of them, without even asking her what she wanted. The bartender placed a red wine in front of her, and she rolled her eyes. Maybe this wasn't the best idea after all. He obviously hadn't paid attention to her at dinner when she said she didn't drink wine.

Taking the wine, she smiled her thanks at him and turned to look at the crowd. Definitely an older crowd than the normal club, and much less inhibited. She saw one couple groping each other under their clothes, and she smiled into her glass. Someone obviously had too much to drink. A supposition she gathered was right, when a large bouncer walked over to the couple and ushered them out a back hallway after talking with them for a moment.

Deciding she needed the ladies' room, she placed her drink on the bar and asked directions after telling Gary where she was going. She headed off toward the hallway the couple had been escorted down and eventually found the bathroom after a couple of unexpected twists and turns.

Jada was washing her hands when two women, a blonde and redhead, walked in, giggling as a couple of friends tend to do at bars. She smiled at them through the mirror before noticing they seemed to be checking her out. The redhead had her hand up the blonde's shirt and was whispering, nodding toward Jada.

Feeling flattered but uncomfortable, Jada smiled at the two of them and quickly walked out the door. A few turns later, she realized she must have gone the wrong way and started to turn around when she saw the girls behind her. Deciding discretion was the better part of valor, she continued on her way and entered a second room of the club.

Looking around, Jada immediately realized why this room was harder to find. It definitely was not for the faint of heart, or unsuspecting souls. This must be where that couple had been escorted to earlier. What they had been doing was tame compared to the rest of the couples she now saw.

Glimpses of skin caught her eye and she realized that most of the patrons' clothing was in disarray while they danced with their partners. There didn't seem to be any rules about public nudity here. It definitely wasn't a strip club though, at least not the standard variety, as the men were in as much disarray as the women.

There was something off, besides the lack of clothing, and she couldn't quite put her finger on it until one of the women in front of her put her hand to her face. *Masks*. The majority of women and some of the men were wearing small half masks.

At second glance, she realized many couples were obviously engaging in more than just seductive dancing. She saw breasts flash as well as other body parts as couples and threesomes moved together. Behind the dance floor, she saw a row of doors with numbers on them, and small light bulbs above. Some were green, and others red. People were coming and going out of the rooms with the green bulbs, with all those who exited looking to be in a state of pleased dishevelment.

Unsure what to do, Jada noticed a pile of masks on a table to her side. She looked behind her, and saw the women were still at the entrance of the hallway. Not wanting to deal with them, she reached for one of the masks and decided to head to the bar. Might as well have a drink while she waited for the coast to clear.

Grasping hold of one, she saw the back of a man out of the corner of her eye. He was tall, maybe six feet and some change, and built like a football player with short dark hair she thought would be perfect to run her fingers through. His broad shoulders were encased in a black silk shirt that tapered down to a slim waist. His tight black jeans clung to his ass like a second skin, and made her want to walk across the room and grab him to ask for a ride.

She felt her body flush as she thought of all the things she could do to a body like that. Who cared what he looked like, she could close her eyes and pretend he was Braden. Ugh, she had to go and think of him. Damn him, if he hadn't broken up with her

three months ago, she wouldn't even be here, wetting her panties over a complete stranger.

Quickly slipping on the mask, Jada turned away from the man and walked to the bar. Keeping with the spirit of the season, she ordered a Peppermint Stick and leaned back to watch the others in the club as she sucked on the candy that came with her drink.

Her attention was grabbed by a couple off to her side. On the edge of the dance floor, a woman was gyrating against a man whose back was to the wall. As she watched, the woman slowly worked her way down the man's body, stopping at his crotch.

Jada was too amazed at the woman's ability to balance while squatting on four inch heels to notice she'd unzipped the man's pants and started sucking on his penis. A flush ran through her body as she watched. She found herself unable to turn away, and realized she was getting excited watching them.

The man's hands wrapped in the woman's hair, holding her at his waist as he continued to move to the music with her sucking away. Jada became aware her breathing rate increased as their actions turned her on more by the second as the woman's head bobbed faster and faster. Jada felt her nipples stiffen and liquid pool between her legs as the woman stopped, pulled back from his penis, then looked up at him with a smile. He pulled her up, and turned her back against the wall, sweeping her skirt up and entering her in one swift move. Jada could only watch, skin flushed as the woman turned to her and smiled as her partner started to pump her hard against the wall.

Ashamed of watching, at being turned on by such actions, and being caught at it, Jada turned quickly to the bar, looking away. Her pussy throbbed with excitement as she wondered what it would be like to make love, no, have sex in a public place out in the open like that. And no one had to know who it was. She brought her hands up to her face as she realized at last the complete freedom she had tonight.

Jada realized she still had the candy in her mouth, and her cheeks were sore from having sucked on it hard as she watched the couple. Never much for voyeurism, she suddenly found herself intrigued and fascinated, as well as incredibly turned on by this place she had stumbled into. This night was turning into quite a little adventure already, and what she had learned about herself in just this short time was eye opening.

The first hint she had was a shiver that ran down her arms, sending tingles all the way to her crotch as she felt him come up behind her. He was big, whoever he was, and he smelled divine. It was the first thing about him she was aware of, his earthy, seductive, yet somehow familiar, scent. Afraid to look behind her, she looked up at the bar, trying to see him in the mirror. Just her luck, though, she was angled away from the mirror, and wasn't able to see anything behind her.

He moved in closer, pressing his crotch against her ass, covering her shoulders with his hands which he slowly stroked down her arms. *What should I do?* Her breath quickened as she thought rapidly. *What do I want to do?* Slowly she slid the candy stick out of her mouth, and laid it glistening with her saliva on her cocktail napkin.

She felt his breath against her ear as he leaned down. "Did you like what you saw?" His sultry, soft whisper sent shivers to her toes.

Swallowing hard, she jerked her head in a nod before she could even think to tell him to take a hike.

"Tell me one of your fantasies." Something about his voice hit her, and she almost had it, but lost it quickly as his hands continued their exploring of her body, leaving her arms, rubbing her back, down to her waist, where he pulled her sharply against him. She felt his cock through her skirt and his pants. And unless he packed it, there was quite a bit for her to feel.

Can I do it? Can I tell this complete stranger a fantasy? Hell, do I even have any fantasies? Her body took over, wiggling her ass back

into him as she debated what to do. This was the chance of a lifetime. A chance to break free from her staid, boring life and do something crazy and wild for a change. *Wasn't that what drove Braden away? Didn't he say I have no excitement in me? No desire for life?*

Well this was definitely a chance to bring some of that excitement into her life.

The sounds came out of her throat before she was even aware of speaking. "I want to be taken from behind, in a public place. I want to be forced to scream with pleasure as I get fucked so hard, I nearly pass out." She held on tight to the stem of her drink with both hands. She couldn't believe she had just said that. *What has gotten into me?*

"Does it matter who takes you?"

Did it? Can I let this complete stranger take me? She forgot to think as his hands roamed down her hips, moving around to the front of her legs. They found the hem of her skirt and slowly worked it up as one of his thighs inserted itself between her legs and forced them apart.

Jada gasped as she remembered she had put on thigh-hi's and a garter belt for her date. A present given her by a coworker, trying to get Jada to spice up her life. She had teased Jada, reminding her that wearing g-string panties and lacy bras were only part of the outfit. She needed to go all the way. Moisture flooded down the inside of her thighs as she realized how close she was to letting a stranger touch her most private spot. In public.

Before she could breathe again, his fingers brushed the lace on the edge of her panties. Not waiting, one hand grasped them and pulled them away from her pussy as his other reached for her and entered her with one smooth move. She arched back in pleasure as his fingers entered her hard and fast.

"So, does it matter who takes you?" He breathed in her ear again. His whisper driving her crazy with desire. "Does it...Jada?"

Did I hear my name? No, I couldn't have. No one knew she was here except for Gary, and this definitely was not Gary behind her. *I must have imagined it,* she decided. His fingers moved inside her, taking her attention away again from what he had just asked. His large thumb brushed against her clit as his fingers continued to massage her canal.

His other arm lifted her by the waist, placing her on the step in front of the bar. "Is this what you want?" he asked again as he brought his hand to her backside, moving her skirt up and out of the way. She heard the rasp of a zipper, and felt his hard cock bounce between her ass cheeks.

"Last chance, baby."

It was the baby that did it. Suddenly, she realized who was behind her. Why he had seemed so familiar.

"Yes, fuck me now. Make me scream." Her mind made up, she knew she wanted this more than anything in her life.

"Oh, baby, I was hoping you'd say that." He practically groaned as he pulled his hand out of her wet pussy and positioned his cock in its place. With one swift move, he jammed himself inside her all the way to his balls. He filled her up completely, sending her over the edge in a tiny precursor of what was to come.

His hand returned to her clit as he flicked at it before moving inside her. In and out, sending tingles all through her body, feeling him everywhere as his thick shaft stretched her body from that angle. His fingers never stopped stroking, rubbing at her nub, going faster, faster, in concert with his cock as his other hand snaked up and squeezed her breast.

Her head went back as she started to lose herself in the sensation. Laying back against his shoulder as he fucked her harder and harder, pinching her nipple through her bra, the pain shot straight to her clit and the matching pinch he gave her there. She felt the tension building so fast, she couldn't keep her breath, panting, gy-

rating, thrashing her head, thrusting back at him as he continued to fuck her.

Suddenly, it was too much, her body went stiff, and one final thrust by him sent her completely over the edge, screaming out her desire. Amazingly, he was right with her, grunting as he filled her with his cum, shooting it as her body milked him in its throes of passion.

They stood there panting, still attached, not saying anything. She felt her body slowly calm down as she waited to get her breath back. As soon as she felt him slip out of her, she readjusted her clothing, pulling her skirt back down to cover her ass. Not turning around, she patted his hand that now lay on the bar in front of her. "Not bad. Meet me here tomorrow night, and we'll see if you can do better than that."

Without turning her head to him, she picked up her candy stick and placed it back between her lips. Then she slid between the bar and his body, and slowly walked out.

* * * *

Jada waited with baited breath. She wasn't sure if he would come tonight. She knew he had recognized her, that he had approached her probably to scare her. He never would have expected such wanton behavior from her. Would he accept the challenge she gave him last night?

She kept her back to the club, in the same place she was last night. If he was going to show, he would find her. She was wearing a suit tonight, one designed to show off her body to its best advantage. The jacket could be worn with or without a shirt underneath it, and the skirt was shorter than the one she had worn last night. In fact, it barely covered what it should, including her bare pussy. Despite the short skirt, she had opted for a bright red shirt under the jacket, hoping it brought some color to her pale face. Looking at her watch once again, she realized it was a bit early. Last night, he

didn't approach her until almost midnight. It was only eleven thirty now.

She took a sip of her drink, hoping to calm herself down. Mask was in place, everything else was ready. One more sip.

"Tell me one of your fantasies."

Jada didn't say a word, she turned away and walked toward the far wall. She left it to him to follow her or not, his choice. Reaching door numbered five, she took the reserved sign off and opened it, stepping in without turning the inside light on. Through the light in the main room, she saw the chair in the middle of the space, and the bed against the back wall. She had been assured there were also straps and other accoutrements scattered throughout the room should she feel the need for them. Turning her attention away from them for the moment, she waited as he followed her through the door. She pushed it closed, plunging them into complete darkness.

"Sex in the dark? That's not very exciting." He sounded almost disappointed with her.

"Shut up." Jada couldn't believe she had just said that. *Damn, apparently one night of uninhibited sex did more for me than I thought.*

"You wanted to know another fantasy of mine? Well, here it is. You are to do everything I tell you to. No questions, no refusing. Got it?"

She could hear the smile in his voice as he answered in a drawl, "Yes, Mistress. I am yours to command."

She smiled herself at his response. "I want you to undress me."

Jada thought she knew what she was getting into. She didn't take Braden's ingenuity into account though, and she should have. She heard his footsteps approach her, and she quickly backed into the wall. His hands found her unerringly as he started his seduction of her.

He brought his hands up to the bun on her head, reaching for the pins holding the mass of hair in place. One by one, he took the

pins out until her hair fell down into his hands. He brought the curls up to his face and inhaled the scent of her shampoo before letting the hair fall to her shoulders. Despite the darkness, she was aware of every move he made. The electricity of his body sent a prickly sensation over her skin.

He opened her jacket, but did not remove it right away. Instead, he slowly, agonizingly so, brought his hands to the top of her shirt. He pulled at the material gently, and she felt his hair brush her chin as his head went down to nip at the first button, his hands moving to cup her hips. Jada froze in place as somehow he managed to get the first, then the second button undone. Each puff of his scorching breath rolled over her flesh, enflaming her further.

She gasped as his teeth wrapped around the third button and pulled sharply. The pop as the threads holding it on snapped was loud in the room. He continued to pull the buttons off, one by one, never touching her body with anything other than his breath. By the time he had reached the last button, her pussy was drenched and her nipples were hard as pebbles, waiting for the touch of his skin against her.

Air brushed her stomach as she felt him step away from her. She knew he couldn't see her any more than she could him, so what was he doing? Her question was answered as his hands reached for her jacket and rolled it slowly down her shoulders, following it with her blouse. He'd effectively trapped her arms behind her body and against the wall.

"No..." she started.

"Hush. You told me to take your clothes off, woman, and dammit, I will do it my way."

Already turned on beyond belief, Jada waited to see what he would do next. This aggressive alpha male attitude was new to her. Braden had never been this forceful during sex before. Maybe that was because neither of them thought she would enjoy it.

She heard a click, and the feel of cold steel against her chest had her holding her breath. The flat of a blade was against her as he slid it beneath her bra strap, and twitched his hand, slicing the strap clean though. *Damn, that was a fifty dollar bra. What the hell is he doing?* The knife went over to the other strap, and he did the same thing to it. Her chest was too large for the cups to fall forward on their own, so her breasts stayed trapped in their lace until with one more slice, he cut the bra in half and let it fall to the floor.

She squirmed against the wall, eager to feel his touch against her skin, and still he avoided touching her. She heard the knife close before he reached around to unzip her skirt. As he got to the zipper, though, he stopped.

“Unh unh. I have a fantasy I want to indulge first,” he groaned as he dropped to his knees in front of her.

Jada didn’t know what to do. Her plans for the evening had gone all to hell, and damn it if she didn’t love it. He grabbed her legs and forced them apart, pushing up her skirt. Her hot, throbbing pussy was bared to the slow circulation of cool air in the room, making it twitch and drip in reaction to the cold.

She felt his breath as he moved closer, slowly, as though savoring what he was about to do. Just when she thought she was ready to beg him to eat her, he thrust his face into her, plunging his tongue in her slit.

“Ahhhhh,” was all she could say, all words taken from her brain at the feel of his tongue lapping at her lower lips. He fed on her for what felt like hours, licking her like a favorite treat, thrusting his tongue inside her, teasing her, fucking her with his mouth, every once in a while, sucking and biting at her as though he were trying to get deeper inside. She felt each stroke against her body like a bonfire scorching her soul. Liquid flame shot through her at his touch. It was so unlike the tame, gentle way he had treated her in the past, she came before she even knew she was ready. He

grunted as he lapped up the juices flowing out of her body, licking her nearly dry.

Finally, he moved his attention to her clit. That little nub that up till now, he had practically ignored. Her legs gave way as his teeth grabbed at her and he sucked her into his mouth hard. He moved, adjusting her legs so she was nearly sitting on his shoulders, leaning against the wall as he continued to play with her, building the tension in her body again.

Obviously not content with just using his mouth, he brought his hands up to her, thrusting three fingers at once into her pussy as his other hand massaged her ass. Jada didn't know how she was going to last, between his sucking, biting, thrusting and kneading, she felt as though she were ready to explode into a million shards. And explode she did. Hard, all over his face. She felt her body contract and spill her juices over his hand and face, and once again, he lapped it up, eating her like a starving man, eager for all he could get.

She stayed there, wrung out from the continuous orgasms he had given her already. She was ready to call an end to the game, to let him know she knew who he was. But he wasn't done yet.

Grabbing her, he carried her to the chair in the middle of the room. He placed her on her feet in front of it and gently helped her off with her blouse and jacket, then removed her skirt. His nudge to get her to move back to sit in the chair was enough to wake her up, and have her take control once again.

"Unh unh. I am still giving the orders here. Strip."

Unsure if he would continue with her game, she held her breath as she waited for his reaction. She breathed once again as she heard him remove his clothes. Moving away from the chair, she pushed him over to it when she thought he was done. "Sit."

Once she was sure he was seated, she walked behind the chair and leaned over him as she whispered in his ear, "This is my dime, buddy, and I'll be damned if I don't get all the fun I want out of it."

With that, she ran her tongue up the nerve on the side of his neck, right up to his earlobe. Grabbing it between her teeth, she nipped at it as her arms wrapped around his body, feeling his smooth, hard chest under her hands. Her long nails raked across his pecs until she ended up at his nipples, grabbing them both and squeezing them hard as she bit down on his lobe. His quick intake of breath and slight jump of his body were enough for her. If he was dating anyone else, she was in for a surprise when next she saw him. Jada made damn sure she marked him.

Standing up again, she brought her hands up to his shoulders, dragging her nails across his back as she walked around him to position herself in front of him. His harsh, shallow breathing gave her the confidence to take the next step.

Starting at his knees, she ran her hands up his legs, teasing his inner thighs lightly as she neared his balls. She kneaded the sensitive skin before scraping her nails away from his prick. Removing her hands, she quickly reached down for him. She grasped his thick cock in her hand and she squeezed it tightly, her thumb flicking the pre-cum at the tip of it. Slowly, Jada lowered herself between his knees, letting him feel her body as it slid down his legs.

Hand still grasping his cock, she leaned forward and took him in her mouth. She had given him blow jobs before, but had never really enjoyed them. Had always felt as though she owed it to him. Tonight, he owed her, and she was going to take it all. She opened her jaw as she brought him entirely inside her mouth, deep throat-ing him as she had never done before.

Taking him like this, as a treat to herself, opened her up to all kinds of sensations while she ran her mouth up and down his shaft. She enjoyed the hard muscled feel and musky taste of him as she sucked and licked. She felt his veins pulse beneath her tongue, responding to each tug she gave. Lovingly, longingly, she laved attention on him as she had never done before.

He brought his hands to her hair, twisting them in her long curls as she bathed him in attention. The feel of his hands knotted in her hair gave her a further high, encouraging her to do more, go farther.

Lost in her actions, she barely heard his, “No, no more. Baby, you need to stop. I want to come inside you. Please.”

Slowly she came up, releasing him from her mouth. He had never begged her before, and it filled her with a glow of satisfaction when she climbed onto his lap and lowered herself down on him.

She was wet and as ready as she would ever be for his hard, thick cock. She had missed this feeling so much. The feel of him inside her, filling her, making her complete. His prick filled her pussy, thrusting in and out, his hands holding her hips, making the thrusts harder, sharper, driving her again to the edge faster than she thought possible. *It...feels...so...good.* She couldn’t even think any more as he pumped her to one orgasm after another, her body spasming on his. She screamed out his name when liquid gushed over him as he, too, reached his climax and shot all he had into her.

It felt like hours later, her head against his chest and cuddled in his arms with his cock still buried in her. “When did you figure it out?” his voice was a soft breeze against her hair.

“Last night. When you called me baby. No one says it quite the way you do.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, then started, “But that was after...”

She smiled a secret smile into his chest. “Yeah, it was.”

“Good Lord, woman. Didn’t you know what you could be getting yourself into?”

“Well, not at first, no. I was brought to the front bar by a blind date. I found this room back here by accident. By the time you approached me, I was, um, intrigued.”

“Damn glad no one else got to you first then.”

“Do you come here often?” Jada realized she was afraid to hear his response. If he had left her because she was boring, was this the kind of thing he found more to his taste?

“Honestly? Last night was the first time. Remember Joe? He dragged me here, telling me it was time to stop moping around and get back in the swing of things.”

“Moping?” Jada couldn’t believe her ears.

“Yeah, I haven’t gone out with anyone since we broke up.” His arms tightened around her, “I missed you, Jada.”

“I missed you, too, Braden.”

“Do you want to give it another try?”

She knew her smile was bright enough to light up the room. “Definitely.”

“On one condition.” He pushed her back as though to look in her eyes he couldn’t see, moving his hands to hold her face tenderly.

“What is it?”

“That from now on, we trust each other with our fantasies and fulfill them in the privacy of our own bedroom.”

Jada laughed as she felt a weight lift from her chest. “That’s a deal.” She barely finished before he brought his lips to hers in a truly soul-searing kiss. One she knew held all the promise of the season and many more to come.

SANTA'S COMING

by

Skyler Grey

Chapter 1

It was pouring down rain in typical Seattle fashion when Trisha raced for her car after work. Irritated she left her umbrella in the backseat, she scrambled for her keys to hit the unlock button.

Just as she reached the door, her feet slipped out from under her, causing Trisha to fall. "Shit!" she exclaimed.

Trying to get up, she winced at the sharp pain in her ankle. *Great! Just what I needed, the end to another perfect day.*

Suddenly someone from behind helped her to her feet. She turned, blinking as the rain pelted her face.

"Thanks." Letting out a short embarrassed laugh, she then added, "I guess that could've won me a spot on *America's Funniest Videos*."

The man chuckled and helped Trisha to her car. She tried to walk, but winced when the pain in her ankle shot up her leg.

Leaning over, his large frame blocked the rain as a look of concern crossed his face. In a pleasantly deep voice, he asked, "Do you think you can drive? If not, I'll be glad to give you a ride and you can come back for your car later."

Quickly shaking her head, she let out a nervous laugh. "I'm fine, but thanks. I'm sure I can manage."

She took another step and fell again, but he already had his arms around her, holding her effortlessly. When Trisha looked up at him, he gave her the I-told-you-so look, raising one brow, his mouth a silly half-grin.

Not sure that getting a ride from a complete stranger was the smartest thing, Trisha didn't feel she had much of a choice since she didn't have a cell phone.

As if reading her mind, he asked, "Would you like to use my cell to call someone? I'd understand since you don't know me."

Feeling like an idiot for the second time in front of this guy who was absolutely gorgeous, she blinked and thought, *What the hell? I took a defense class a few years back. I'm sure if I need to, I could remember the moves.* She gave him a small grin. "Um, actually I think I'll take you up on your offer. If you're sure you don't mind?"

Smiling, he winked. "Don't mind at all."

As they pulled out of the parking lot, she looked over her shoulder, somewhat apprehensive. Turning to the stranger, she asked nervously, "So are you from around here?"

He grinned. "I guess you could say that. I was actually born in California but grew up here in Seattle. Then went back to Cali for college. I graduated this past year, but love Cali so much, I couldn't bring myself to leave. Just got back in town last night."

"Oh." Still a bit uneasy, she continued, "Well thanks for doing this. I really appreciate it."

He looked over at her and grinned. "I'm always a sucker for a pretty girl."

Her smile deepened, feeling a warmth spread through her as his eyes held hers before turning his attention back to the highway.

Without looking at her, he asked, "So what's your name?"

She looked forward, trying to keep from staring at him. *Damn, he's hot!*

"Trisha, Trisha Rivers. I work back there at the restaurant. What's yours?"

"Eric Matthews, and that's quite a coincidence, because my father owns the restaurant. His health hasn't been good and he's been pestering me to come back home." Then glancing at her, he

winked. “Personally, I think he’s milking it, his way of keeping me close.” He let out a deep laugh.

She grinned, finding that she liked his laugh, and she was beginning to like him. The other girls told her how good-looking the owner’s son was, but said he never dated employees. Which was comforting, in a way, but also disappointing.

She noticed where they were and said sharply, “Take a right!” Glancing at him, she added, “Sorry, wasn’t paying attention.”

He shrugged. “No problem.”

Turning her attention back to the rain coming down in buckets, she mumbled, “I hate that it rains all the time here.”

He looked at her, a bit puzzled, and asked, “So you’re not from around here?”

Trisha preferred not to speak much about her private life, and felt like she could have kicked herself. “No, just moved here about three months ago.”

His eyes filled with interest. “So, why move to Seattle where it reputedly rains all the time?”

Taking a deep breath, Trisha shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t want to go into all the boring details, but I moved out here from Virginia. My boyfriend *at the time* was already here, calling me every day and begging me to move here with him. I wasn’t really keen on the idea of moving clear across the country, but I didn’t have anything keeping me in Virginia, so I gave in and here I am.”

Eric looked at her again. “Was he from Virginia, too?”

She shook her head, “No, he’s from here. He’s a mama’s boy.”

Eric raised a dark brow. “A mama’s boy? Okay and you, what about your family?”

Giving a light snort, she mumbled, “What family? My mother’s dead, died at my birth, and my father’s a drunk. I was an only child, so by the time I started first grade, I was pretty much taking care of myself. I left home at fourteen and never looked back.”

She bit the corner of her lip. *What made me tell him any of that?*

Eric looked at her. "So this guy you love..."

Snapping her head around, she quickly corrected him, "Loved! Past tense. And to be honest, I never really loved him. Just comfortable, I guess. Breaking up wasn't that big of a deal to me."

Nodding his head in understanding, he asked, "Okay, this guy. Where is he now and what happened?"

Trisha looked out through the water-covered windshield, staring but unseeing. "He's around I guess, I haven't heard from him in over two months." Then releasing a deep sigh, she turned in her seat and faced him. "I can't believe I'm telling you all this, but if I'm going to give you all the sordid details of my past, then you have to reciprocate."

He looked at her and laughed. "That could take longer than the drive to your place, which by the way is..."

Looking up, she was surprised to discover they were there already. She pointed across the street. "Over there, it's the small house on the corner. I thought I was getting a really good deal until I found out the plumbing leaked. But I've taken a liking to it, and now it feels like home."

Eric looked at the small house and grinned. "Yep! I guess it could use a little TLC, but it's not bad."

The rain was still pouring as he pulled into the driveway. Putting the car in park, he looked over at her, shutting it off. "Wait a second and I'll help you to the door."

Trisha found herself not wanting him to leave. She liked talking to him. She really hadn't met many people and Eric was a nice change.

"Um, actually if you're not in a hurry, you're welcome to come in for a cup of hot coffee." Raising her eyebrows in a challenge, she added, "It's only fair you share at least some dark secret with me, since I told you things about myself no one else knows...except Josh."

Eric grinned. "Josh being your ex?"

She smiled. "Yes."

He smiled back and shrugged. "Sure, love to come in. But I can't stay too long. I'm expected somewhere."

Trisha's face lit up as she gave him a big smile. "Great!"

Once inside, they started laughing as they realized both of them looked like drowned rats.

She bent, gently pulling off her shoe as she leaned against the wall for support.

Eric said, "Hold on a second, let's get out of our coats first, then I can help you over to the couch."

She looked at him nodding. "Good thinking."

Reaching down, she unzipped her jacket, peeling it off her soaked body. Taking it from her, he hung it next to his on her small coatrack. Then, before she knew it, he scooped her up and carried her into the living room, setting her easily on the couch.

Her eyes popped open in surprise. "I didn't expect you to carry me."

He stood, giving her a boyish grin. "I knew if I asked, you'd say no. And to tell you the truth, I wanted to see how well you'd fit in my arms." Then winking at her, he added, "It was a nice fit."

She laughed as she stared up at him. "I'm glad you approve, too bad rumor has it you don't mingle with the employees."

Giving her a puzzled look, he raised a sexy brow. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Why on earth did I say that? Laughing nervously, she pointed toward the bathroom trying to change the subject. "You're welcome to use the restroom to dry off if you'd like. And I'll be glad to throw your clothes in the dryer."

Looking down the hall, he grinned. "Thanks, I'll take you up on that. I hate the feel of wet clothes. You want to go first?"

"Oh, no thanks. I'll try and hop into the kitchen to put on the coffee first, then change. Towels are in the hall closet."

Strolling toward the bathroom, he turned, giving her a sly grin. "Don't peek."

She laughed as she shook her head, her stomach a flutter of butterflies.

Her heart raced. *What the hell am I thinking? I just asked a complete stranger to take off his clothes.* Standing quickly, she hopped toward the kitchen. Hollering over her shoulder, "What do you want in your coffee?" When he didn't answer, she peered around the wall.

Looking down the hallway, she froze. She'd forgotten to tell him that the bathroom handle had a trick to it, and if not shut properly, it would slip open. Which was exactly what happened. He stood, his reflection filling the mirror on the wall. She was unable to move. As if in a trance, she stared as muscles rippled across his back, his arms large as they bulged when he bent them, his chest broad.

His stomach was hard, and tight, and she counted at least an eight pack. *Eight?* His ass was round, firm and perfectly shaped. His waist narrow and a line of dark hair slipped sexily below his belly-button. She felt warmth spread to her lower half as her nipples tingled.

He turned to face the mirror and caught her eyes on him.

Almost tripping, she quickly turned away, her face blushing. *Oh shit!* Taking a deep breath, she waited a second, leaning against the counter. Hoping to save face, she hollered again, "I was asking how you like your coffee." She jumped when she felt him behind her.

"Black." His breath was hot as it hit the back of her neck, her nipples hardened instantly against the wet shirt of her uniform.

Nervously she moved away, reaching for two coffee cups, hoping to put a little distance between them. She couldn't think with him so close to her. Her heart pounded in her chest and she was positive he could hear it.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw he was leaning against the countertop, his lower half wrapped in a towel. Breathing a sigh of relief, she turned and grabbed the pot, filling it, then placing it back onto its burner before pushing the button.

She jumped when he spoke. "Cute place you have here. I like older homes like this."

"Th-thanks." She bit the corner of her lip, willing the coffee pot to hurry up.

Finally, the coffee was ready and she reached for the pot. Her hands trembled as she went to pour the hot liquid. He was behind her, and reaching around, he placed his hand over hers to help steady it.

She felt her body jerk as if a bolt of electricity shot up her arm.

Gently, he pulled her hand free from the pot and laid it on the counter, placing his over it as he pressed his body against her back. Bending, he kissed the back of her neck, his mouth forming a trail to her earlobe.

She inhaled sharply, closing her eyes, her chest rising and falling rapidly at his touch.

He reached around with his other hand, cupping her large breast through the wet material. She moaned lightly.

It had been a long time since she'd felt a spark ignite between her legs. Josh always left her feeling cold and empty. Never having done anything as crazy as this, she found herself unable to resist. This stranger, whoever he was, absorbed her will and molded her desires with his own.

She reached behind, her hands tugging on the terry cloth towel until it fell free to the floor. Turning to him, she looked up into his face. He was so handsome, his eyes dark, like pools of onyx, his face strong, masculine as the faint shadow of a beard gave him a sexy look. He bent to kiss her. She opened for him eagerly as

their mouths pressed together, tongues warring for dominance and control.

Eric reached between them, unsnapping her blouse until it hung open, leaving only a lace bra.

He bent his head, kissing the tops of her breasts, her skin soft and smooth beneath his lips. Cupping one, he pushed it upward forcing the tip of her nipple to pop free, as it stood rigid and hard against his tongue.

With his other hand, he pulled on its twin, freeing it from its lace bondage. Pinching the nipple gently, he rolled it between his fingers as he sucked the first into his mouth, bringing it to a puckered peak beneath the torture of his mouth and tongue.

She moaned again as she let her head fall back, resting her elbows on the counter behind her. Arching her back, she thrust her ripened breasts into his face.

He groaned as he licked and sucked them hungrily. Her nipple swelled inside his mouth causing his cock to jump against her leg.

She jerked, feeling the huge size of him as he pressed into her. *God, he felt good.* The thought of him making love to her made her panties wet. She gasped as he rubbed himself against her.

Lifting her lightly, he carried her toward the kitchen table, laying her back across it.

Fighting with her conscience, Trisha struggled to keep her head clear. But as soon as his lips touched her bare skin again, her mind was lost, and any reasonable thoughts she might have had were gone.

He pulled the straps of her bra off her shoulders, allowing the fullness of her huge tits to spill free. Groaning, he buried his face between them, taking turns sucking on each, until her nipples were large and hard.

She arched beneath him, her senses reeling as she felt long pent-up desires deep within her begin to awaken.

Pulling his mouth free from her peaked cones, he slid down between her thighs. Raising her skirt, he pushed it up above her waist, peeling her silky panties down around her knees.

His breath was hot on her bare skin, and she felt the wetness between her legs as her clit ached for his mouth. He kissed her hips and thighs, teasing the V of her treasure box. She was shaved smooth, giving him free access to the slick folds that protected her pussy's opening. As he licked along the top and inside edges of her slit, she moaned, her hips rising beneath each assault.

Tugging on the sides of her panties, he peeled them off, sliding them along her wet legs and past her ankles. He stepped back, pulling her toward him.

Kneeling, he pushed her thighs open as his hands separated her, pulling the pink, juicy flesh of her wet opening wide, exposing her engorged clit to his mouth. Instantly, his mouth covered her, drawing it in as he sucked tenderly on the swollen nub. "God, you taste good," he mumbled, licking and drinking in her flowing juices.

Just when she was ready to come, he pulled his mouth free, causing her to groan in disappointment, but not for long. He grabbed her ass, squeezing her tight cheeks with his large hands as he pulled her roughly against him. She gasped out loud as he plunged into her, filling her completely.

Lifting her legs higher, he pushed them up over his shoulders as he bent forward. "You're so damn tight, Trisha. Didn't that asshole of a boyfriend ever fuck you?"

Trisha couldn't speak, her mind climbing waves of ecstasy as she neared her peak.

Eric drove deep inside her as she cried out, his huge cock stretching the walls of her tight opening. Closing her eyes, she gritted her teeth. *I've never been fucked like this by anyone.*

Trisha pulled his face toward hers as he grabbed a large tit into his mouth sucking hard. He continued to dive deep inside her and she felt herself tumbling into ecstasy.

Josh never made me come like this. She cried out as her orgasm spiraled, crashing down, leaving her weak and breathless.

Eric plunged one last time, shoving his hardened cock deeper as he growled. Squeezing the cheeks of her ass, he pulled her hard against him, his hot stream exploding inside her.

He laid her down gently, then he leaned over her, catching his breath. Both of them were panting, his chest pressed against hers as they fought to control their breathing.

Trisha was stunned. Too weak to move, she lay beneath her boss' son gulping in deep breaths as she looked at him. Slowly she raised one hand and ran it through his hair. *It's a nice color, chestnut with a touch of sun.*

Eric finally lifted his head, staring down at her and grinned. "I don't know about you, but that was great!"

Trisha felt her face flush as she looked away. Grinning, she nodded. "Yeah, it was really good."

Eric laughed, then he pushed back off the table but stayed wedged between her thighs, his cock still buried deep inside her.

Her stomach fluttered at the sensation of him still inside her. Instantly, her nipples hardened and she saw his eyes fly to them.

He grinned when he saw them swell. Slightly raising one brow, he cocked his head and looked at her. "Demanding little things, aren't they?"

Trisha blushed.

He stood looking at her spread across the table in the kitchen light; her face flushed from their lovemaking, her tits rosy from the assault of his mouth. Her body was slender as he took in her tiny waist and long legs, the perfect length to wrap around his hips. Her skin was bronzed except for the tiny tan lines of her bathing suit.

His cock jumped just looking at her.

She felt him swell inside her and looked up at him in amazement.

Grinning, he reached behind her and lifted her off the table, carefully carrying her down the hallway as she clung to him. He managed to make it to her bed without dislodging himself from her body.

He laid her across the bed and rolled slowly over, placing her on top. Trisha spread her legs as she straddled him, her hands pressed against his broad chest.

She noticed for the first time the tribal armband tattoo around his left arm. Tracing it with the tip of her finger, she smiled. "My, what big muscles you have."

He laughed as he slowly began to lift her, sliding her up and down on his cock. "The better to do this with, my dear."

She closed her eyes as the coarse bush of his pubic hairs rubbed against her clit. Already she could feel the wetness of her pussy. She moaned and she dropped her head back, letting him fill her to the fullest.

She felt his hands cupping her breasts, as he squeezed them. Taking the nipples between his fingers, pinching them until they stood straight and erect.

She began to ride him long and slow and he groaned, shoving his head back into the pillows. It was driving him mad and she loved it.

She slid up and down his long, hard shaft with increasing speed. Suddenly crying out, her pussy squeezed him in multiple orgasms, sucking his huge cock with a fierce intensity.

She went limp and he slowly lifted her off his still-hard cock. Laying her beside him on her stomach, he reached down and spread her legs apart, raising her hips high into the air. While on his knees, he lifted her tight ass toward his cock, reaching around the front of her as he played with the wet flesh of her swollen pussy to ready her again.

She moaned as she wiggled beneath his fingers. "God, Eric, you're insatiable."

He let out a deep lusty laugh. "Judging by the tightness of your pussy, I expect you're thankful I am." With that, he slipped the head of his cock into her pussy's tight opening. "I love watching," he groaned as he watched his cock plunge in and out of her.

Climaxing again, she pressed her face into the blankets, curling her fingers into the sheets when she cried out. His deep groans filled the room, which only brought her orgasm to a full bloom. Together, they peaked, reaching an orgasm so intense that both fell across the bed when it ended.

Eric couldn't speak. His chest heaved when he looked at her. She lay beside him, panting to catch her breath. He finally murmured, "Your body looks sexy as hell all wet and sweaty." Then dropping his head back onto the bed, he let out a deep sigh. "Man, that was intense!"

Trisha could only mumble, her face still buried in the blankets.

Eric laughed as he grabbed her around the waist, lifting her over onto her side. Raised on one elbow, he traced the side of her delicate cheekbone, smiling into her exhausted face. "So tell me. What kind of fool would let someone like you get away?"

Trisha opened her eyes and smiled. "It doesn't matter. I'm used to guys not hanging around long."

Eric frowned. "Okay poor subject. How's this? Ole St. Nick is around the corner. Think you're on his naughty or nice list?"

Trisha gave another soft laugh and she rolled onto her back, resting her arm across her forehead as she closed her eyes. "Another man who never stuck around for very long."

Eric looked at her, then reaching across the bed, he traced a finger over the smooth line of her jaw. Traveling down her neck, he caressed her shoulder and arm.

Turning her head toward him, she raised a slender brow, narrowing her blue eyes. "What's going through that handsome head of yours?"

Grinning wide, he shook his head. "Oh let's just say I have an *in* with Santa. And if you're a really good girl, I might be able to put in a good word for you."

Trisha laughed as she turned and sat up, hanging her legs over the bed as she peeked over a slender shoulder. "I quit believing in Santa a long time ago. In fact, I quit believing in a lot of things." Then forcing her dark mood to lighten, she looked at him through slanted eyes, licking her lips suggestively.

Laughing, he reached for her as she squealed and jumped off the bed. "Hey, I told you I have personal connections with Santa, so you better be nice to me. And you're not being very nice right now."

Standing next to the bed, she cocked a slim hip, resting her hand on it as she teased. "And whatcha gonna do? Spank me?"

He grinned, his eyes bright with the challenge. Jumping toward her, Trisha squealed and raced from the room. Sometime later, they ended up in the shower, Eric's appointment long forgotten.

* * * *

It was late when Eric finally left. Kissing her at the door, he tapped the tip of her nose with his finger.

Looking out behind him as he stood on the porch, he pulled his jacket closer around his neck. "Brrrrr! I think it's going to snow soon."

Trisha smiled up at him as she snuggled into her housecoat, wriggling her toes inside her thick socks. "I think you're right. Better hurry home before you get caught in it."

Nodding his head, he chuckled. "Yeah, it'd be a shame if I had to stay the night."

Trisha laughed, knowing he was teasing. “Get out of here, you’re already late for that appointment you had earlier.”

He laughed. “Yeah but it was worth it. I’ll be at the top of Santa’s list now for helping a lady out.” Then cutting his gaze heavenward, he began to count on each finger, “Out of her bra, out of her panties...”

Giggling, Trisha slapped him playfully as she shoved him toward his car. Watching him race through the cold winds, she felt her heart dance. For the first time in a long time, she felt happy. *Maybe coming here wasn’t so bad after all.*

Chapter 2

Trisha woke up feeling fresh and alive for the first time in months. *Did last night really happen?* She grinned as she hopped out of bed. *Ouch!* By the soreness of her thighs, she knew it did.

The morning went by quickly as she showered and dressed. Sipping on her coffee, she watched the first snowfall drift from the sky. It always left her breathless to see how beautiful snow was.

Her doorbell rang and she turned to it. Her hands started to tremble, hoping it was Eric. Opening the door quickly, her face filled with disappointment. A young man about her height hopped from one foot to another, his hands shoved deep in his pockets as he smiled. "Hi, you Trisha?"

She looked at him suspiciously. "Yeah?"

"I'm Tommy, Eric sent me to take you to your car. Said he was sorry but he got tied up and couldn't come himself."

Trisha felt a twinge of disappointment, but gave him a half-smile. "Sure, give me a second and I'll be right out."

Trisha's ankle was only slightly tender this morning. She grabbed her jacket and boots, pulling them on. Yanking on her gloves, she snatched her purse, locking the door behind her.

The drive back to her car was quiet. She was glad because she really had nothing to say to the kid driving her. When they pulled into the parking lot next to her car, she gave him a smile. "Thanks a bunch for the ride. I really appreciate it."

"No problem. Glad I could help. You need me to wait to see if it starts?"

Shaking her head, she got out. "No, but thanks. I have to work, I'll be going home later."

She watched him pull away, then hurried across the parking lot and inside the restaurant.

* * * *

She was never so glad to be off work. It was the day from hell. Half the staff was out sick and she had four extra tables to wait. The bus boy sucked and halfway through her shift, she ripped into him.

Telling her to piss off, he walked out, leaving the rest of them to bus their own tables. That, in turn, caused the other waiters to get irritated at her.

Pulling into her driveway, she leaned against the steering wheel. Taking a deep breath, she got out and hurried to the front door. She turned the key and slipped inside, thankful for the warmth.

By the time she had pulled off her jacket, gloves and hat, she turned to see that her living room was filled with bouquets. Gasping in shock, she looked from one to the other. A total of six bouquets filled her living room and in her kitchen was a huge arrangement of white roses in the center of her table.

She rushed to read the card:

Trisha,

Just wanted you to know you're special. I hope you enjoy the flowers.

Eric

Tears filled her eyes as she looked at the blurred roses. Blinking, she just stood there, letting the tears slide down her cheeks, not bothering to wipe them away.

* * * *

Another day of work and she was finally home. Anxiously waiting for a phone call, she rushed inside the house. Hurrying to the answering machine, she hit the button to listen to her messages

while she pulled off her wet jacket and boots. She froze when she heard Eric's voice.

"Hey, there. I heard you got some flowers yesterday. I thought you might like to be a bit naughty later. I'll pick you up around eight."

Trisha laughed out loud. *He's just plain crazy*, she thought but squealed as she ran toward the shower.

He was at the door promptly by eight when she looked at the clock. *Wow, talk about punctual.*

Eric stood in the door dressed in a long heavy coat. Smiling, he looked at her. "Hey."

Trisha grinned as she pulled him inside shutting the door behind him. Kissing him on the cheek, she smiled. "Thanks for the flowers. They're beautiful!" Then noticing his suit and tie, she backed up. "Okay, you did not tell me that we were going someplace fancy. Look at me!"

He furrowed his brows as he slowly walked around her. "Hmmm, you're right. I think you need to strip your clothes off." She shoved him.

"I have to go change now so you'll just have to wait a few more minutes."

A little bit later, she came out wearing a sexy little red-hot dress with black knee high boots. He gave her a wicked grin, "You look h-o-t!"

* * * *

Laughing, they rushed inside from the freezing snow. "Oh my gosh, Eric! I've always wanted to see *Phantom of the Opera*. It was beautiful."

Helping her out of her coat, he grinned. "I'm glad you liked it. I got the tickets for my parents, but with my father being ill, he couldn't go. And since they've seen the play a few times already, being mom's favorite, they insisted I use them."

“Well please tell them thank you for me.” Then giving him a wicked look, she headed for the bedroom. “Sorry, but I have to get comfy. You’re welcome to join me if you’d like.”

Eric grinned as she teased him with the sway of her hips. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Pulling his shirt off, he draped it over her couch, then kicked off each shoe. By the time he entered her bedroom, he had left a trail of clothes, and stood in only his boxers.

Trisha turned, then burst into a fit of laughter. Falling onto the bed, she pointed at his shorts. “Oh my *gosh*. Those are the goofiest shorts I’ve ever seen.” Then doubling over, she fell across the bed laughing.

Eric grinned looking down at his Santa shorts. They were red flannel with a white fur trim around the edge of each leg topped with jingle bells attached to the drawstring.

“Okay, okay. I get it. They’re just a *little* too sexy for you. I’ll take them off so you can focus more clearly.” With that, he swooped down, peeling them off in one sweep.

As Trisha tried to stop laughing, she slowly sat back up, her face sobering when she looked at him. He stood posed as the statue of David. Staring at the ceiling. She burst into another fit of hysteria. Falling backwards, she lay on the bed as he slowly eased up between her legs.

Her giggling slowed, turning into moans as he licked the inside of her thighs upward toward the V of her throbbing clit.

Arching, she spread her legs. He turned around, straddling her as his large cock dangled proudly in her face. She stared at him hungrily licking her lips. *My God, he’s big.*

Sliding her hands around his long hard shaft, she squeezed gently. Slowly, she began to teasingly lick around his engorged head, tracing the edge of his cock with her tongue, blowing her heated breath against it. Finally, she took him fully into her mouth sucking him fiercely.

He groaned against the smooth skin of her hip. Nipping at the tantalizing silkiness of her thigh, he slipped his fingers inside the slick lips of her pussy, spreading them apart.

He covered her throbbing clit with his mouth, then his tongue rolled over and around it, flicking and teasing until he sucked it in, causing her body to rock back and forth as her hips thrust toward his mouth. He groaned and squeezed her firm ass.

Slipping another long thick finger inside her tight opening, he began to finger fuck her. She moaned, continuing to slide her hands up and down his shaft, sucking with a fevered hunger. Pulling him out of her mouth, she gasped, "I can't believe how good you taste. Like peppermint." Then returning back to him, she gobbled him up, moaning when he leaked into her mouth.

Eric shoved his finger deeper until he found the nub he was searching for. She tensed as he began to rub it. Her juices flowed into his mouth as she cried out, mumbling with pleasure, against the mouthful of cock she was enjoying.

Trisha took him deep into her mouth as she clamped her lips tightly around him, sucking the engorged head of his cock like a vacuum, shoving it between her lips and down her throat with intensity.

Eric knew she was near peaking when she pumped him fiercely with her mouth. He, too, was nearly ready to explode. Then suddenly, they came together. She greedily swallowed him, sucking him dry, gasping from her own orgasm.

He ate her throbbing pussy, teasing and pulling on her clit until her tight walls squeezed around his long finger in multiple orgasms. Her juices flowed as he eagerly licked her clean.

They lay next to each other breathing heavily. Eric whispered, "I could eat you all night, Trisha. You've got the sweetest pussy in the world."

She laughed softly. "Me? You're the one who tastes like peppermint."

Easing himself up, he grinned. "That's because I put edible peppermint lotion on my cock."

She sat up quickly while giving him the evil eye. "Give me some."

Eric went to get the bottle of lotion he brought. Coming back into the bedroom, he stopped at the door, his cock jumping to attention.

Trisha lay propped up on the pillows, her legs spread open as she teasingly rubbed herself, licking each finger in turn. Moaning, she rested her head back looking at him through slanted eyes. Smiling at him, she slowly licked her lips.

Sliding in beside her, he poured the lotion into his hands, rubbing them together. He began to smear it across her nipples, massaging them until they sprang to life beneath his fingers.

He groaned as he watched her playing with her clit, slowly slipping her long fingers in and out of her juicy wet opening.

Grabbing the bottle, he drizzled the lotion down between her legs. Pulling her hands free, he began to rub her, his fingers sliding the lotion over every inch of her shaved pussy. Dragging her across the bed, he positioned her so he could kneel on the floor, her clit and lips easy access for the pleasure his mouth wanted to give.

Moaning loudly, she grabbed her tits, squeezing and pinching the swollen nipples. "Oh God, Eric! My tits feel warm and my pussy is so hot..." She gasped when his mouth touched her slick folds.

He whispered hoarsely, "It's a heating lotion."

She bent forward to pull her nipple into her own mouth, sucking it as she pinched the other. Gasping, she fell back when his tongue flicked the bud of her clit, intensifying the heat of the lotion with his hot breath.

He took her into his mouth completely and she cried out. Panting, she gasped, "Eric, I've got to have you inside me right

now. Ohhh God..." she whimpered, finding it hard to breathe. "Fuck me before I lose my mind!"

Immediately he was over her, pinning her arms above her head and plunging deep inside her. She cried out in pleasure, her legs wrapping instantly around his hips. He drove into her, long, hard and fast.

She bucked against him as she struggled to ease the fire between her legs.

A deep groan escaped from the back of his throat, and he pumped deeper into the tightness of her pussy.

The bed rocked violently as the headboard slammed into the wall, both oblivious to the noise it made. The room was filled with sounds of orgasmic moans and cries.

Suddenly, Trisha exploded in a climax of frenzied pleasure, screaming as she pulled her arms free to claw Eric's back.

Throwing his head back, he yelled, a deep growl blending with Trisha's wild cries of pain and pleasure.

They lay spent, their hearts racing as they slipped into a peaceful sleep. Later that night, they awoke, both smiling as they slowly began the heated torture of each other's body all over again.

Chapter 3

It was one day before Christmas and Trisha paced her house nervously. Looking into her living room, her heart warmed at the sight of the most beautiful Christmas tree she had ever seen. Eric surprised her with it and together, they decorated it. It was hard to believe they had been dating for only three months, when it felt like they'd known each other forever.

Barely remembering having a Christmas tree, her heart soared whenever she looked at it. She just finished wrapping Eric's present and placed it under the tree when the doorbell rang. Trisha sprang across the floor pulling it open. She froze. It was Josh.

With Trisha trying to shove the door closed, Josh managed to wedge his foot in, blocking her efforts. "Whoa now, give me at least a second here."

Trisha gritted her teeth as she spat out at him, "Your second was up over five months ago, asshole. Now leave."

Narrowing her eyes, she watched nervously as he flipped his blonde hair out of his face, feigning a hurt look. Then without a word, he shoved the door open, knocking her backwards and stepped in, closing it behind him.

Backing away, she reached for the portable phone.

He shook his head. "Uh-uh-uh, Trish. That wouldn't be a smart move."

She froze, knowing he meant it.

Looking around, he whistled when he saw the tree. "What's this? A Christmas tree...and you already have presents?"

Cocking his head, he looked at her and slowly grinned, walking toward it. She jumped in front of him to block his way, glaring up at him as he stood inches above her. He wasn't nearly as big as Eric, but he was muscular enough, and his eyes looked different, causing an eerie fear to spread to the pit of her stomach.

They had only been together a year, long enough so she knew his moods, good and bad. He was controlling, mentally abusing more than anything, and always demanding but she had stayed with him, for whatever bizarre reason.

She was glad he was out of her life. And now she wanted him out of her house.

She narrowed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Get out, Josh, I don't want you here. The best thing you ever did for me was walk away!"

Josh stepped only inches from her and grinned wickedly. "Trisha, I never really walked away, just took a break is all. Baby, don't you know that you're the only one who really makes my dick hard? It's been torture not having you to come home to. I keep dreaming I'm fucking your little brains out. So here I am. Merry Christmas, baby."

Grabbing her, he yanked her body against his, forcing his mouth roughly over hers. She tried to scream but he pushed her up against the wall, his hand around her throat as he yanked her shirt up, exposing her bare breasts. He groaned, "Oh man, how I missed these big titties." Looking up, he pushed his lips against hers. "Tell me you missed the taste of my dick in your mouth." Shoving up against her, he moaned, "And my lips on your sweet hot little pussy."

She fought him as panic began to fill her. He had just started becoming aggressive sex-wise before they split. Looking into his crazed eyes, she knew he was dangerous. She had no doubt he would rape her, believing he had every right to do so. Twisting, she managed to put her back to him and tried to scream.

Clamping a hand over her mouth, he pulled her against him, dragging her toward the bedroom. He chuckled, then he breathed in her ear, "Bedroom's this way, right, baby?"

Suddenly, the front door burst open, causing Josh to freeze.

Eric came barreling through the door, growling like a mad man. Seeing Trisha's face filled with fear as the stranger behind her covered her mouth, Eric narrowed his eyes as fury filled him.

Josh's eyes widened in shock as he held Trisha tightly. "Who the hell are you?" he shouted as he slowly dragged her backwards.

After taking one stride, Eric slammed Josh with the hardest punch he'd ever landed on a guy. Knocking him flat on his back, Eric watched with satisfaction as blood spurt from the man's busted nose while he rolled, groaning in agony.

Trisha watched in amazement as Eric dragged a screaming Josh to the door, then threw her ex-boyfriend out.

Pointing a threatening finger at Josh, Eric warned, "If I ever see your fucking face around Trisha again, I'll kill you. And if I ever see you around town, I'll beat the shit out of you just for fun."

Josh scrambled to his feet, holding a severely broken nose, looking angrily from Eric to Trisha before he ran.

Eric shut the door, turning to Trisha. Trembling, she ran into his arms. As he held her, he kissed the top of her head. "I'm assuming that was Josh. Did he hurt you?"

Shaking her head, her voice quivering, she answered, "No. He didn't get the chance. Just scared me. I'm so glad you came home early." He held her until her body stopped trembling.

Finally stepping back, she gave him a small smile. "Why *did* you come early?"

Chuckling, he walked her over to the couch and sat her down. "First, are you sure you're okay? Do you want me to call the police?"

Trisha shook her head. "No. He won't be back. He knows when he's been beaten." Looking into his eyes, she smiled, her

body tingling as she felt a warmth spread through her. For the first time in her life, she felt safe. Then tilting her head, she grinned at him. "I've got a sneaking suspicion you're up to something, Mr. Matthews."

Eric grinned wide. "Actually, I am." Then standing, he went to pour her a glass of wine, and handing it to her, he smiled. "Wait here, I'll be right back."

She watched him disappear down the hallway into the bedroom as she took a long sip. Closing her eyes, she felt the warm wine begin to relax her.

Hearing a slight cough, she opened her eyes wide with shock. Slowly, a smile spread across her face.

Standing before her dressed in all his Santa glory, from his red and white fur cap to his snow-white beard and furry red suit over a big jolly belly and down to his long black boots was Eric. He smiled at her and then dropped to one knee.

Suddenly, Trisha's own knees went weak and her heart pounded in her chest. She looked deeply into his dark eyes. He held out a black box. Her heart skipped, as she felt the sting of tears threaten the back of her eyes.

His voice quivered just a bit as his eyes filled with emotion. "Trisha, I'd like you to believe in Santa, if only for one night. But mostly, I want you to believe in me, for the rest of our lives. I want you to be my wife. Will you marry me?"

She thought her heart was going to explode with joy and she started to cry. Her body trembled uncontrollably. "I can't believe it."

Tears spilling down her face, she looked into his eyes adoringly. "Yes. Yes. I love you. And I do believe in us." Then with a wry grin, she narrowed her eyes. "But Santa's gonna have to work on me a little more."

Eric gave her a huge smile. "I was hoping you'd say that. And I think Ole Santa's got a few more tricks up his sleeve you're going

to like.” Taking the ring from its box, she gasped when he slipped it onto her finger. It was a huge, princess cut diamond with a channel of baguettes flowing around the band.

“It’s breathtaking,” she whispered.

He leaned over, his thumb caressing her cheek. “Not as breathtaking as you.”

She grabbed him as tears of joy spilled down her face. “This is the happiest day of my life, Eric. I love you so much.” Then, taking his face into her hands, she kissed him deeply.

* * * *

Later that evening, she lay in bed admiring her ring, waiting for her lover to follow. She yelled teasingly, “Eric! Where are you?”

He stood up in the living room, where he had just placed the last package under the tree. Then picking up a white envelope, he slipped it into the tree’s branches and grinned. She was going to faint when she opened that. It was the deed to her house, and having fallen in love with the little home himself, he couldn’t resist the urge to buy it for her.

He smiled. *Yeah, she’s going to love this one.*

Rising, he headed down the hallway. “Ho ho ho, Santa’s coming!”

TAKING A CHANCE

by

Michelle Hasker

Where is Santa? Ryna frowned as she looked around the crowded ballroom for Jolly Old St. Nick.

When she'd been given the task of raising more money than her mother, Ryna had opted to try a new route, rather than the traditional. This year, instead of a Christmas Ball, *Montgomery's* was hosting a blind date ball. So far, it was a success. If Santa would just show up to hand out some gifts, she could relax and let the staff handle the rest of the details. He was late, and she was becoming nervous.

Ryna needed everything to go perfectly tonight if she wanted to prove to her mother that she was more than capable of handling any task set before her.

"Would you like to dance?" A deep, husky voice interrupted her thoughts.

Ryna turned around and glanced into the palest blue eyes she had ever seen. The rest of his face was hidden behind a black satin mask. Automatically, she looked lower to check out his body, when her gaze locked on his gaudy tie. The words *Merry Christmas* were printed all over it. Forwards, backwards, even upside down. She couldn't tear her gaze away from the horrible scrap of fabric.

"Would you like to dance?" he repeated.

Debating the answer, Ryna looked back up into his eyes. What kind of man would wear a tie like that? One her mother wouldn't approve of. Any man who wore a tie like that couldn't follow the rules all the time. Ryna grinned, and nodded.

The stranger extended his hand and waited for her to place hers in it. She shivered at the hungry look in his eyes. He devoured her with his gaze as if she were a five-course meal and he, the sole survivor of a shipwreck. *Oh, baby.* When he grinned, she wondered if he could read her thoughts.

After leading her out onto the dance floor, he turned quickly, and pulled her up against his chest before she could protest. Shivers raced up her spine at his touch. She tried to ignore the contrast of the silk shirt against his hard chest when she braced a hand there to steady herself. *His tie. Think about that tie.* Ryna tried to focus on it instead of the sensations coursing through her body.

Ryna inhaled deeply and almost drowned in his delicious scent. A pleasant mix of something woody, combined with his own unique scent, enticed her in a way that nothing else ever had. She'd never felt this strong of an attraction before and the mask only enhanced her desire because she didn't know this man. *What will happen if I give into that desire?*

If he knew it was his tie that made her decide to dance with him, he'd think she was crazy. Then again, he must have a good sense of humor she decided, going cross-eyed from staring at the hideous fabric. Ryna tried not to laugh.

"What's so funny?" His low deep voice startled her and she let out a giggle before she could stop herself.

Realizing he still waited for a reply, she blurted out, "Your tie."

"My tie?" He looked down right into the abundant cleavage her top revealed. His erection pressed against her belly. "What's wrong with my tie?"

His reaction to her outfit sent her heart racing. When he spoke, he sounded breathless and distracted. That amazing little piece she had picked up at the lingerie boutique certainly did enhance her size satisfactorily. She debated whether or not to tell him

about her underwear until he looked up. All her thoughts fled from the fire in his gaze.

“I like this tie. What’s wrong with it?”

What? He was looking at her as if he wanted to throw her down on the dance floor and ravish her, but he wanted to talk about his tie? If that turned him on...

“My mother would hate it.” Ryna gazed at him through her eyelashes.

“Well, then, let me remove the offending garment.” He reached up and yanked off the tie.

“A clip on?” Ryna failed to stifle a groan, but didn’t care. “That’s even worse.”

“Is it?” He waggled his eyebrows up and down. “What else would bother your mother?”

Oh, but he’s fun. She knew her attraction to bad boys was why she got burned so often, but maybe this one would be worth the risk.

Eager to make him look perfectly disreputable, Ryna reached up and ran her fingers through his mane of thick, black hair. After ruffling his hair until it stood up and looked as if he had spent a few pleasant hours in bed, Ryna wondered if one night with him would be enough.

“Am I unacceptable enough now?” His voice was huskier than before and she knew hers would be too.

“Almost.” Ryna licked her lips as she lowered her hands from his hair and settled them on his chest. She unbuttoned the top two buttons exposing his smooth, tanned skin. Biting her lower lip to keep from whimpering at the sight of his gorgeous flesh, she lifted her face to meet his gaze.

“How am I now?”

“Perfect,” she croaked and cleared her throat in embarrassment. “Perfectly unacceptable.”

“Good.”

He lowered his face and captured her lips with his. His mouth moved slowly, his lips brushing against hers, causing a delicious tingling to spread all over her. Her palm rested on his now exposed chest and she could feel his heart pounding under her touch. He was as affected as she was. Someone moaned, she didn't know or care who it was.

In the background, she realized people were clapping. As the room erupted in cheers, her sexy stranger wrapped his arms around her and kissed her until her legs and mind went numb.

"Come with me." He rubbed his thumb over her lip while he waited for her response.

"Yes." Ryna practically melted into a puddle at his feet.

She could hear her mother's voice in her head. *Behave yourself. Don't do this.*

Shut up. Tomorrow I can be the good girl. Tonight I just want to be me. I want this.

Tall, dark and sexy led her through the crowd. Santa had arrived. She should have guessed it from the cheering and applauding, but the sexy stranger had her so tied up in knots, she didn't care about anything other than how long it would take to get his clothes off.

Since Santa was here, her responsibilities were done for the night. She was free to enjoy herself. She planned on making the most of this night with her sexy stranger.

Holding her hand, he led her through the crowd. He stopped at a table to pick up a jacket and followed her to pick up her black shawl. He moved behind her, draped the shawl over her shoulders, and led her out of the ballroom.

Willingly, she followed him down the hall to the elevator. For tonight, she could be someone else. Anyone she wanted. Even someone desirable and glamorous, or wild and reckless.

Mercifully, the elevator ride was quick. He led her down the hallway before either one of them could change their minds. She chuckled. *As if.*

* * * *

He closed the door and pressed her up against it. Ryna's arms flew around his neck when he lifted her up so her face was level with his. She melted mindlessly against him, as he planted hot, wet kisses on her neck and shoulders.

"What name?" She panted breathlessly and tilted her head, giving him easier access to her neck. He brushed her blonde hair out of the way and nibbled on her ear.

He scooped her up and swiftly carried her over to the bed. He placed her on it, and knelt over her before pressing every hard inch of his body against her. His erection moved against her belly. Ryna reached down and cupped him through the fabric, enjoying his soft moan as he pressed his lower body against her.

As they kissed and caressed, they rolled around wordlessly, each trying to dominate the other. Finally managing to pin him beneath her thighs, Ryna pushed him down when he tried to pull her close, and sat on him, straddling him. She pressed kisses on his bare skin as she unbuttoned the rest of his shirt, inch by glorious inch, until all of his smooth flesh was exposed.

A low groan reached her ears before he rolled her over and pinned her while growling softly. He kissed her, his lips lingering against hers, as she pushed his shirt off his shoulders.

"Sweetheart." He said the endearment breathlessly as he stood up and pulled her to a sitting position.

He tried tugging ineffectively at her dress. Ryna stopped him and quickly undressed. They embraced again and fell together on the bed. His hands and mouth roamed all over kissing her, tasting her.

"Mmm," she moaned, as millions of tiny darts of pleasure shot through her body.

Pressure built and expanded until she didn't think she could stand it anymore. He cupped a breast in one hand, kneading it and tugging on the nipple, while gently biting the other. The throbbing ache between her thighs grew. Ryna wiggled, trying to get him to move his attention lower.

"Patience, my sweet. I'll give you the release you crave, but not until I've tasted my fill of you."

Ryna groaned and fisted her hands in the bedspread hoping he'd be mercifully quick. Instead, he slid his tongue and lips across her stomach, slowly. She arched her back, and wriggled against him as he licked and nibbled his way lower.

"My God." She gasped and twisted her body underneath him. His mouth was like magic; every spot he touched ignited, fueling the desire that now threatened to consume her if he didn't give her the pleasure he'd promised.

"You're acting like a woman who's been starved," he mumbled against her belly button.

"It's been a while," she admitted, when he paused and looked up at her.

"Have you ever been pleased by a man?" There was an odd glint in his eye, but Ryna didn't know him well enough to know what it meant.

"I'm not a virgin, if that's what you mean."

"No." He laughed. "I want to know if you've felt ultimate pleasure with a man. Have you ever come on a man's face as he feasted on you?"

"No." Ryna felt her face heat at his words. It should have sounded crude and turned her off, but no, she wanted to come all over him and watch him lap it up.

"My poor, deprived darling."

He sat up, pulling away from her.

“No!” Ryna gasped, and sat up, reaching for him. He couldn’t leave her. Not now. Not unsatisfied. He was hard and thick, so she knew he still wanted her.

“Shhh.” He lifted his finger to his full lips. “Lay back down and let me pleasure you until you tremble, until you come all over me while I taste you. Then I want to plunge into you, over and over, and take you higher and higher with each thrust until you explode again and again and again.”

Breathlessly, Ryna stared up at him. He smiled when she silently lay back and spread her legs.

“You will never forget this night, not even if you live to be a hundred,” he promised as he ran his hands up her calves, over her knees, and past her thighs.

Gently, he prodded her to spread her legs open even further, opening herself completely to him. With a light touch, he moved his fingers over her swollen folds, teasing her flesh with the gentle caress.

He leaned forward and spread her slick lips open. One finger dipped between them. Ryna tried to close her legs and arch off the bed when her inner muscles clamped around his digit, drawing it in deeper.

“Patience, sweetheart.” He pressed her back down and removed his finger, before coating her clit with her juices. “I bet you taste divine.”

He lowered his mouth, and sucked on her clit. Ryna cried out and bucked against him. He bit gently on the hard nub. She screamed and shattered into a million pieces of stardust, as delicious tremors shuddered through her body.

Trembling, her body still shaking from his skillful mouth and hands, she watched as he grinned up at her. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, inhaling her essence. Ryna wondered why she didn’t feel embarrassed by his actions. Instead, they excited her.

More liquid pooled between her legs when he stroked her sensitive clit with his finger. He pressed it with his thumb, and dipped one finger in between her folds. Ryna moaned and lifted her hips, moving against him. He withdrew his finger, and added another before he slid them inside her. She moaned, then whimpered when he pulled them out and added another. He pushed them in while continuing to torment her clit with his thumb. Helplessly, she met each thrust of his hand as her nerves endings began to tingle.

He lowered his mouth, and lapped at her, feasting on her as if she were a delicacy. He glanced up at her, smiling, his lips shining from her essence, which coated his mouth and chin. She'd never seen a more erotic sight. Ryna moaned and clenched her fingers even tighter in the comforter.

She stared, mesmerized, meeting his gaze as he continued to slide his fingers out, then ram them back in. Then all rational thought fled as he simultaneously crooked his fingers inside her and sucked hard on her clit.

Ryna screamed, her body spasming, as more of her essence covered his face. Slowly, he withdrew his fingers.

"No more," Ryna pleaded hoarsely. "I can't take anymore. I need to feel you inside me." She didn't care if she was begging. Her trembling legs and quivering thighs had about all they could handle. She hadn't been made love to this thoroughly, ever. Hell, she'd never experienced such a skillful lover before.

He chuckled, and sat up for a minute. He leaned over the side of the bed and scooped his wallet out of his pants. His fingers fumbled with the little foil packet before he turned back to her. He slid the condom on, then looked at her with his hungry eyes.

"Yes," Ryna whispered and reached out her arms.

His mouth met hers and she kissed him greedily. She could taste herself on his lips. His hands cradled her cheeks as he deep-

ened the kiss, plunging his tongue between her lips, imitating the way his fingers had slid in and out of her a few minutes before.

"You are so lovely," he said, ending the kiss.

Ryna smiled at him, speechless. This stranger was more in tune with her needs and desires than anyone else. He seemed to know what she needed even before she realized it herself.

"Please."

He nodded and slid his hands down to her hips. His grip tightened as he entered her slowly. Once he slid in all the way, he pulled out almost completely, then rammed in his full length.

Ryna cried out and lifted her hips. He withdrew and slammed into her, again and again. The sound of wet flesh striking wet flesh filled her ears until all she could hear was that and the sound of their frantic breathing. Listening to his harsh breaths, and the sound of their bodies slapping together had her tensing up as she felt another orgasm building.

"Please, oh please," she begged breathlessly. She rocked against him as her hands closed on his shoulders.

With a groan, he drove into her harder and faster until the room began to spin. Ryna closed her eyes and held on, praying the night would never end. But then he grunted as he reached his peak, and she fell over the edge with him into another spiraling release.

* * * *

Stretching, Ryna froze when her body pressed against something hard and warm.

"Mmm." A firm, tanned arm reached over her and pulled her up against a rock-hard body.

"Umm." Her stranger from last night. She'd fallen asleep at the hotel and now was faced with a morning after. Just her luck.

How am I going to get out of this mess? This was such a mistake. Well, not completely. If only she could keep him. Her mother would flip, which might actually make it worthwhile to pursue a

temporary relationship. *No! Not now. Not when she was so close to proving herself.*

“Good morning.”

Ryna shuddered when he whispered in her ear. She turned toward him, slowly. His mask had come off during the night. She reached up and realized hers had also fallen off. Two dimples appeared at the corners of his mouth.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he said, as he reached out and cupped her chin.

Before she could blink, his mouth covered hers. Ryna melted against him, like chocolate on a warm stove.

“Good morning.” Ryna debated whether they should have a quickie, or if she should leave. *What time is it anyway?* She glanced at the clock and saw that it was half past nine. “Oh, no!” She sat up abruptly, the sheet pooling around her waist.

“What’s the matter?” He sat up next to her, his gaze falling on her uncovered breasts.

Ryna blinked. “It’s almost ten o’clock.”

“So? It’s a Saturday.” Little wrinkles formed near his eyes as he scrunched up his face in confusion.

“I had an appointment at nine.” Ryna jumped out of bed. She struggled to pull her clothes back on and glanced over in time to see horror dawn on his face.

“Shit! I have one too, but mine’s at ten. I’d forgotten all about it.” Swiftly he dressed next to her. “Where do you need to go? I’ll drop you. It will be faster.”

“Thank you. I used a taxi last night.”

“No problem.” He smiled and handed her the black shawl as he scooped his keys off the nightstand.

“I wish I had time to change.” *Or shower.* Of course, she had let her body rule her and now she would pay. Her mother would know exactly what happened, and remind her about it constantly.

“About last night—” he began.

"It's okay. I understand. I know how these things work."

"These things? Do you do this often?"

It felt as if his gaze penetrated her. She swore he could see right through her.

"No, I've never slept with someone I don't know. Nor do I normally do so on the first date, either," Ryna admitted, hesitantly.

"Well then, this is different. I'd like to see you again."

"Look, it wouldn't work out between us. I'm sure you're a nice man and everything, but my mother already has my whole life plotted out. You aren't the kind of man she would pick for me."

"But I'm not dating your mother! Hell, I'm not even dating you." Frustration was evident on his face, in his posture, and his tone. "Never mind. Let's just go."

* * * *

Ryna remained silent in the car and spoke only to give him directions. When he pulled up to her mother's house, she braced herself for an onslaught of pleas asking to see her again. He didn't disappoint her.

"You have a meeting *here*?"

"Yes. Why?"

"No reason," he said, too quickly.

He got out of the car and walked around to the passenger side. He opened the door and walked her up to the front door. As she reached into her pocketbook for a key, he spoke.

"I do want to see you again. Will you go out with me tonight?"

Ryna lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm swamped at work right now and I don't really have the time for a relationship."

"Think about this." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. His mouth moved over hers and she remembered all the wonderful things she had experienced last night.

"Okay." She sighed. Their faces were so close, she could feel his breath on her lips.

"Okay?"

“Yeah, I’ll go out with you again.”

He smiled and stepped away from her as the door opened.

“Oh, I see you two have met.”

“Mother?” Ryna turned and stared at her mother in horror.

Her mother looked expectantly at the two of them. “I assume from that kiss, you two have met already.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Had her mother really seen the kiss? If so, then she was screwed.

“Hmmm, I didn’t see a taxi pull away.”

“This nice man gave me a ride home.” Ryna ground her teeth together, wondering why he didn’t just leave and save her further embarrassment.

“I had hoped from that sizzling kiss, that you two spent the night getting acquainted with each other.”

“Mother!” Ryna gasped. Her face flushed as she looked at her handsome stranger. He looked as uncomfortable as she felt.

“Rebecca, how nice to see you again. I had no idea this beautiful woman was your daughter.”

“You know my mother?”

He cleared his throat. “By some strange coincidence, she happens to be my ten o’clock meeting.”

“What?” She contemplated different methods of murder she might be able to get away with.

“Ryna, meet your new partner, Tyler Chance.”

“Excuse me?” Ryna blinked. *Am I still asleep?* “What do you mean *partner?*”

“Tyler bought out your uncle last night.”

“*What? When did they discuss bringing in someone new?*”

“Yes. I told Tyler about the charity event and sent him over to tell you the good news.”

“You knew who I was the whole time?” She turned toward him, anger blazing in her eyes.

“No, I didn’t.” He lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender.

“How could you do this to me?” She turned back to her mother. “I was supposed to take over control. I’ve devoted years to this. I’ve given up all my free time over the past year to prove to you both that I could handle it. How could you two go behind my back and sell Uncle Bill’s shares? No shares have *ever* been sold or given to *anyone* outside the family.”

Rebecca gave Ryna the stern look she’d perfected while Ryna was a teenager. It worked as well now, as it had then. Ryna bit her lip, praying this was a misunderstanding.

“Why don’t we take this inside?” Rebecca suggested. “Tyler, please join us.”

“I’m not sure that would be a good idea.” He sighed and took a step back. “Perhaps I should come in Monday after Ryna’s had a chance to get used to things.”

Rebecca grinned. “Splendid idea. I knew Bill would pick the best candidate.”

Ryna ignored Tyler and tried to squeeze past her mother and into the house. Tyler snagged her arm. When she tried to tug free, he tightened his grip.

“Please give us a moment, Rebecca.”

“Of course, but it’s a shame you can’t join us this morning.” Rebecca gave Ryna a warning look before she stepped inside and closed the door.

“Ryna,” he whispered.

Ryna swallowed past the lump in her throat. She’d been planning on taking over for years. She’d been prepared to give up her lifestyle and find a nice boring man to settle down with. She’d been ready to give up everything to make this work, and her mother and Bill had sold half the business out from under her.

It was only when Tyler brushed a tear from her cheek with his thumb that she realized she was crying.

“I had no idea who you were when I invited you up to my room.” He turned her face toward his.

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you.” She inserted as much sarcasm into her voice as she could.

“Oh, Ryna.” He sighed and brushed his mouth against her ear. “Feel that?”

She shivered as he sucked her earlobe into his mouth. Hell yeah she could feel it. But she wanted to ignore it.

Tyler dropped his hands to her hips, and tugged her lower body against his. “Feel my desire? You do this to me. Even knowing you think I’m a liar and that I tricked you into making love to me last night can’t calm my body. I won’t give you up, Ryna. We might be business partners now, but I want more. You told me one-night stands weren’t your thing.”

She opened her mouth to deny it, but he kissed her. Tyler nibbled on her lower lip, before sucking it between his. He moved his body against hers, leaving no doubt in her mind what he’d like to be doing right now.

Ryna shivered and lifted her hands. She buried them in his hair, and gave herself over to the kiss, reveling in the feel of his thumbs as they caressed small circles on her stomach. With a moan, Ryna arched her back and opened eyes she didn’t remember closing. She met his heavy-lidded gaze and knew if they were inside, nothing would have prevented him from making love to her again. God help her, she wanted him to. Ryna groaned and pulled away from him.

“Ryna, my sweet. We are far from finished. I did not set out to seduce you. I didn’t even know who you really were. If you think you can get rid of me so easily, you’d better think again. I’m here to stay. You belong in my arms, and I’m not letting you go.”

“I can’t do this.”

“You have until Monday, then I’ll begin my pursuit of you.”

She stared at him with her mouth open as he pulled away, and walked back to his car. He winked at her before he climbed inside

and drove off. With weak legs, she opened the door and stumbled her way to the dining room.

"I'm so glad the two of you hit it off." Rebecca smiled and handed Ryna a cup of coffee.

"We did not hit it off. He offered me a ride here this morning. Neither one of us knew who the other was."

"The whisker burns on your chin and cheeks say otherwise."

"Mother!" Ryna wanted to sink onto the floor and hide under her chair. It'd been so long, she'd forgotten about that.

"What's the matter, honey? Afraid of the bad publicity of a stranger gaining entrance to your supposedly Invitation Only event?"

"The *party* was a huge success, and you know it. I can't help it that you sent him there like that. The guards shouldn't have let him in without an invitation."

"I gave him mine."

Ryna growled and decided to tackle the question really bothering her. "Why did you let Uncle Bill sell to someone else? You knew I'd been planning on taking over. I was willing to give up everything to do so."

"That's why." Rebecca sighed. "Honey, running the business is time consuming enough for two people, let alone one."

"But you did it."

"That was several expansions ago, when we were still small and unrecognized. I didn't want you to lose yourself in the business. I want grandchildren, and you aren't getting any younger, you know."

Ryna stared at her mother. "You mean you and Uncle Bill decided I need to get married and have children? So you picked someone to buy the other half of the business and woo me?"

"Heavens no! Bill and I never suspected you would be even remotely attracted to Tyler. We hoped he'd take over enough responsibility so you would have the time to find someone you could

love. I knew you thought you had to be superwoman. I watched as you cut back on all your activities, and started spending more and more time at work. Bill and I knew we had to do something before you gave your life over to work completely. I know you aren't happy with me right now, but you'll get over it. You'll see that I'm right. One day, you'll thank me for this."

Thank her? Ryna doubted that would ever happen. Meanwhile, she had to deal with Tyler and his position in the company. It was her family business, and she was going to make sure he knew it.

* * * *

The workweek passed quickly, and before Ryna realized it, Friday was almost over. Tyler had asked her out a few times, but she stood her ground firmly. As soon as he realized business and pleasure couldn't be mixed, the faster she'd get the upper hand, and take control.

"Ryna!" Rebecca called from the boardroom. "Can you come here?"

Ryna sighed. The office was closed, business was done for the week, so what did her mother want now? She walked into the large room to find Tyler sitting in one of the chairs with a notebook and a pen in front of him. Rebecca and Bill stood near the doors. Bill handed her a matching notebook and pen, and pushed her toward the large oak table.

"Sorry to do this to you two, but if we want to keep this business running successfully, you'll both need to start getting along." Rebecca and Bill turned and walked out the door. "I'm going to lock this door now. We won't be back to let you out until morning. If you two haven't reached an agreement by then, you'll spend every day and night in here until you do."

"You've got to be kidding!" Ryna gasped as they closed the door. The sound of the lock clicking into place was like a death knell to her. She ran over to the door and shook it. "I can't believe they locked us in here! Are they crazy?"

"No." Tyler looked up from the table as she spun around. "You're the one acting crazy. For the past week, you've been rude to me in front of clients, showing me nothing but disrespect. How many clients do you think we'll keep if you can't hide your obvious distaste of your own partner?"

"This is all your fault!" she snapped.

But it wasn't. He hadn't really known her identity last weekend. All week long, he'd treated her like a partner, and not in the business sense. It had been hell trying to concentrate on her clients with him around. He found a million excuses to touch her, brush against her, and lean close to whisper in her ear. Ryna knew she couldn't take much more before the desire in her won out over her self-control.

"Ryna, have a seat. Take some deep breaths and relax." Tyler tapped his pen on the tabletop.

The sound grated on her already strained to the breaking point nerves, and she reached over, grabbed his pen, and tossed it across the room. A fire lit in Tyler's eyes as he grabbed her wrist and prevented her from pulling away.

"What did you do that for?"

"It was driving me crazy."

"Well your pacing was driving me crazy, but I didn't throw you across the room."

Ryna tried to ignore the vision that flashed in her mind of Tyler throwing her down on the table and ravishing her. She tugged on her arm, but he didn't let go.

"Ryna. You know you are upset about them locking us in." He pulled her down close to him and whispered in her ear. "Let me help you get rid of your excess energy."

She frowned and tugged harder. *He wouldn't, would he?*

"Why do you fight me so? Why do you hold onto your anger? What are you afraid of?"

"Afraid of?" Her voice cracked as she repeated his question.

“Yes.”

In one swift move, Tyler stood up and pinned her between himself and the table. He leaned down and captured her mouth with his.

“Mmm, you taste like a peppermint candy cane.”

“I was sucking on one earlier,” Ryna said.

Tyler groaned. “What an image that gives me.”

“The image of me sucking on sweet, sticky candy?” Ryna reached for a candy cane on the table. She unwrapped it, and brought it to her mouth. She moaned, and slid the tip into her mouth.

Tyler’s gaze locked on her mouth as she swirled her tongue around the stick, then drew it deeper between her lips. He moaned this time, and adjusted his pants.

“Or did you mean the image of me sucking on something else?” she asked, batting her eyelashes.

Tyler grabbed her waist, and he lifted her onto the conference table. “I’ll give you something to suck on.”

He’d mumbled the words, and Ryna wasn’t sure she’d heard him clearly. “What?”

“Never mind.”

Before she could even think to protest, he lifted her skirt, and slid his hands up her thighs.

“I love that you don’t wear pantyhose. These give me much easier access to you.”

“Tyler, we can’t do this. Not here, not on my mother’s conference table!” The last word came out as a shriek when Tyler bent down and licked her exposed skin.

“Mmm.” He purred against her as he kissed and nibbled his way to her lacy underwear.

It was a good thing she’d gone for the black lace thong. He must have agreed because he ran his hand over it before slipping underneath it.

“You are so wet, Ryna. I can’t wait to drive my cock into you over and over again, harder and harder while you scream out my name as you come all over me.”

Ryna blushed, but couldn’t deny that his words increased her arousal. She might have denied him, fought the desire, but that would end now. *Why fight this?*

His tongue slid along her swollen folds, and she arched her back, moaning.

“You taste so good.”

He reached up and took the candy cane out of her hand. Before she could ask what he was doing, Tyler rubbed the end of the stick on the same path his tongue had taken. She gasped as the tip of the candy cane slid into her welcoming dampness.

“So delicious,” he whispered.

Tyler nibbled on her clit, tormenting the hard nub until she gasped for air and begged him for more. Then he withdrew the candy, lifted his head and glanced up at her. Slowly, he brought the peppermint, coated with her juices, to his lips, and sucked it into his mouth. When he closed his eyes and moaned, Ryna knew she’d never seen anything more erotic.

When he offered the candy to her, Ryna drew it between her lips.

“Forget the candy,” Tyler growled, and tossed the candy cane on the floor. He grabbed her underwear and ripped it off in one swift move.

Stunned, Ryna stared at his eyes, watching the way he licked his lips as he looked at her.

“Please,” she begged, lifting her hips. “Make love to me now.”

He grinned, and released his hold on her to undo his pants. When he stood there, with his pants around his ankles and his cock at attention, Ryna reached for him. Tyler shook his head and pushed her down onto the table. He guided the tip of his erection

to her moist entrance, rubbed it against her juices, then plunged into her.

Ryna screamed, and grabbed onto him. He pulled out, then rammed his hard shaft back in. Over and over again, he repeated the movements. Ryna rocked her head back and forth, glorying in the sensations Tyler aroused in her. Her muscles tightened around him, pulling a moan out of him. He drove in and out of her faster and harder.

Tingling started in her stomach and spread to her thighs before it reached out, encompassing her entire body. Shaking with need and desire, Ryna dug her nails into him and held on as he pounded even deeper inside her.

Tension spiraled and wound 'round her. Ryna wrapped her legs around Tyler and locked her ankles as she rose to meet his thrusts.

Tyler shouted her name and drove in deeper than she ever felt before. Ryna screamed and exploded, stars filling her vision as her orgasm swept over her.

"Ryna," Tyler gasped, and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. "That was incredible."

Her breath caught in her throat when she looked into his eyes. Not wanting him to see her love, she quickly looked away, but not quick enough. He made a tsk sound and cupped her chin, forcing her to look at him.

"Tyler," she whispered. "Don't."

"Don't what?" he whispered back at her. "What are you so afraid of? Talk to me, Ryna."

She sighed and closed her eyes. Ryna drew in a deep breath and released it before opening her eyes and meeting his gaze once more.

"Come on, honey. Take a chance on me. The worst that can happen is we find out we're incompatible. After being around you the way you've been all week, I doubt it could get much worse."

Ryna laughed.

“I want you, Ryna. You’ve already got my heart.”

She gasped and pulled back. “It’s too soon. How can you say that? We’ve only just met.”

“I don’t know how or why, but you are the only one for me. I’m prepared to wait as long as it takes for you to realize it, too.”

“You are?”

“I am. Take a chance.” He captured her lips with his. Ryna sighed. This was what she wanted, wasn’t it? She’d been willing to see him again before she knew he was her partner. *What difference does his job make? All the cards are on the table, there are no surprises left. Is the potential gain worth the risk?*

“Okay. I’ll take a chance on you.”

SWEET TREATS

by

Sherrill Quinn

“All I want for Christmas is a big, sexy man. A big, sexy man. Oh, a big, sexy man.”

“Would. You. Shut. Up.” Even though she secretly wished the same thing, Jenna Sweet glared at her friend and business partner, Taylor Evans, while the other woman sang the distorted Christmas tune off-key. Taylor was beautiful with a lush, gorgeous body, but she couldn’t sing worth spit.

And the way Taylor constantly teased her about Gabriel Horne...well, she was an off-key pain in the ass.

“All I want for Christmas is a big, sexy maaaaaaan...” Taylor grinned and winked as the door to the coffee shop opened and the big, sexy man in question walked in. Just as he reached the counter, she finished in a sultry tone, “So I can have a *very* merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too, Taylor.” Gabriel Horne rested one fist on the glass-topped counter. Jenna stared at that hand for a couple of seconds, heart thudding against her ribs like a mariachi band gone wild. Long, square-tipped fingers led to a broad hand with a smattering of dark hair over the back.

Her gaze traveled up his jacketed arm, over his wide shoulder and turtleneck-covered throat, up to lapis lazuli eyes made darker by the rich royal blue of his shirt. He ducked his head just a bit to put their faces more on eye level. “Merry Christmas, Jennasweet,” he murmured, running her name together as he usually did. “You look...edible this morning.”

His deep voice was rough with the lingering effects of the cold she knew he was trying to get over. Black hair fell over his brow and he impatiently brushed it away from his eyes. The thin scar on his left cheek and the day-old beard darkening his jaw gave him a dangerous, bad-boy look impossible to ignore, and it was getting harder and harder to resist him.

Even though she wore a thin long-sleeved blouse, Jenna felt overheated, like she had too many clothes on. She tried to ignore the hot lust turning her core liquid. *Just pour the man's coffee, Jenna, and he'll go away. You can get back to your staid, boring, safe life.*

"Merry Christmas, Gabe." Ignoring his comment about her edibility, she poured a cup of hot espresso, then added cocoa, milk, a dash of vanilla extract and a pinch of cinnamon. She topped it off with whipped cream and handed it to him. Glancing out the window, she saw two extended cab pickup trucks parked in front of his trail outfitter store across the street. With Gabe wearing his heavy sheepskin coat, she figured he was readying to go out again. "You're going out with a group?"

His fingers deliberately brushed hers as he took the cup. Her breath hitched. When he handed her a ten dollar bill, she snatched it from his hand, her fingers trembling. God, what was wrong with her? He came into *Sweet Treats* every morning for his mocha latte and a banana-nut muffin. She should be used to his flirting by now.

But every morning, she worked herself up into a tizzy until he came, acted like a blushing schoolgirl while he was here, then kicked herself seven ways 'til Sunday once he'd gone. Even when she'd finally agreed to go to dinner with him—exactly twice—she'd been nervous and quiet.

She just never really thought a man like him, former Special Ops macho Marine and all that went with it—tall, gorgeous and worldly—would be serious about a shy little bookworm like her. She didn't understand what kept him coming back for more of...nothing. Trying to concentrate on getting his change, she fi-

nally slapped the bills and coins down a little too hard on the counter. There was no way she was going to touch his warm skin again.

“Got a group of businessmen down from Denver,” he said, his drawl sending shivers through her as it always did. “They want to go up on the mountain and spend a weekend at the cabin without their wives before, as they put it, the craziness of Christmas begins.”

Unlike Jenna, who’d been born in the North and had transplanted herself in Colorado to run the coffee shop after her grandfather passed away, Gabe was born and raised in Langton, with the Rocky Mountains as his playground. “I could use some company,” he went on. “I don’t want to sit around and watch a bunch of yahoos play poker. Why don’t you come along?”

He asked her that all the time, in the same dark tones with the same hot, intense look in his eyes. As if he really meant he wanted to spend time with her, when she knew he was only flirting. Period. He couldn’t be serious.

Could he?

She shook her head. “Thanks, but—”

“I have to work,” he finished the excuse she gave each time she refused his offer. Leaning over the counter, he slid one hand behind her head, pulling her forward until their faces were only inches apart. “One day, Jennasweet, I’m gonna change your mind.” His mouth came down gently on hers, coaxing it open. His tongue slipped between her lips to slide along hers, stealing her breath.

When he drew away, he lingered for a few moments, staring into her eyes. Then his tongue swept slowly over his lips. “Mmm. You taste like cinnamon.”

“It-it’s my lip gloss.”

“I love cinnamon,” he whispered, and one long-lashed lid came down in a slow, wicked wink. Scooping up his change, he turned and walked away.

Men shouldn't have lashes that long. It was an inane thought, but she was unsettled by the kiss. She was vaguely aware that Taylor now stood at her side, watching, as Jenna did, as his oh-so-fine ass left the shop. He sauntered across the street, spoke to the men standing by the trucks, then unlocked and opened the door to *Colorado Trails*, his outfitter's store.

"Girl, what is your problem?" Taylor leaned one elbow on the counter and looked at Jenna with her eyebrows raised. "That man has a serious case of the hots for you, and you keep shooting him down. It ain't natural."

"He's just flirting." Jenna turned to face Taylor. "He doesn't mean anything by it."

"So what?" With a frown, Taylor straightened and crossed her arms over her chest. "Darlin', he's wined and dined you at some very nice restaurants. When a man as good-looking as that one keeps asking you to go away with him, you say *yes*. End of conversation. Besides, he forgot his muffin."

Jenna chewed on her lower lip for a couple of seconds, then asked, "But what if it doesn't go anywhere?"

"Then it doesn't go anywhere. But what if it *does*?" Taylor put one hand on Jenna's shoulder. "Go have some fun for once, honey. I'll get my mom to come in and help with the shop."

Jenna looked out the window to the store across the street. "I don't know..."

"I do. Listen, look at it as an early New Year's resolution: have sex with Gabe." Taylor moved behind her and untied her apron. "Ms. Sweet, you are now officially on vacation. Go."

Can I do it? Jenna let her friend slide the apron over her head. "But I don't really like camping."

"It's a modern log cabin with floor to ceiling windows and all the amenities. I think you can stand it for two days. Go."

"But there are so many men..."

Taylor raised one eyebrow and put her hands on her hips. With an exaggerated glance out the window, she raised one hand with three fingers in the air. "There are exactly three men. Gabe and Clay make five. They'll keep you safe from any two *or* four-footed critters." She winked. "Maybe if you get lucky with Gabe, I'll get lucky with Clay. Go."

"But—"

"Go, or I will kick. Your. Ass." Taylor slipped a banana-nut muffin into a paper bag and handed it to her.

With a sigh, Jenna gave up. She wanted Gabe. That wasn't the issue. She just didn't want to get hurt.

But how would she know if she didn't go for it?

* * * *

Gabe loaded the last of the supplies in the first pickup and tried not to think about the sassy vixen in the coffee shop across the street, even though his gaze kept straying that way, hoping she'd come out and tell him she'd changed her mind.

She was such a slippery little thing. He hadn't wanted to scare her off, so he'd kept things light, flirtatious. A couple of dates where they'd had dinner and gone to a movie had greased the wheel, and he'd hoped their relationship would naturally progress. But for some reason, she kept a distance between them that, at first, had puzzled him. Eventually he'd figured out she was scared of him.

Oh, not of him physically hurting her, but emotionally. She was afraid to trust him, or herself. And so he'd decided to be patient, bide his time. But this morning, when she got that look of polite wariness in her hazel eyes, some kind of impish devil inside made him want to replace it with something else. Something hotter. So he'd kissed her.

And damned if he hadn't scared her off.

He'd wanted her to come with him this weekend. The cabin had plenty of space. His guests would be busy sitting around play-

ing poker and smoking cigars, which left him free and clear to spend time with Jenna. But now...

He'd be lucky if he wasn't tossed back to home plate to start the game all over again. It might just be worth it, if he got a chance to sample her mouth again. She tasted bittersweet, like cinnamon with a hint of coffee, and he wanted to dive into her mouth again and again.

But she didn't appear to be interested. He should just move on, stop wasting time on a woman who didn't want him. He pushed aside the hollow feeling in his gut.

"Is that everything?" His best friend, Clay Hollingsworth, sauntered around the edge of the vehicle, a baseball cap in his hand. His breath steamed in the frigid air.

"Yep." Gabe slammed shut the tailgate. When he realized he'd shot another glance at *Sweet Treats*, his jaw tightened in irritation. *Damn, boy. You got it bad.*

Clay laughed. "Man, buddy, you got it bad. That's like the hundredth time you've looked over there." He fit the baseball cap on his head, taking care to make sure the bill was tilted just so.

"Fuck off," Gabe muttered, and jammed his own baseball cap on his head. "Let's go."

His friend looked over his shoulder. Eyebrows raised, he said, "Well, if you score, make sure you put in a good word for me with her sexy little blonde friend. And don't worry about coming up to the cabin if you get a better offer. I can handle these three yahoos." Before Gabe could ask what he meant, Clay winked and brushed by him to walk around to the driver's side of the truck.

A feminine clearing of the throat had him turning around to see Jenna standing there, holding out a paper bag, an uneasy, shy look on her beautiful face. "You forgot your muffin," she said, her voice soft.

Her tongue swept over her full lips, leaving them shiny and wet. It made him want to claim her mouth again and again until he

was sated. Barely aware of Clay starting up the pickup, unable to formulate a coherent sentence, he took the bag from her with a nod.

She stuck her hands in the pockets of her red parka. Since she wasn't turning around and heading back to her shop, he figured she had something more to say. He waited, and when she stood and stared at his chest, he prompted softly, "There something else, Jen-nasweet?"

She licked her lips again, then sucked the bottom one between her teeth. He clenched his jaw against the need that twisted his gut. When she started chewing her lip, he muttered a curse and cupped the side of her face with one hand. If anyone was going to bite that sensual lip, it would be him. His thumb rubbed against her mouth and freed her lip from the grip of her teeth. "What is it, honey?"

A quick breath puffed against his thumb. Her hazel gaze snagged his. "Is the offer still open?" she asked. One slender hand came up to grasp his wrist.

"Hell, yeah." He grinned at the crooked smile that tilted her lips. "We can swing by your place on the way up the mountain and get whatever you need."

She flicked a nervous glance toward the men getting into the truck with Clay. Her teeth came back down on her lip. With a smothered groan, Gabe pulled her into his arms, his sudden movement startling a gasp from her. Slanting his mouth over hers, he was thrilled to hear the sexy little whimper that came from her as her lips parted and softened under his hard assault. The slow slide of her hot tongue against his made his cock as stiff as a pike.

She tasted hot and sweet and spicy. When he came up for air, he leaned his forehead against hers. Their breath steamed in the cold air. She shivered against him and he hugged her close to keep her warm. *He* knew that *she* knew he wanted her, but it was a good thing they both had bulky coats on. Otherwise, he was afraid if she

got a look at—or a feel of—the size of his erection, she'd change her mind.

"See ya, Gabe," Clay called from the truck.

"Yeah," Gabe responded without turning to look at his friend. He waited until the vehicle drove off before he pulled back far enough to look at Jenna. Her cheeks were flushed, whether from desire, embarrassment or the cold, he couldn't tell. But the hot, slumberous look in her eyes was dark enough to make him want to take her upstairs to his loft and make slow, sweet love to her until he slaked his desire.

Which might be never.

Clearing his throat, he dropped his arms and moved away from her. "We'd better get a move on," he said, his voice husky, "or Clay will send out a search and rescue party."

That half-smile tilted one side of her lips and nearly made him forget his resolve to get underway. He cleared his throat again, then sighed and walked her around to the passenger side of the remaining pickup truck. Once he'd opened the door, she hopped into the vehicle with feminine grace, the shimmy of her hips making him groan in frustration.

"You all right?" she asked, looking at him. With her seated in the high-riding vehicle and him still standing, they were at eye level.

"Five by five," he muttered, and carefully closed the door. He walked around the truck and tried to rein in his raging libido. If Mister Happy didn't calm down, the drive to her place and then on up the mountain to his cabin was going to be hellacious torture.

Gabe climbed into the pickup and slammed the door shut. Glancing at her from the corner of his eye, he knew she'd be worth whatever sexual agony he might have to endure. He finally had her where he wanted her—with him—and he'd damned well better not blow it.

* * * *

Jenna invited Gabe into her home for the first time and watched with some trepidation as he looked around her condo. She glanced at the surroundings so familiar to her, wondering if he saw what she did: an open area made warm and inviting by earth-toned furniture with scattered pillows and rugs in bright jewel tones. The kitchen, with its oak cabinets and green-and-peach-tinged Corian countertops, was large and airy.

Her Christmas tree stood in a corner of the living room, colorfully decorated with blue and gold bulbs, red beaded garland and multicolored miniature lights. Several gaily wrapped packages were on the snow-white tree skirt, as well as a small wooden train she'd gotten from her uncle one year.

"This is nice," he remarked. He took off his cap and tossed it onto the purple and blue easy chair closest to the door. "Cozy. Just the one bedroom?"

She closed her eyes and tried not to hyperventilate. Was he asking to see her bedroom because he was curious, or because he wanted to follow up on that sizzling kiss?

Well, maybe she should just show him her bedroom and see where things went from there. "Yeah. It's this way."

She stopped just inside the doorway to the bedroom and flipped on the overhead light. This room was her sanctuary and was decorated with soothing mint greens, baby blues and lavender. Her favorite Christmas angel sat prominently on the top of her dresser, and glass candy canes hung along one wall as a makeshift border. Gabe walked into the room and looked at the king-size bed. Standing behind him, she couldn't see his face to know what he was thinking, so she walked forward until she stood beside him.

Tilting her head, she glanced up at him, then bit back a gasp at the heated look of lust tightening his face. He turned to look at her, his blue eyes dark and nearly searing a hole through her. A muscle twitched in his jaw. "Before I do something to scare you off, maybe you'd better put some clothes in a suitcase." He took a couple of

steps back and thumbed over his shoulder. "I'll wait for you in the living room."

Her suspicions were confirmed. Not only was he sexy, he was nice. An irresistible combination. "Wait," she said. Walking over to him, she lightly gripped the soft wool lapels of his sheepskin coat. She knew she'd been acting like a bunny on speed any time he got near her, and it was time to stop and behave like a rational, responsible, ready-for-sex woman. Searching his eyes, she saw dark lust tempered by affection. "What do you want from me?" she finally asked.

"Anything you can give me." His broad hands came up and cupped her face, his thumbs rubbing lightly over her flushed cheeks. "I want your passion, your humor, your joy, your sadness..." With his lips a kiss away, he whispered, "I want everything."

His mouth covered hers and she sighed at the gentle thrust of his tongue between her lips. When his hands shifted from her face to curve around her back and draw her closer, fitting her soft frame into the harder contours of his big body, she moaned and wrapped her arms around his waist.

One hand slid up and down her back, then around her front to rest just under the swell of her breast. The pressure of his mouth eased enough for him to nibble at her bottom lip. He gave it a small nip and laved the sting away with his tongue. "You still taste like cinnamon," he murmured, his tongue making another sweep across her lower lip.

Her head swimming with the heady taste of him, Jenna leaned into his solid body. "Lip gloss," she managed to say just before his mouth crashed into hers again.

He tasted so good. Like the latte she'd fixed for him and something so completely, uniquely his own flavor. It would be remarkably easy to become addicted to him.

She wanted him with an intensity she'd felt for no other man. Faced with her desire—and his—Jenna wasn't quite sure what had held her back so long. Suddenly impatient, she pushed at his shoulders until he backed off, a bewildered expression coming over his handsome face. With a smile, she shoved his coat off his shoulders.

It took only a second for him to understand. He grinned and toed off his boots. When his fingers went to the buckle of his belt, she placed her hands over his. "Let me," she whispered. Sliding her hands around his back, she pulled his knit turtleneck shirt from his pants, then did the same with the front. When her fingers brushed his skin, she heard him suck in a hastily drawn breath.

Gathering the hem of his shirt in her hands, Jenna drew it up and over his head, letting it drop onto the floor. Her gaze traced over him, from the bump of his Adam's apple, over strong collarbones and wide pectorals, and followed the trail of silky black hair that whorled in an inviting trail down his lean abdomen.

She unbuckled his belt, then slid the zipper of his jeans down with careful slowness. When her hands pushed the denim over his hips, he stepped out of them, kicking them to one side, leaving him clad only in a pair of black boxer briefs. She rolled one sock down to his ankle and he picked up his foot, allowing her to drag the sock off. Repeating the action with his other foot, she paused and looked him over.

Her heart pounded hard and fast against her ribs, making it difficult to breathe. Gabe was...beautiful was the only word that came to mind. She'd known he was fit; slim-fitting jeans and clinging t-shirts in the summer had revealed that long before she'd seen him without a shirt.

When she looked lower, her eyes widened at the length and breadth of his erection. He hooked his fingers in the waistband and bent, drawing the boxer briefs off. He straightened and she faltered, doubt starting to dilute her desire. Her legs felt as supportive as soft butter and her stomach knotted with nerves.

“Don’t,” he whispered, putting one lean hand under her chin. “We’ll take this slow and easy, honey. This,” he gestured to his jutting cock, “just means I want you.”

His lips grazed hers and he set his hands lightly on her shoulders. His erection brushed against her belly as he said, “Let’s get some of these clothes off you, all right?” Gabe kept his voice soft. He knew she was nervous and he didn’t want her to be. He wanted her open and natural with him, not inhibited and full of doubts.

More than anything, he wanted this to be right for Jenna. Her smile, when it came, was quick and sweet, but shy. It seemed to help that he had gotten naked first so she wasn’t the vulnerable one without clothes. He pushed the red parka off her, then settled his hands on her slender waist.

“This blouse makes your eyes look green,” he murmured. It had been one of the first things he’d noticed about her, how her eyes changed from brown to green depending on what she wore. Well, after he’d noticed her tits and ass, he’d noticed her eyes.

“Sit.” Gently pressing on her shoulders, he backed her up until she sat on the bed. Then he knelt at her feet and picked up first one slender foot and then the other, pulling off both boots and thick winter socks. When he’d finished, he parted her legs and moved between them.

Leaning in, he inhaled, pulling her scent deep into his lungs. God, she smelled so good. Like vanilla and cinnamon and tart, tangy woman. Her nipples had drawn into tight, hard points visible through her blouse and bra. Lust hit him again, hard, and he couldn’t wait another second to get his mouth on her.

He latched onto her right breast, taking long, slow pulls on her nipple through both layers of cloth. She arched into his mouth with a small cry. Switching to the other nipple, he suckled strongly.

When he pulled back, he stared for a moment at the sight of her distended nipples, pressed against the wetness of her blouse.

With fingers that shook, he took her hands in his and pressed a soft, hot kiss in each palm, then unbuttoned the cuffs of her shirt. He went to work on the buttons down the front, finally drawing the blouse off.

Her nipples were dark points against the wet cotton of her bra. He cupped her breasts, plumping them, and rubbed his thumbs over the hard tips. Breath hissing between her teeth, she moaned his name.

Reaching around her, he unclasped her bra and drew it off. A light flush tinged her cheeks and he saw the instinctive movement to cover her nudity before her fingers curled into fists and she let her hands fall back to the mattress.

“You’re beautiful, Jennasweet,” he murmured. “Strawberries and cream.” He looked up and met her gaze, the expression in the hazel depths twisting his gut. So full of desire and uncertain anticipation, it was almost enough to make him lose control. Almost.

But this moment was for her and the pleasure he could bring to her. He’d show her he was serious, even if it meant his cock got so hard it broke.

God help him, he hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Reaching out, he unsnapped her jeans, the sound loud in the stillness of the room. Then he pulled down the tab of her zipper. “Lift your hips,” he said, his voice harsh from a throat tight with need.

She complied and he drew both jeans and panties down her slender legs. Her sweet pussy beckoned him, a shelter of curly dark hair above bare, plump lips slick with her arousal. “God, you’re so pretty here. More strawberries and cream...”

With a deep groan, he draped her legs over his shoulders. He ran his fingers up the silken skin of her inner thighs, enthralled with the picture his darker hands made against her silky paleness. His hands moved up and up until he reached the apex, his thumbs meeting, sliding into her slick folds. He inhaled the rich, heady

scent of her arousal then, straining passion no longer willing to wait, he unfurled the petals of her sex and pressed his mouth against her.

At the first touch of his tongue, she trembled and cried out, her hands coming up to fist in his hair. She tasted like woman: a hint of spice, a slight tang of salt, all warmed by her body's heat.

Gabe shifted his hands, pulling her flesh further open to expose her swollen clit and the small opening beneath her inner folds. He wanted his cock there, thrusting fast and hard. Deep, so deep, he would feel her womb. His balls drew up tight, his cock surged toward his belly. Shuddering, he put his mouth back on her silken flesh and entered her with his tongue.

"Gabe!" She arched against him. Her feet moved to his shoulders for leverage and he was lost. The eagerness, the honesty of her response unraveled his restraint. He was ready to come and she had yet to touch him.

Sucking her clit into his mouth, he drew on it, his tongue pulling firmly as he pushed one finger into the moist well of her body. She let out a gasping cry, her inner muscles clamping down. Looking up at her, he saw she'd dropped her head back, the long, slender line of her throat and heaving breasts with tight, puckered nipples one of the most erotic things he'd ever seen.

He withdrew his finger, feeling the clenching of her sheath trying to keep him inside. Pulling his finger nearly all the way out, he circled her snug opening with his fingertip, then slowly pressed back in. She bucked against him, her hands tightening in his hair before she sank back onto the bed, her fists gripping the padded comforter.

"Gabe, please." Her voice was throaty, needy.

Adding another finger, he started a steady in-and-out motion in rhythm with his suckling of her clit. From under his lashes, he watched as she let go of her shyness and inhibitions and became the creature of passion he knew she was.

The hot cream of her arousal coated his fingers, spilled out into his palm. She bucked against him, her moans raw and the sweetest of music to him. Her body tightened and she wailed out her release, quaking under his mouth and hand until she gave one last shudder and collapsed against the mattress.

Brutal lust roared through Gabe, along with a desperate need to possess her in the most elemental, primal way possible. He needed Jenna so much, he shook with it. He wanted to see her cute little ass bouncing as he plowed into her from behind. He had to get inside her. Now. As hard and as deep as she'd take him.

Reaching down, he snagged his jeans and yanked out his wallet, pulled out a square packet and fisted it. Jenna struggled onto her elbows and wide hazel eyes watched him roll on the condom, then slender fingers reached out to curl around his engorged length.

When her hand slid down and her fingers brushed against his tight balls, his jaw clenched and he drew her hand away. "I can't take it, honey," he muttered. "I'm hard as a pike and you've barely touched me. When I come, it's gonna be inside your sweet pussy."

"But—"

"No." He softened the refusal with a long, slow kiss. Drawing away, he flipped her onto her stomach, keeping her hips at the edge of the bed. Pushing her legs apart, he flexed his knees and pressed his erection against her bottom.

Jenna raised her torso and braced herself with her palms against the mattress, swallowing hard as she felt the velvet tip of his cock nudge along the swollen folds of her wet cleft, thrilled to realize Gabe was going to take her in this primitive way. It was the way she wanted it, too, to be the recipient of his wild, searing passion, to feel him thrusting into her from behind. It was an empowering thing, knowing she'd driven this strong, controlled man to taking her on such a basic level.

With a small gasp, she looked over her shoulder at him, putting her trust in him—body, soul and mind—and hoping he could read it in her eyes, on her face, in her posture. She was his. In any way.

In all ways.

He gripped her hips, his fingers digging in, and she knew she'd probably have a few bruises after all was said and done. But she didn't care. She gloried in the raw passion she saw on his face. Entering her in one long, driving stroke, he filled her to the hilt, making them both moan.

She was full, his thickness stretching her sheath almost to the point of pain, quickly engulfed by fiery pleasure as he rotated his hips, driving a gasp from her.

"God, honey, you feel so damned good." Reaching around, he rolled her nipples between his fingers, the tug sparking all the way to her pussy. "I knew you'd be like this," he rasped, his voice low and tight with need. "Snug and wet and so fucking hot, I'm about to burn alive."

He slowly pulled out of her until just the head of his cock rested inside her sheath. He slammed back in, driving the breath from her. Another long, low stroke out, then the pleasure grew and grew as he pumped harder and faster.

Jenna dropped her head and thrust her hips back to try to pull him deeper inside her. Gabe leaned more fully over her, covering her from behind. One big hand braced on the mattress as he pushed her farther down. Crisp chest hair rasped pleasantly against her back. His warm breath drifted across her skin as he mouthed kisses over the top of her shoulder to the side of her neck. Biting lightly at the tendons, he laved the small hurt with his tongue while the fingers of one hand moved back and forth to each nipple, pinching and tugging.

When one hand slid down her belly and long fingers scissored around her clit, she closed her eyes and moaned, then went down

on her elbows. The action thrust her hips at a higher angle and as he drove into her, he went so incredibly deep that a loud groan was dragged from both of them.

“Harder.” Her demanding plea was throaty. His thick length was almost too much, the pleasure bordering on pain. Her body tightened, her clit swelled as her climax hovered just out of reach.

“I don’t want to hurt you, baby.”

“You won’t. Harder.”

He gave her what she wanted. Another forceful stroke, a hard circle against her clit, and she arched against him and wailed as her climax hit. She shook and her sheath convulsed and contracted around his shaft. His entire body stiffened and then shuddered as his own orgasm roared through him.

He thrust one last time, holding himself firmly against her, a shout of completion roaring in her ear. When the last shudder abated, he collapsed against her, forcing them both onto the mattress. Still lodged deep inside her, he nuzzled her nape and then placed a soft kiss against her cheek. “Are you all right?”

“Mmm.” Jenna didn’t have the energy to open her eyes, much less make any kind of intelligible response.

“I didn’t hurt you?” Concern laced with the satisfaction heavy in his voice.

At that, she did open her eyes and twist her neck to look at him. With a muttered curse, he pulled out of her and turned her over onto her back, then helped her more fully onto the bed, propping her head on the pillows.

Even knowing he couldn’t stay in her forever—it wasn’t realistic to expect he could walk around with her attached to him like a lollipop to a stick—she still frowned at the loss of the sensation of being so full. Seeing his answering frown, she smoothed her fingers over the scowl lines between his eyebrows. “You didn’t hurt me, Gabe. I wanted it that way as much as you did.”

A slight flush rode high on his cheekbones. "Yeah, well, I can't believe I took you like an animal our first time together."

Knowing him, he was about ready to apologize for giving her the best sex of her life. "Don't you dare say you're sorry," she muttered, narrowing her eyes at him.

A smile tilted one corner of his sexy mouth, then his lips curved into a big grin. "You're perfect for me, do you know that?"

It was her turn to blush. "I'm not perfect," she said. Reaching up, she kissed his lean cheek. "But thanks for saying so."

He turned his face and captured her lips with his. The light, affectionate kiss turned quickly into something deeper, a meeting of tongues and hearts. When he finally drew away, both of them were breathing heavily.

"I didn't say you were perfect, Jennasweet," he murmured against her lips. "I said you were perfect *for me*." He rubbed his lips against hers. "What do you say I take care of this condom and we do things properly?"

She grinned. "Any more properly and you'll kill me."

He smirked and pulled her into a long hug, his big hands roaming over her back. Pressing a kiss to her temple, he murmured, "Let me take care of this. Be right back." He rolled off the bed. She watched the flex of his ass and leg muscles as he walked into the bathroom. She heard the water run in the sink, then shut off. When he sauntered back into the room, she spread her legs and ran one hand slowly down her stomach. His eyes narrowed on her, and his cock thickened slightly.

"Damn. I don't believe this." He shook his head. "This thing's acting like it's attached to an eighteen year old," he growled. When she dipped her fingers into the well of her body, he groaned and wrapped his fingers around his once-again rigid cock. With a low curse, he bent and grabbed his wallet from the floor, pulling out another condom. Ripping the packet open with his teeth, he

sheathed himself and crawled onto the bed, kneeling between her splayed legs. “You’re so beautiful, it makes me hurt.”

Jenna caught her breath at the look in his eyes—dark passion and something that looked very much like love. He bent low and nipped her right knee, then grazed her inner thighs with his lips. She shivered at the rasp of his whiskers against her soft skin. Groaning low in his throat, Gabe closed his mouth over her sex and thrust his tongue deep.

Swirling and suckling greedily, he ate at her soft, swollen flesh like a starving man. Moving up, he trailed kisses over her belly, finally latching onto her nipples, going from one to the other, sucking hard until the tips of her breasts were long and red.

She panted as her body tightened, preparing for another orgasm. His mouth pulling on her nipples set off a corresponding pulse in her sex. She wanted him inside her again. Now.

“God, I have to get inside you again.” His voice was a low rasp that shivered across her nerve endings.

“My thoughts exactly.” When Jenna wrapped her legs around his lean hips and pulled him forward, he groaned and slowly pushed into her pussy. She closed her eyes as his long, hard cock stroked inside her. When he was fully seated, he braced his arms on either side of her head and rubbed his lightly furred chest over her distended nipples.

“I’m not gonna last long,” he muttered, his mouth nipping at her neck. “I want you too much.” His hips pulled back, then he slowly pushed into her. Slow pull out, long push in. In. Out. In. Out.

She needed more. Faster. Harder. Her breath hitched and she slid her hands down his sides to curl her fingers into his taut buttocks. His thrusts became more and more frantic, jarring her until she was gasping with each inward stroke. He reached between their bodies and found her clit, rubbing it with tight, hard circles.

Her sheath tightened and then convulsed around his plunging cock. She arched into him, her back bowed as her orgasm raced through her with the force of a sensual hurricane. She dimly heard his shout and felt his shaft jerk as he found his release.

He gave one last twitch, then groaned and rested his face against her breasts. Jenna rubbed her hands up and down his moist back, and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. She loved this man and wasn't quite sure why she'd been so afraid of it. Thank God Taylor had given her that push. What if she'd not gone after him?

He held her for long moments, seemingly content to stay where he was. Every once in a while, he'd press a kiss to the soft swell of her breast. Finally he shifted, his sated cock sliding from her channel. "Be right back," he said, pressing a brief kiss to her forehead.

Once in the bathroom, Gabe dropped the used condom into the wastebasket. Bracing his hands on the sink, he leaned over and drew in a deep breath. What had just happened—twice—was different from what he'd shared with other women. Deeper.

Which made it too important to fuck up. He had to take things slow—well, slower than he had already, or he was sure to scare her off. As much as he wanted to crawl back into bed with her, he didn't want to push it.

With a sigh, he went back out into the bedroom. Seeing her, lying sprawled on the bed, arms flung out to the side, thighs still spread, her sex glistening with her juices, almost made him forget his resolve. His unruly cock perked up and he ground his teeth together, fighting for control. And his sanity.

Leaning over, he placed a soft kiss against her lips, drawing away before she could deepen it. "We need to get going," he said, drawing away and bending to pick up his pants.

"So soon?" she asked, her voice sated and sleepy. The look in her eyes was soft and caring, and his heart thumped with hope.

Sitting beside her, he brushed dark hair from the side of her face, tucking the long curls behind her ear. His gaze tracked down her body, over plump breasts with now-soft pink nipples, lean ribcage and little rounded belly, down to the light fur on her mound and the bare lips of her sex. When he looked back at her face, he smiled to see the blush staining her cheeks. "You have nothing to be shy about, Jennasweet," he murmured, tracing her jaw line with his fingers. "You're beautiful, inside and out."

She leaned up on one elbow and studied his face, her hazel eyes darkening. White teeth bit into her full bottom lip for a moment, then she said, "I don't want to go to the cabin, Gabe."

"What do you mean?" His heart dropped to his stomach at the thought she didn't want to spend any more time with him. God, he *had* been too rough in his passion, rutting on her like an out-of-control animal.

She sat up and leaned into him, her arms sliding around his waist, resting her face against his chest. Even that innocent, affectionate touch had his cock straining toward his navel and he inwardly cursed. She had to think he had nothing else on his mind but using her lovely body. No wonder she was ready to boot him out and have some alone time.

"I mean...couldn't we just stay here? Just the two of us?"

"Don't you want..." Gabe trailed off as he realized what she'd said. With his hands on her shoulders, he pushed her slightly away from him so he could look into her face. "You..." His voice came out a deep husk. Clearing his throat, he tried again. "You want me to stay?"

Now she was the one to be uncertain, and it colored her face a rosy pink. "Don't you want to?" Moisture welled in her eyes and she blinked, looking as if she were trying not to cry.

Oh, God. His heart wouldn't survive if she started crying. *Nimrod. Good going.* In his effort to not fuck up, he'd fucked up.

He took her face in his hands and pressed a slow, deep kiss against her lips. Pulling away, he rested his forehead against hers. "I don't want to rush you." Taking a breath, he decided to bite the bullet and just tell her what he was feeling. "This was more to me than just fucking, honey."

Jenna made a slight choking noise and moved her face until it rested on his shoulder. "For me, too."

He drew his hand through her curls, cupping the back of her head, and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"What do you want from me?" She whispered the question she'd asked him before this all started.

"Everything." He gave her the same answer. "I want you. All of you. That's all I want for Christmas. And beyond. Just you."

She pulled back and searched his face. His eyes sparkled with sincerity and the slight tremble in his jaw told her this strong, brave man—a man who'd taken the first step and declared his feelings—was made uncertain by her hesitation. A wide smile broke out over her face. "Forever?"

Gabe drew her back into his arms, bearing her down onto the mattress. "Forever, Jennasweet," he murmured, and claimed her mouth before sliding down to her throat.

Jenna wrapped her arms around her big, sexy man and held onto him, humming a Christmas tune under her breath. When his lips moved against her neck in a grin, she tightened her hold. "Merry Christmas," she whispered.

"Merry Christmas, indeed." His mouth slanted over hers and the loving began again.

CHRISTMAS CARROLL

by

Barbara J. Baldwin

Crissy never thought to see him again; believing he wouldn't return to his home in Snow, Pennsylvania once he had left. Her hand shook as she lifted the coffeepot and slowly walked toward the dark-haired man sitting alone at a table meant for two. His back was bent; his hands at the sides of his face, as though holding his head up was the only thing he could manage.

He stared out the window of the *Holly Café*, totally ignoring her as she refilled his coffee cup.

"I'm sorry about your dad," she said softly.

One hand dropped to the table as he slowly turned to face her. A smile tilted his lips just slightly, but didn't reach his eyes—eyes the same mesmerizing blue, yet somewhat sadder than she remembered. He was as handsome as ever, but had the mature look of a man of the world. She tried to shut out the memory of that last night when she had cried, begging him not to leave; even though she had known for Joe Roberts, there had been no other options.

He opened his mouth, then closed it without speaking, but he kept staring at her and Crissy wondered if he didn't recognize her. Then, he reached a hand to her hair, coming away with several strands of silver garland.

"Hello, Christmas Carroll." He said her full name in that deep, smoky voice she still heard in her dreams. "I see some things never change."

She laughed. "We're getting ready to decorate and I..." She stopped, wondering if discussing Christmas decorations was appro-

priate with someone whose father was fighting for his life. “Have you been to the hospital?”

“No, I just got into town, and I...” He swallowed, turning back to the window.

“Joe.” She sat down, placing her hand on his. When he had left town after high school, it had been on bad terms with his dad. Now, Crissy only hoped he had time to mend the rift. Before she could ask, he turned her hand in his, laying the silvery garland on her palm and curling her fingers around it. She felt his warmth, the light calluses on his fingers, and the old familiar wave of heat that used to sweep through her at a single glance.

“I have to go. I’ll...” He paused, tossing some bills onto the table. “Maybe I’ll see you later.” And he walked out the door.

They were both older and although she hadn’t seen him in far too many years, Crissy felt like they had never been apart. Joe was her soul mate, and maybe before he left town this time, she could make him see that.

* * * *

Joe pulled the collar of his coat up around his ears to block the cold wind as he stood in the dark in front of *Poinsettia Place*, trying to decide whether to knock. The house, red with white trim, was exactly as he remembered, as was the entire town. Old-fashioned lamps lit street corners; holiday decorations hung from every conceivable nook and cranny, and snow sculptures scattered the landscape from City Park to the outskirts of town. The whole damn town got into celebrating Christmas. That is, when the men weren’t working twelve hour shifts in the mine. He swallowed hard. Or when there wasn’t a mine accident like the one that left his dad in a coma.

He had refused to follow in his dad’s footsteps and work in the mines after high school. Instead of being proud of Joe for wanting to make something of himself, his father had never understood.

What's wrong with working the mines? There's pride in being a third generation Roberts miner. You too good for that? He could still hear his dad's words, made more vivid by the hospital visit, right before he ended up on Crissy's doorstep.

All he'd ever wanted was to shake the coal dust from his soul; to make enough money to buy his mom all the things she had done without. Only Crissy had understood, even as she had cried when he had boarded the bus for college.

The front door opened and Crissy stepped out, carrying a wreath. When she spotted him, her face broke into a bright smile.

"Hey," she said, "come on in."

He took the wreath and hung it on the door at her direction, then followed her into the house. Warmth surrounded him, a spicy scent heavy in the air.

"I see you're at it." In the living room, a large tree stood, lights already twinkling from the branches.

"You know everybody has to be ready for the grand lighting ceremony on the twelfth. That's only three days from now."

The Christmas holiday dominated Snow. Businesses had names like the *Holly Café*, *Noel Cleaners*, and *Candy Cane Pharmacy*. Kids got a free day off school at the first heavy snowfall to create snow sculptures that dotted yards and roadsides. But the holiday was particularly special to the woman standing in front of him, hanging ornaments on the tree. Christmas Carroll had been born on Christmas day.

"This looks familiar." He lifted a round paper ornament from the tree, the youthful coloring nudging a memory.

Crissy blushed. "In third grade, I decided to dress up as a Christmas tree for our Halloween party. You know, given my name and all."

He nodded. "Now I remember. All the kids laughed at you."

"Everybody except you. You made me this ornament and pinned it on my tree costume."

He stepped closer. "You were the prettiest Christmas tree I had ever seen in October."

"And you were my hero from that day on." She raised her head and his lips brushed her forehead.

Her sweet scent brought back other memories—their first kiss; high school prom; the night she gave herself to him with the promise to love him always. She had been his one regret in leaving all those years ago.

He wrapped his arms around her and lowered his head. Time had no doubt blurred his memories, because he didn't recall her body feeling this lush against his, nor the fire in his blood so hot from a single kiss. His tongue darted along the seam of her lips and she opened to him, her hands sliding around his waist to caress his back.

"Joe." She whispered his name like a wish granted. He rained kisses down her neck, sucking lightly at the rapidly beating pulse in her throat. She pulled him closer. God, he wanted her naked beneath him. He raised his head to gaze into eyes the color of holly in the sunshine.

"What have you been doing all these years?" She caressed the side of his face.

"Crissy, I don't want to talk." It was a bold statement and he searched her features for his answer. He needed her tonight.

* * * *

Crissy's heart hammered in her chest at Joe's words. His smoldering look told her how much he wanted her. Every year *he* had been her Christmas wish, and every New Year's resolution to quit loving him had been broken within days of making it.

She took his hand and led him upstairs. The residents of *Poinsettia Place* were already in bed, and even though both were hard of hearing, she put a finger to her lips in caution.

"I wondered if you had the same room," Joe whispered as she shut her door and turned the lock.

“Same room, same house, same girl,” she replied.

Joe’s hands slid around her from behind, cupping her breasts and pulling her back against him. He kissed her neck, murmuring, “Not hardly.”

Crissy’s breath caught at his tender touch. She pushed her fanny against his erection, and the fire that had started with one kiss burst into flames. She spun in his arms, lifting her mouth to his in a devouring kiss. Her hands shook as she unbuttoned his shirt, jerking it from his shoulders. She desperately wanted to feel bare skin.

Joe tugged her sweater up and she groaned. “Hurry,” she gasped, reaching for his pants. In seconds, they were naked, but as Crissy stared at the man from her dreams, she suddenly found she couldn’t move. He was so gorgeous. He had always been tall, but now his chest had filled out; the muscles tight and lean, a sprinkling of dark hair trailing from his nipples to his groin. She reached out to touch him, smiling when he hissed as her fingers closed around his throbbing erection.

“God, that feels so good,” he groaned as she slowly slid her hand from base to tip. She rubbed her thumb over the drop of moisture seeping from the head.

Joe had never intended to jump into bed with Crissy the moment he saw her, but memories had flooded through him. Where once a lithe, blossoming girl had shyly stood before him, now a lush woman was looking at him with such longing, his knees went weak. She leaned in and licked his nipple, then sucked the pebbled nub. Fire shot through him. Her hand tightened on his shaft as she tilted her head back and gave him a sexy smile.

“I know we have all night, but would it hurt to hurry a little this first time?”

This first time. Joe scooped her up and turned to locate the bed. If he had his way, there would be a lot more than just this time.

He followed her down on the bed, his hips nudging her thighs open. He had thought that coming back to Snow wouldn’t mean

much, but *this* felt like coming home. He greedily sucked one pert nipple. Her back arched, urging him on. He moved his hips, his manhood nudging her sex and he groaned.

“Just...” he gasped, fighting for control. “I forgot.” Forcing himself away from her warmth, he pushed off the bed and found his pants, digging in a pocket. He rolled the condom on as he turned back to her.

She lay seductively open to him on the bed, her eyes following his movements, her tongue peeking out to lick her lips. It dawned on him that, first time or not, he wanted to savor the moment and give her the pleasure she deserved.

He put one knee on the bed, bending to kiss her toes, her ankle, slowly moving up her leg. He nipped the sensitive skin at the inside of her knee, then licked it with his hot tongue.

“Oh, God,” she groaned as he worked his way up the inside of her thigh. She reached down to tug on his shoulders. “Now!”

He had to chuckle. “Patience, Christmas. Good things can come more than once a year.” With that, he gave her what she wanted, sliding all the way inside her, groaning at her tightness. She wrapped her legs around his waist and he sank deeper. As his lips found hers and he began to move, he wondered how he could ever have left her—this—even in his quest to make something of himself. And then he couldn’t think at all as pleasure washed over him when she clutched around him in orgasm, crying out his name. His hips jerked as he came so hard, it bordered on pain—an exquisite pain he would gladly take over and over again.

* * * *

Crissy woke in the morning alone. She rolled over and stared at the ceiling, wondering if she had dreamed that Joe had been there with her. *He was like a ghost from Christmas past.* Had she wanted him so desperately she had conjured him up? But no. The tenderness she felt in her breasts and between her legs was no dream. Joe had shown her a piece of heaven.

The phone interrupted her thoughts. One of the waitresses had called in sick and they were busy. Most of the time, she didn't mind her inheritance—the *Holly Café* and *Poinsettia Place*, the home where she had grown up, which had first been a bed and breakfast, then somehow drifted to having permanent boarders. It paid the bills and she really loved where she lived. But there were days...

"Young man, what are you doing? Why are you here? Does Crissy know you're snooping around her living room?" Crissy could hear Matilda Grumbley from halfway up the stairs.

"Ma'am, I'm just trying..."

"Don't you ma'am me. I never married. Men aren't worth the aggravation. Don't look at me with that smug expression, Henry Holliday, you're just an old pain in the tush. Where is Crissy? She knows I have a doctor's appointment today."

Oh, Lordy, Crissy had completely forgotten. She hurried down the stairs.

"Matilda, good morning," she said perkily, hoping for once, this particular boarder would be in a good mood. She should have known better.

"You know I like to be there early. What have you been doing and who is this man?"

Crissy stole a glance at Joe, whose eyes twinkled and whose smile defied her to tell cranky Miss Grumbley just exactly why she was running behind schedule. She could feel a blush heat her face.

"Matilda, give the girl a chance to speak, for heaven's sake." Henry spoke up.

Crissy smiled her thanks. "Henry, would you mind having your breakfast at the café? Jill's sick and I'm going over."

Matilda interrupted. "You know I can't be late."

Crissy ran her fingers through her hair, frustrated the day was starting like this. She turned toward the kitchen.

Joe followed. "How do you do it? I can't find an internet outlet and my cell doesn't even get a signal here."

"I'm sorry I don't have internet, but we usually have cell phone service. I'll call someone today."

"Honey, that's not why I said anything," Joe cajoled. "Why do you stay here, with this?" Joe gestured back to the living room where Matilda and Henry were still verbally sparing. "Don't you want more?"

Crissy stopped in the process of pouring a cup of coffee. Her parents had left her the café and their home—what more did she need? She tilted her head toward Joe, who, despite his good looks, appeared somewhat harried.

"What have you been doing all these years?" she asked the question he hadn't answered last night.

"Building a business and making money," he answered, sounding defensive.

"I'm not judging you, Joe, but are you happy?"

"I can buy whatever I want. I have a condo in New York and drive a new car every year."

"But are you happy?" she asked again. When he didn't answer, she said, "Perhaps you need to be reminded what Christmas is all about."

His eyebrows raised and lowered and a sexy smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "Oh, I would say I found that out last night. And I wouldn't mind enjoying Christmas more fully again tonight."

"Sh, they'll hear you." She blushed. "Besides, that's not what I mean." She loved her name, but it did get confusing at times.

Crissy knew Joe would have done anything to flee the coal mines, and basically, his heritage. Even though small towns weren't for everyone, she wasn't sure Joe liked New York any better. She smiled as a plan began to form. A little reenactment of *The Christmas Carol*, with some minor character changes, might just be in order. "Would you do me a *huge* favor?"

His eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"If you'll take Matilda to her doctor's appointment, since you'll want to go see your dad, anyway," she hurried to explain when he started to protest, "I can cover at the café and everybody will be happy."

"Do I get a favor in return?" he murmured, stepping close to kiss her ear before trailing his hot wet tongue around the shell.

Crissy was willing to agree to anything if he kept tantalizing her senses. "I'll feed you," she suggested.

"Anything I want?" Hot breath fanned her hair, yet she shivered.

"Crissy, it's time to go," Matilda hollered from the living room.

She tried to pull away but Joe held her tight, his erection pushing against her hips.

"Crissy," Matilda's voice was getting closer.

"Okay," she said, prying his arms away, "anything you want."

* * * *

An hour later, Joe wondered if he had struck a bargain with the devil. He knew for sure Matilda Grumbley was the devil's mother. She complained about all her aches and pains, and practically everyone in town. Joe had grown up here, and he knew the town wasn't that bad.

"Mrs. Grumbley, we're here," he finally interrupted.

"Don't be calling me Missus. I'm a Miss; always have been and always will be." She jutted her pointed chin in the air.

And I can see why. Joe kept that thought to himself as he hurried around and opened the door, helping Matilda out and up the snowy walk.

"Be back in precisely one hour, young man. I don't want to stand around in the cold waiting for you."

"Wait inside if I'm not here," Joe said.

"One hour." She walked past him into the reception room and Joe turned to walk the short distance to the hospital entrance.

He wondered what had made Matilda Grumbley an old sour-puss. Apparently, she didn't have anybody to take care of her. As he walked down the sterile hospital corridors, he thought about his own life. He had family, although he wasn't close to them anymore. When he got old, would he have to rely on the goodwill of others? *God, he hoped not.* He couldn't imagine being as lonely and bitter as that old woman.

* * * *

Joe didn't get back to Crissy's until well after dark. Other than returning Matilda home precisely one hour after dropping her off, he had stayed with his mom at the hospital. Though still in a coma, Dad was slowly improving.

Later he had gone to the library to catch up on some work via the internet. He talked to his secretary—on a pay phone, for God's sake—and told his partner to take over when meetings couldn't be rescheduled.

Now, as he opened the door, Christmas music washed over him and the tension left his shoulders. He stomped his feet, numb from the cold, and shrugged out of his coat.

"Crissy?"

"In the kitchen."

He found her with an apron tied around her middle, elbow deep in flour. He thought how right she looked and wondered why she wasn't married with a houseful of kids. Even as he thought it, his chest tightened in jealousy over an imaginary husband doing to her what he had done last night.

That's stupid, he lectured himself. *You have no claims on her.*

"How's your dad doing?" She bent over to put a sheet of cookies into the oven and his mouth went dry at the sight of her tight, jean-clad ass. As soon as he was sure she wouldn't burn herself, he grabbed her from behind.

She squawked, pushing against him to get loose. "Stop that! Henry and Matilda are in the other room." She continued to wiggle

and it just made him harder. He nuzzled her neck, enjoying the homey smell of her.

"I checked; they're both asleep in front of the TV. Besides, I think Matilda could use a little voyeurism. It might improve her mood." He finally released her when she reached into the warming oven for a plate piled high with roast and potatoes.

"What's with her, anyway?"

Crissy put the plate on the breakfast bar and he sat, digging in as she began cutting out more cookies. "She's just old and lonely."

"Yeah, well, she's going to stay that way. Jesus, all she did was complain about everything," he said around a mouthful of food.

"From what I heard, she moved here because of her fiancé. But he died in the mines, and afterward, she devoted herself to teaching. She never married." She looked up from the dough she was sprinkling with colored sugar, her eyes searching, her expression serious.

"What?" He shook his head in confusion. "There's a message in there somewhere?"

"I just think there's more to life than work, that's all." The timer dinged and she turned to take the cookies out, replacing one sheet with another.

"You work hard. You run your dad's café, and you've turned your home into a boarding house for crotchety old people."

She gave him a soft smile. "I love what I do. I get to talk to people all day and Matilda and Henry need me."

"I need you," Joe said, giving her a wolfish grin. "Besides, after having to cart Miss Grumbley around, you owe me." He stood, slowly circling the breakfast bar. Crissy backed away.

"I promised you a meal. You got it." She pointed to his empty plate, but there was a twinkle in her eye and her luscious lips tilted into a sexy smile.

"That was delicious, but it wasn't what I had in mind to eat." Joe pressed against her. She was warm and soft and he ached with

need. He nipped her neck, nibbling his way to her ear while his hands found the ties to her apron, dropping it to the floor so he could slide up under her shirt.

"The cookies," Crissy murmured, then groaned as he covered her breasts with his hands and her lips with his. She tasted and felt like heaven. He rubbed his thumbs across her nipples. When he ran his tongue across her lips, she opened for him and he tasted the essence of Christmas, but it still wasn't enough.

He reached for the button on her jeans, only to have the oven timer ding in his ear.

He groaned as he released her. "Get them out—fast—because I have something just as hot for you to handle." As soon as she put the cookie sheet down, he grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the kitchen.

"Those cookies ready to eat?" Henry called from the living room.

"The cook has disappeared," Joe answered, "but help yourself."

Henry chuckled and Crissy swatted at Joe, but didn't pull away as he urged her up the stairs.

* * * *

Crissy loved Joe's take-charge attitude. She had longed for someone to want her for herself and not for cooking a meal, meeting payroll or acting as a chauffeur. She was more than willing to give what Joe demanded from her. And tonight, he didn't seem inclined to wait.

The minute her door was closed and locked, he had his hands on her shirt, pulling it over her head. She was naked before he had even kicked off his shoes, but when she protested, he backed her up to the bed and lowered her on it. He bent over her, arms braced on either side, and she felt her skin warm under his intent gaze.

"Now, I'll show you what I'm really hungry for," he whispered as he began kissing her, starting at her forehead, but never

lingering long at any one place. She reached up to unbutton his shirt, but he placed her hands back on the mattress. "Tonight, I'm going to take care of you."

His kisses got hotter and longer as he worked his way down her body. Heat shot out from her breasts as he sucked one into his mouth, gently kneading the other. Her nipples tightened under his tender touch and she arched her back, wanting more.

His hands were everywhere, caressing, stroking, and heating her with a fire that centered deep between her legs. She could feel him through his pants, and she pushed her hips against him.

"I was just going for dessert." He nipped her nipple one last time before trailing his hot tongue down her belly.

Crissy groaned, knowing where he was heading and unable to protest. It just felt so good. The tingling anticipation made her ache. She wanted him to hurry and at the same time, go slow so she could savor every touch, every shot of electricity through her body.

When he knelt, shouldering her knees apart, she just about lost it. His hands slid from her hips to her center, parting her curls. His mouth closed on her; teeth gently nipping; tongue lovingly lapping the sting.

"Oh, God," she moaned, her hips moving on their own, arching into his mouth. He slid a finger, then two, inside her and she cried out.

"Let it come, darling, let it come," he whispered before flicking his tongue hard, pushing her over the edge.

As Crissy rode out her orgasm, Joe held her tight, pushing her deeper into intense pleasure. She hit the crest and began tumbling down, but he fingered that secret spot inside her and she climaxed again, this time crying out his name.

Joe stared down at Crissy. She was beautiful when she let herself go so completely in the throes of passion, and he quickly jerked his pants open. He pulled her to the very edge of the bed, groaning

as he filled her completely. Then he stilled, savoring the clutch of her orgasm around him.

Only after she calmed did he start moving in long, slow strokes. Her eyes drifted open and he captured her gaze, wanting to imprint himself on her mind and heart, perhaps her very soul. His body was screaming for release but he held off until he felt her muscles squeeze around him, knowing she was coming again.

He watched as her eyes dilated with passion, her chest heaving with every gasping breath, and he knew this was the picture of Christmas he would carry with him forever. When she called out his name this time, he came with her, flooding her body in an orgasm that shook him to the very core.

Much later, with Crissy curled in sleep beside him, Joe reflected on the course of his life, his family, Crissy and her happy outlook on life. Something had happened tonight. He wasn't sure if he had given it or if she had just outright stolen it, but his heart was no longer his own.

* * * *

Always an early riser, Joe was already having coffee by the time Crissy came into the kitchen. She looked tousled, well loved and very kissable as she yawned and stretched.

"Morning."

She spun around with a squeal. One hand flew to her chest and the other began a mad finger combing of her hair. Joe shook his head as he walked toward her. He had watched her sleep this morning, her mouth open in a delightfully feminine snore and her short hair sticking out in all directions. But a smart man knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Instead, he bent to kiss her, wrapping his arms around her in a hug. "It snowed last night. I'll shovel the walks before I go to the hospital." He chuckled at her look of surprise as he grabbed his coat.

"Hello, who are you?" a young girl asked, standing on the back steps when he opened the door.

"Better question, how did you get here?"

She waved in a vacant manner. "Crissy had the idea to tie a rope from her porch to ours because I come over here so much." She grinned, showing braces.

"That's a pretty smart idea," Joe answered, thinking how easy it would be for a youngster to get lost if it were snowing.

"Is Crissy here?"

"Hey, Megan, how come you're out so early on a Saturday?" Crissy peeked around Joe, her hand lightly touching his shoulder and he thought how right it felt.

The girl held up a wad of yarn with needles sticking out of it. "I think I dropped a stitch but I can't tell." She then leaned forward and whispered, though loud enough for Joe to hear, "Who is he?"

Crissy smiled. "Sorry. Megan Appleby, this is Joe Roberts. Joe, Megan is Polly's daughter. Polly was a classmate of ours."

The girl stood in front of him with her hand outstretched. "Is he handsome, Crissy?" Megan turned her head to the side where Crissy had been, but now had moved back inside. Before he could say anything, Crissy smiled and slightly shook her head.

"I think so," she said, answering Megan's question, "when he's not frowning." Then she grinned, sticking her tongue out at him. He took a step toward her but she put a hand on his chest.

"Megan and I have Christmas presents to make. If you insist on shoveling the walk, at least get Henry and go to the hardware store for some coveralls and goulashes." When he started to protest, she added, "You don't have to work in the mines to dress appropriately for the weather. Besides, Henry commented yesterday he needed nails for the birdhouses he's making."

As they walked away, Joe listened to Megan chatter about the scarf she was knitting. *She's blind. Doesn't that make a difference?* He

looked across the yard where a path zigzagged through the snow, a rope swaying in the breeze at about waist height.

Amazing. He had known Crissy was special, but he was beginning to see the impact she had on people she cared about. He smiled as he went in search of Henry.

* * * *

An hour later, he and Henry were sitting in the café drinking coffee. Joe wiggled his toes in his new boots, admitting that they were warm, but swore if his partner saw him, he'd laugh. He was a khakis and loafer kind of guy, even in winter.

"So what did you do before you started building birdhouses?" he asked Henry.

"I was in the stock market—made millions—but I'll tell you, young man, all the money in the world doesn't mean squat if you don't have someone in your life to share it with." He got a faraway look on his face. "All that money couldn't help my Hettie one little bit when she got sick." He shook his head sadly, then took a sip of coffee. "Anyway, now I do a little woodwork to pass the time, but it sure does get lonely."

"Have you ever thought of marrying again?" Joe asked.

"Ah, Hettie was my one love, but I wouldn't mind having a little fling now and again." He gave Joe a purely male grin as he leaned closer. "You know, I'm thinking Matilda could use a good loving."

Joe choked on his coffee. "Miss Grumbley?" he sputtered and the old man nodded. *Hell, Henry had to be at least sixty-five, maybe seventy. How could he...* Joe didn't even want to go there. Yet when he thought about making love to Crissy for the next thirty years, his manhood stirred to life and he grinned.

Henry nodded. "Maybe I'll sneak into her room one of these nights and jump her bones. Whatcha think?"

Joe grinned wider, lifting his hand in the air and Henry gave him a high five.

* * * *

Crissy had just finished payroll when Joe walked into her room. She closed her ledger and slid it to the back of the small desk.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, turning in her chair. “I can make you a sandwich.”

“No, I ate with Mom.” He walked toward her and Crissy couldn’t gauge his mood. When she lifted her hand, he took it, playing with her fingers but obviously preoccupied.

He squatted down in front of her. “Dad’s awake.”

“Oh, Joe, that’s wonderful!” She was really happy for him.

“Yeah. We talked—really talked. All those years of misunderstanding were all about pride.”

She brushed his hair back from his forehead. “Yours, or his?” she asked tenderly.

He gave her a quirky grin. “Both. I wanted to show him I could make it, and he wanted me to know that, working in the mines or not, he could provide for his family. I wrote, you know, and once I started working, I sent money. The money was always returned and it made me angry that he wouldn’t take it, if only to make things easier. But it wasn’t until today that I ever thought about the letters.”

“Letters?” Crissy asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “He sent the money back but never the letters. Mom says he still has them.”

Crissy reached down and hugged him. “Oh, Joe, he might be stubborn and proud, but he does love you. And you’re just like him.”

Joe stood and tugged her to her feet. His kiss made her feel treasured and she wondered how she was ever going to stand it if he left her again.

Joe slowly undressed her, planting kisses on each inch of exposed skin. Crissy didn’t notice the coolness of her bedroom as Joe

warmed her body with caresses, and then with his own heat. Tonight there was no torrid sex as they'd had for the past two. Instead, they took their time, exploring each other, savoring each kiss, even as the passion built. And when he entered her, gently taking her to the heavens and beyond, Crissy's heart ached with love.

* * * *

Monday was Crissy's day to work at the *Holly Café*, so Joe spent the morning at the library checking email and doing business, visited his dad at the hospital, then came back to *Poinsettia Place* to prepare some reports. He was working at the kitchen table when the back door banged open and Megan stormed in.

"Whatcha doing, Joe?" she asked, tossing her coat at an empty chair, then unerringly finding him at the table.

"How did you know it was me and not Miss Grumbley?" He was fascinated with her abilities, and with the fact she seemed to have such a happy disposition.

She wrinkled her nose. "It's your smell."

"I don't smell," he retorted, though he knew she meant scent.

She just laughed. "Will you take me downtown?"

He frowned at the graph on his computer screen, not happy with the projected fourth quarter sales. "Wait for Crissy. She'll take you."

"I can't, silly. I have to buy her Christmas present. Mom's working at the store, so I can stay with her if you'll just take me. I have to get Crissy something special because she always helps me with my homework and she taught me how to knit. She's a really great person. And she's pretty, too, isn't she?"

Joe laughed, realizing Megan was playing matchmaker. "Get your coat, squirt, and we'll go."

Megan kept up a steady stream of chatter as they bundled up and Joe drove to Main Street.

"Have you got your Christmas shopping done?"

“No.”

“But you have to. What will you get Crissy? You should get her something nice because she really likes you. I can hear it in her voice.”

Joe pulled into a parking slot. He didn’t need to be convinced that Crissy was someone special, but apparently Megan *saw* things he didn’t.

She skipped beside him. “Isn’t the snow beautiful?”

Before he thought, he said, “But you can’t see it.”

“Oh, but I do,” she replied with feeling. “I didn’t go blind until I was five, and besides, I see with my other senses.” She grabbed his hand, pulling him to a stop.

“Close your eyes.”

“Megan, we—”

“Just do it.” She tugged his arm.

Joe sighed, complying. “Okay.”

“Now, what do you see?”

“Megan, I can’t see.”

“Then you’re not trying.”

Joe decided if they were to get out of the wet snow and cold, he’d better come up with something. And just like that, he realized what she was talking about. Wet snowflakes landed on his face in freezing spatters as he tilted it upward. The cold was seeping through the soles of his shoes. As he opened his senses, he heard the scrunch of tires on snow, and the chatter of people walking by. He stuck out his tongue to catch the frozen drops of moisture and laughed right out loud.

“Megan Appleby, now who are you dragging around to see through your eyes?”

Joe’s eyes popped open to see a petite woman standing at the door of a small shop.

“Hi, Mom, this is Crissy’s boyfriend, Joe.”

Even at thirty years of age, Joe liked the sounds of that. Still holding his hand, Megan dragged him into the store.

“Joe Roberts, I never thought to see you back in Snow.” Polly took his hands and squeezed. “How’s your dad doing?”

Everybody knowing his business was one of the things he had hated in high school, but now the concern people showed felt refreshing.

“Megan,” Polly turned toward her daughter, “there’s a snack for you in the fridge behind the counter.”

Joe watched Megan bounce around the corner, never bumping or knocking anything off the shelves. When he turned back, he found Polly watching him. He felt his face heat.

“It’s okay,” she said, smiling. “I decided when Megan became blind due to a fever, I wouldn’t treat her differently, nor allow others to. But I couldn’t have managed without Crissy.”

“Joe came to Snow to see Crissy,” Megan called out.

Her mother smiled indulgently. “Crissy says Megan reminds her of Tiny Tim from *The Christmas Carol*. She always has such a positive attitude; as if there’s nothing she can’t do.” Polly shook her head slightly. “I wanted her independent, but sometimes...”

“Oh, this scarf is so soft. Crissy would love it. Joe, what color is it?” Megan came hurrying toward them.

“Megan,” her mother warned.

Joe just smiled. Turning to Megan, he took the scarf, sliding it across her outstretched hands. “It has swirls of color running through it—the blue of the sky and the green of leaves in spring. And there’s lavender—a touch sprinkled here and there like fairy dust.”

“See, you *can* do it,” Megan whispered to him. Then she tugged him down and kissed his cheek. Joe felt his heart burst open.

* * * *

Crissy was totally shocked when she turned and saw Joe herding Matilda and Henry into the *Holly Café* ten minutes before the lighting ceremony. Then he walked right up and gave her a kiss and love overrode everything else.

“I get the message,” he murmured as he hugged her tight. She frowned. “What message?”

Joe waved toward Matilda and Henry, who sat at a table by the front window, for once, not arguing. “Grumpy Christmas past and lonely Christmas present.” He tilted her chin with a gentle finger, gazing at her with dark, passionate eyes. “I don’t want to be like them.”

Crissy’s eyes filled with happy tears. “You always did catch on quickly, but what about Christmas future?”

“*Tiny Tim* is with her mother. As for our future, I want—”

“It’s time!” one of the customers called when the courthouse clock began its deep, lingering gong.

Crissy grabbed her coat and Joe’s hand, hurrying outside, admonishing Matilda and Henry to stay inside out of the cold. They’d still be able to see the lights from the café windows.

Joe stood behind her on the sidewalk, his arms wrapped around her, his breath a warm caress at her ear.

“I still don’t see how you got Matilda downtown.” Crissy shook her head.

“I called her Mrs. Scrooge.”

Crissy twisted around to stare at him. “You didn’t!”

He nodded. “I told her as long as I’m around, she would not be cranky or I’d sic the ghost of Christmas past on her.” With that, he kissed her cheek. “There’s only one gong left. You’d better look out that way.” He nodded across the street.

As long as I’m around, Crissy said a swift prayer. She hoped that would be indefinitely.

As the last stroke of the courthouse clock echoed in the frosty winter night, the whole town of Snow became lit for the Christmas

season. The giant tree on the courthouse lawn was a rainbow of color, and the huge star at the very top shone in the night as snow began to silently fall on the gathered crowd. Someone started singing, and soon the entire town burst forth with a boisterous rendition of *Deck the Halls*. As Joe hugged her and his deep voice joined hers, Crissy wondered if this would be the Christmas she had always imagined.

* * * *

Joe couldn't wait to get Crissy alone, but for once, Matilda was in a congenial mood and seemed inclined to visit. *That's what I get for being nice to her.* Joe scowled across the living room, wondering if he should have spiked her eggnog.

"See what happens?" Crissy whispered in his ear. "You completely changed her outlook."

"Can I change her back?" Joe pouted, wondering how long they would be held hostage.

"Patience. Isn't that what you told me?" Crissy asked, but when he glanced her way, he could see in her heated gaze that she was having just as much trouble focusing on the conversation.

"I was never patient. I used to peek under Mom's bed for presents. I always wanted my Christmas to *come* early." He narrowed his gaze meaningfully and was gratified to see her squirm.

"Are you alright, dear?" Henry asked. "You look a little flushed."

"It's been a long day. I think I'll call it a night." She began collecting their cups and dessert dishes.

"I'll get those," Joe said as he stood. He watched as she started up the stairs, her hips swaying suggestively. He gritted his teeth, hoping he could join her quickly.

"Henry and I have been talking," Matilda said from directly behind him.

Joe groaned, not bothering to hide his exasperation as he glanced over at Henry, who was smiling broadly. *That dirty old man has been making it with Miss Grumbley.*

“Young man.” Matilda poked his arm to get his attention. “Since Christmas’ parents have passed on, we’ve looked after her. And we’ve decided if you’re going to keep hanging around here, then you must marry her. We don’t believe in hanky-panky between young people.” She gave a short jerk of her head and harumphed.

Joe opened his mouth to protest, then snapped it shut. Matilda had just given him his excuse. “You’re absolutely right. If you’ll excuse me, I’d better go ask Crissy right away.”

He didn’t wait for a response but bounded up the stairs two at a time. When he let himself into her room, his eyes quickly adjusted to the light from a single candle and he found her lying on the bed, gloriously naked, the candlelight shimmering off her pale skin.

“I wondered how long it would take you to make up an excuse,” she said as she propped herself on one elbow to look at him with sexy interest.

Joe undressed in record time, his eyes on Crissy and hers following his hands. She began squirming, her hips lifting suggestively, when he took himself in hand and stroked. As he walked toward the bed, her tongue came out to lick her lips and Joe’s balls tightened.

They came together, lips searching, hands stroking, and Joe found her wet and ready for him. But she had other ideas.

“Lay back,” she murmured, pushing against his chest, then straddling him. When she bent to kiss him, her hot bottom pushed against his erection.

“Whatever you have in mind, you’d better hurry,” he gasped as her thumb flicked his nipple.

"There's twelve days until Christmas," she teased him as she began peppering his chest with hot, wet kisses. As she slid lower, her feminine slit stroked his hot shaft in a wet, torturous caress.

"Honey, that's twelve days *of* Christmas, and I plan on getting my fair share." His voice cracked at the end when she suddenly took him into her mouth, tonguing the sensitive underside and sucking.

"Of this?" she murmured as she nipped his hip, her fingers caressing his sac as her thumb slid up and down his straining erection.

"What do you want me to do, beg?" Joe groaned as she continued to nuzzle him in all the most private places.

No, I want you to stay forever, Crissy thought but she wouldn't ask. He had to be willing to do it for his own reasons, and she could only hope that loving her was one of them.

When she couldn't stand the achiness any longer, she straddled Joe's lean hips. Capturing his gaze, she gave him her most dazzling smile as she slowly sank onto him, taking inch after glorious inch into her body. He felt so good, filling her completely and as his hips began to buck, she longed for her love to be enough to keep him.

Joe slid his hands from her waist up to her breasts and Crissy covered his hands with hers as he gently kneaded her flesh, tenderly pinching her nipples. Her head fell back, her hips undulating as he moved faster and faster.

"Joe," she gasped his name, pushing one hand downward until he knew what she needed and moved his thumb to rub that singular pressure point that made her writhe with pleasure. She squeezed her thighs as he pushed deeper, triggering her climax. Pulsing sensations robbed her of breath, and each time her muscles clutched, Joe thrust, sending her over the edge again and again.

When she cried out, he plunged deep one last time, his hips arched, his face a mask of sensuous pleasure. She could feel him throbbing deep inside as he came, and the thought of him filling her

with his very essence caused her to climax again, squeezing around him to take everything he had to give.

* * * *

When Joe could breathe again and control his shaking muscles, he bent his legs, planting his feet on the bed to form a backrest for Crissy. He wasn't about to let her move anytime soon, especially when he was still buried inside her hot sheath.

"Close your eyes and tell me what you see," he commanded when she finally looked at him.

"You've been talking to Megan."

"Just do it." He held onto a small ray of hope that she still loved him after all these years. Granted, they had just had the most phenomenal sex of his life, but he wanted more from Crissy. And he couldn't plan his future until he knew how she felt.

She gave him a smile, but complied, holding out her hands. He entwined their fingers as she began to talk. "I see a man who's too wonderful for words—and much more wonderful than he gives himself credit for. I feel sunshine warm my skin whenever he smiles at me, and I taste the flavor of our love in every kiss."

Then she opened her eyes, capturing his gaze as she slipped her fingers free to place his hand over her fast beating heart. "Most importantly, I can hear my pounding heart, telling me to love you well, and forever." She brought his other hand up and kissed his knuckles.

The tightness in Joe's chest relaxed and he smiled. If he had known so many wonderful things would happen by coming home, he would have done it a long time ago. "They say Dad'll be home by Christmas," he said, thinking that would be a great time to get married.

Crissy frowned. "Will *you* be here at Christmas?" Joe felt her heart start to pound beneath his hand and realized she needed reassurance, too.

He gave her a wide, sexy grin. “Honey, you get me internet access, and I’ll be here permanently.”

She wiggled her hips, causing him to grow instantly stiff. “It was installed this morning.”

CANDY CANE KISSES

by

Jamie Hill

“Step under the mistletoe and give me a kiss, baby!” The man made a grab for her, missed, and fell flat on his face.

Cyndi Benson sidestepped the drunken stranger and made her way past him to the table where her friend Lisa waited. “Nice,” she muttered, rolling her eyes at the man crawling back up to his bar stool.

Lisa laughed. “You’re too choosy. See, you could have had a date right there.”

“Oh yeah!” Cyndi settled into her seat and leaned back. “That’s just what I need. I’m not sure he’d remember his own name, let alone mine.”

“Maybe *that* is what you need,” Lisa offered, and looked up as the waiter approached their table. “I’ll have a White Russian. Cyn?”

“Um, just a glass of white wine, please.”

“Very good.” The waiter nodded and walked off.

Lisa lasciviously watched him go. “Nice ass. He was cute, too, did you notice?” She flicked her dark hair away from her face and licked her painted lips.

Cyndi laughed. “Sure, and he was probably all of twenty-two. I may be desperate, Lise, but I still have my scruples.”

Lisa reached over and unbuttoned the top button of Cyndi’s blouse. “You’ve got a lot more than just scruples, sweetheart. You just need to let them hang out a little bit.”

“Stop!” Cyndi pushed Lisa’s hand away, but left the button undone. She did tend to overdress, and Gil always used to tell her

that her breasts were beautiful, and she shouldn't be afraid to show them off. He certainly enjoyed looking, she remembered. Gil was lavish with his praise in those days; he loved Cyndi's long blonde hair and the fact she looked beautiful and polished with very little make-up. She sighed.

"You're thinking about him again, aren't you?"

Cyndi smiled and nodded guiltily. "Sorry. Gil was always unbuttoning my top button like you just did."

"He knew a good thing when he saw it," Lisa added. "But, Cyndi, look, it's been almost a year since Gil...left."

Cyndi knew Lisa wanted to say something else, but checked her temper for Cyndi's benefit. Lisa never particularly liked Gil, but he had been the love of Cyndi's life. Even after ten months, she still missed him desperately. She knew it was time to move on, but that was easier said than done. None of Lisa's attempts to fix her up had worked out, because as much as Cyndi craved a man's touch, she wasn't going to settle for just anybody.

That infuriated the hell out of Lisa, who flitted through a string of men before settling down and getting married. She encouraged Cyndi to let herself go, have a few flings, and relax. Every relationship didn't have to be serious. But Cyndi wasn't wired that way. She and Gil had been very serious for several years, and she found it impossible to toss that away, even if it was already long gone.

"I don't know what to do anymore," Cyndi said softly, and smiled at the waiter as he set their drinks down. She watched him retreat, thinking he did have a nice ass. She was accurate when she told Lisa she was feeling desperate. It was Christmas Eve and she would be spending the night alone. That thought terrified her.

"I wish you'd come home with me," Lisa told her as if reading her mind. "You could spend the night. We're having my family tonight for dinner and gifts. You know most of them, you'll fit right in."

"I couldn't intrude, but thanks for offering."

"It's not just for you—I'd love the company. Tomorrow I'm going to be surrounded by Jason's relatives and believe me; it would be nice to have someone *I like* to talk to."

Cyndi laughed. "You like Jason's family."

"Mostly," Lisa admitted, and then her eyes lit up. "His cousin Tyler is coming, now he's cute! You need to meet him, Cyn."

"I don't think so. It's sweet of you to offer, though. I'll be fine."

"You'll be alone and wallowing in misery. I wish some of your family could have flown in."

Cyndi shook her head. "It just didn't work out. I saw them at Thanksgiving, anyway."

"It's not about seeing them; it's about *you* not being alone for Christmas." Lisa sipped her drink. "I'm worried about you, hon."

Cyndi finished her glass of wine and reached for her purse. "I'll be fine, I promise. I hope you and Jason have a lovely Christmas, and I'll see you in a couple days." She tossed some cash on the table and leaned in for a hug. "Merry Christmas, Lisa."

"Merry Christmas, Cyn." Lisa hugged her back. "Promise you'll call me if you change your mind. You know you're welcome at any time. I mean that."

"I know you do, and thanks." Cyndi smiled at her friend and stood up. She retrieved her coat from the coat check girl and headed out to her car.

It was bitterly cold outside, and several inches of snow covered the ground. Cyndi drove home carefully, the roads were passable but not clear and she didn't want to take a chance on an accident. The thought of a traffic accident terrified her more than the idea of spending Christmas alone. She was feeling extremely sorry for herself and quite pathetic when she pulled into the driveway of her little house.

Cyndi was startled to see smoke coming from her chimney. She hadn't used the fireplace since Gil left the previous winter. *What is going on?* Had her parents shown up to surprise her? She looked around for cars but didn't see any, so she pulled into her garage and entered the house cautiously. "Hello?"

Now she was really stunned. Beside the warm, glowing fire sat a fully decorated Christmas tree. Cyndi hadn't bothered to put up a tree this year; she frankly wanted to forget Christmas and couldn't wait for it to be over with. "Hello?" she called again, looking around the room.

"Merry Christmas, baby." Gil stepped from around the corner and smiled at her.

"G-Gil?" she stuttered. She wanted to ask, *What are you doing here?* Instead, she fainted.

* * * *

Cyndi woke up on her sofa with a soft blanket covering her.

"Take it easy, you may have hit your head." Gil set a cup of tea on the coffee table and scooted on the edge of the sofa next to her.

"You're really here?" Cyndi reached out and touched his face. He looked the same as always, his curly dark hair needed a trim and he had a three-day beard growth, like he did the last time she saw him.

"I'm here." Gil turned his head and kissed the palm of her hand.

"But...why? What are you doing here?"

He shrugged. "I knew you needed me, Cyn. I couldn't bear the pain you were in, being alone at Christmas."

She leaned back from him. "How did you know?"

He smiled and shrugged again. "I just knew."

Cyndi ran her hands through her hair and shook her head, trying to clear it. Gil tried to catch her hands but she pounded them on his chest instead. "You didn't mind the pain I was in when you left me! *You left me!*" she cried, pummeling him.

"I know, I know." He tried to comfort her but she was having none of it.

"Where's Ciara?" Cyndi asked him angrily, tears streaming down her face. "Why aren't you with Ciara?"

He grabbed her shoulders and faced her. "She's spending the night with her grandparents and some other family. I'll be with her tomorrow. I thought maybe tonight, I could be with you."

Cyndi scrambled away from him and off the sofa. "You bastard! How could you even think..." Her sentence trailed off. She couldn't pretend like she didn't want him. She looked at him there on the sofa looking sweet, apologetic and dammit, sexy! He still looked so damn sexy, she couldn't stand it. "I can't believe this," Cyndi muttered.

"Don't think about it so much." Gil stood up and folded her into his arms. "You needed me, and I'm here. I dare you to tell me that you don't want me here."

She looked up at him, the tears falling again. "Of course I want you, you jackass. I'm just scared as hell."

"I know." He held her tightly, rubbing her back and pressing her body into his. "Try not to overthink it. I've missed you, Cyn, and I know you've missed me. Let me love you tonight."

Cyndi felt the hard ridge of his erection through his jeans and pressed into it. "God, yes," she murmured, then kissed him passionately. He opened his mouth to her and she forced her tongue in deeply. She plundered with it viciously like she wanted his body to do to hers, and damn if she didn't want it more than anything! She knew she was breaking her own rule about casual sex, but it didn't seem to matter, because this was *Gil*. Her beloved Gil was back, even if only for one night. Tomorrow he would go back to Ciara, but Cyndi wouldn't think about that. She wanted to relax and enjoy...and not think. "Make love to me, Gil," she whispered breathlessly between kisses.

He smiled and pressed her down on to the sofa. Cyndi watched him as he stood to shut off the lights, leaving them in the glow of the fire and the flickering Christmas tree. When he reached out to the tree and grabbed a candy cane from it, Cyndi felt herself cream her underwear. She reached down and flicked off her slacks and panties quickly, and Gil smiled as she tossed her blouse and bra aside.

Unwrapping the cellophane, he pumped the red and white candy stick between his lips a few times to wet it. He leaned over Cyndi and she shivered as he traced the sticky cane across her nipples and down her stomach. "Still like candy cane kisses?" he murmured, and she shivered again.

"Only from you."

Gil held the candy between his teeth like a cigar as he undressed himself. His erection sprang free from his briefs and Cyndi eyed it hungrily. "Are you going to share that candy?"

"When I'm done with it," he agreed, and removed it from his mouth as he leaned down to kiss her.

Cyndi groaned as the minty taste mingled with the flavors of their mouths. She inhaled sharply as his mouth moved down her body. She knew what was coming and creamed again with the anticipation of it. "Oh, Gil," she moaned as he licked the stickiness off her nipples one at a time, slowly, thoroughly, and in an achingly familiar way. His mouth continued lower, following the trail of the candy to her own pink opening. "Oh God," she moaned again, and he chuckled because he hadn't even started yet. But Cyndi knew what was coming and her hips bucked with eagerness.

Gil rubbed the candy cane over her throbbing clit and through her slick folds, spreading peppermint methodically over her. He took the stick and slid it gently into her pussy, and thrust it in and out slowly as he began licking her clean. Cyndi came explosively, shuddering and soaking him with her juices. He lapped them up

and continued cleaning her, dragging the melting stick of sugar in circles over her clit as he sucked her pussy dry.

She came again gloriously, and yanked Gil on top of her by the hair. He grinned as he faced her, the candy still hanging out of his mouth like a cigar and his face sticky and wet. "You're a mess," she teased him.

"You're still a gusher. I love that." He kissed her, putting the other end of the candy in her mouth and they both sucked her juices off of it and gazed at each other. Finally Cyndi took the candy cane and flipped Gil to his back. She rubbed the sticky pink cane over his flat nipples and watched them pucker before she sucked them into her mouth. He groaned with pleasure and arched his back.

Cyndi dragged the stick down his body and followed it with her mouth. She settled between his legs and traced the candy up and over his rigid cock. Gil squirmed and she smiled, licking the drop of moisture off the tip of his cock before pulling the whole shaft into her mouth. She heard him groan as she worked him up and down slowly with her mouth and her hands. She cupped his balls, massaging them, and felt his body stiffen. As his stream exploded, she lowered her mouth so it shot straight down her throat. Cyndi didn't realize she was crying until she pulled away from him moments later.

"Hey, come here." Gil reached for her and dragged her up and into his arms. "Don't cry."

"I can't believe how pathetic I am," she murmured. "You show up for one night and I'm all over you like a cheap hooker on a twenty dollar bill."

He rubbed his hands over her back and said softly, "That was worth a lot more than twenty dollars, I guarantee you that."

Cyndi slapped at his chest and he laughed and grabbed her hands.

“I’m teasing!” he insisted, and wrestled her to the sofa beneath him. “That was perfect, the way it always was. You’re so beautiful, Cyn.”

Her tears still streamed down her face. “If it was so perfect, then why—”

“Shhh...” he quieted her, and tugged the last of the candy cane from her hand. “There’s my candy. Share it with me. I need more candy cane kisses.” He broke the last of the stick in half and put a piece in each of their mouths.

“Gil,” Cyndi tried to protest, but he kissed her and she couldn’t form coherent thoughts anymore. His body weighed heavily on hers and his tongue possessed her mouth. She wanted to stay that way forever.

* * * *

She must have dozed, because when she woke alone on the couch, she was fuzzyheaded. The Christmas tree twinkled brightly—it wasn’t a dream. “Gil?”

“Right here, baby.” He carried a tray out of the kitchen. “I thought you might be hungry.”

She pulled the blanket around her and looked at him. “I thought you were a dream.”

Gil smiled. “Damn nice dream.”

“Yeah, it was,” she said softly, and put her head in her hands.

He set the tray down and sat next to her on the sofa. “Cyn, you need to eat something and get your strength built up. You look awfully run down.”

“It’s been stressful at work,” she looked around, “and here. I didn’t want to decorate for Christmas. I just wanted it to be over.”

“I figured that. But you need to keep going, baby. Don’t act as if your life is over. Get out there and get back in the game. You’re a beautiful woman; men will be falling all over themselves to get a shot at you.”

"That's what Lisa says." She looked at him angrily. "But it didn't keep you here."

He smiled at her patiently. "That was different, and you know it. But I don't want to talk about that. We still have a long night ahead of us. Eat something and get your strength up for round two."

Cyndi nibbled at some cheese and crackers from the tray. "I can't believe you waltz in here and think I'm going to make love with you all night long."

"Believe it," he said, and flicked a strand of hair back from her face. "Because that's what we're going to do. *All night long.*" He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "You want it as much as I do."

"Yes." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I want it badly. I've missed you so much."

Gil worked her to her back on the sofa and hovered over her. "I've missed you too, baby." He looked over her. "God, I love your body."

"Show me," she whispered.

He slid his hand between her legs and parted her folds. He inserted a finger and brought it out again. "You ready for me?"

"Oh yes." Cyndi spread her legs and felt his cock thrust toward her center. "Yes," she moaned again, and raised her hips to meet his thrust. They joined fully and rocked back and forth as one.

Thrills went down her spine at how right it felt. She wrapped her legs around his and propelled her body against him.

"You feel so good," he told her through gritted teeth.

"Mmm, you too," she agreed, and her eyes rolled up in her head as she moaned, "I'm coming!"

"Come on," Gil encouraged, keeping up his movements as Cyndi shuddered and clung to him. "Oh yeah, that was pretty, you're such a pretty girl..."

She collapsed to the sofa but he wasn't quite finished. "Get back up here." He grinned and worked one hand under her ass,

pressing her into him. "You've got one more in you, I know you do. And I'm going to come with you this time. Come on, baby. Fuck me hard and come with me."

Cyndi shivered at his words and felt herself going over the edge again. She practically growled at him, "Yes! Fuck me!"

Gil shuddered and Cyndi held tight to him, orgasmic waves washing over both of them simultaneously. She felt more wonderful than she could ever remember in her life, until she came back to reality and remembered that she only had this man for one night. She fought back the tears this time.

"Oh my God," Gil muttered, holding himself up on his arms so he wouldn't crush her. "That was fucking incredible."

"Yeah, it was," she agreed quietly.

He winced as he pulled out of her, and climbed off the sofa. "If I smoked, I'd want a cigarette right now."

"There's always a candy cane," she told him, and they both chuckled.

He leaned down to kiss her. "I've had enough artificial sugar for one night. I only want the real thing now—you, the sweet taste of you."

Cyndi ran a hand through his hair. "Still such a smooth talker."

"Only to you, baby."

She started to comment and he waved a hand to quiet her. "Don't, Cyn."

She sat up, pulled her knees to her chest and hugged them. "So, Gil, will you say goodbye when you leave, or just disappear?"

He looked at her seriously. "You know I would never just disappear." He waved off her comment again and said, "Cyn, if this is too hard, maybe I should just leave." He reached for his shirt.

"No!" She scrambled off the couch and took the shirt from him. "Don't go! Please, Gil, I want you to stay!"

He wrapped his arms around her and Cyndi cried into his chest. "I need you to stay," she whimpered.

"I'm not going anywhere tonight," he said softly. "I want to be here with you."

"Thank you." She looked up and touched his face. "I love you so much."

He kissed her forehead. "You've got to get over me. I want you to be happy, Cyn, not sitting around pining for me."

"I can't. I love you." She kissed him and he responded, pulling her into his arms snugly. She sighed, and murmured, "Let's go to bed."

"We won't have the Christmas tree," he reminded.

"We'll make do." She pulled him by the hand and led him to her bedroom.

As they walked in, Gil picked up the framed picture of him from her dresser and said, "You should put this away. It won't look good when you bring other men in here."

"There are no other men." She knelt on the bed and tugged him toward her. "I only want you. I want you to taste every inch of me, and when you're ready, I want you inside me again. I want you, Gil. I want you." Cyndi knew she was begging, but he started it by coming here, and now she wanted as much of him as she could get before he left again.

"I want you too, my beautiful Cyndi." He pressed her back on the bed and began exploring with his mouth.

She lay back and tried to think about nothing more than the feelings he was stirring inside her. Her mind kept coming around to the fact she wasn't 'his beautiful Cyndi' anymore, but she knew if she voiced her concerns, he might leave, and she couldn't allow that. She had several more hours until morning, and she intended to make the most of them. "Love me, Gil," she said softly, and he murmured something unintelligible back to her. His mouth was otherwise occupied, and Cyndi was floating to the clouds.

She awoke with the late morning sun peeking in through her window blinds. She yawned, stretched, and remembered. "Gil?" Cyndi sat up and looked around but there was no answer.

They made love until dawn, when the first shards of daybreak filtered a murky pink light into the room. She vaguely remembered him telling her goodbye, but she was so sleepy and so contented, it was fuzzy in her mind.

She got up and went to the bathroom, sore with muscles aching she hadn't used in ages...or ten months, to be exact. She had made love with no one since Gil, and after last night, it would be a long time before she wanted to make love with anyone else. He had satisfied her completely, and she would savor and cherish the memory for a long, long time.

Standing under the shower spray, Cyndi cried in fits and spurts. She tried to be happy, and grateful for the gift Gil had given her. But it hurt so damn bad to know he was gone, back with Ciara, and she might never see him again. She stood under the stream of water until it turned cold, then grabbed a towel and proceeded to dry herself off. She felt better, a little numb perhaps, but generally pretty good.

Cyndi had just dressed in jeans and a festive red sweater when the doorbell rang. She darted down the hall, checking the living room quickly for signs of debauchery. It looked strangely neat and tidy, not exactly how she remembered leaving it. She shrugged and opened the front door to Lisa.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart! Wow, you look better! Did you have a good night?"

"Yes," Cyndi replied and smiled. "I had a great night." She started to tell Lisa about Gil coming back, but stopped. Lisa never liked Gil, and she wouldn't appreciate his one-night stand with Cyndi. So she smiled, and left it at that.

"I'm so happy to hear it. I was worried about you."

"I'm fine, really I am. I feel much better today." That was the God's honest truth.

"Wonderful! Then perhaps you'll change your mind about coming to my house. Jason sent me over to see if I could convince you to come. His family will love you, and you and I can make fun of them behind their backs."

Cyndi laughed. "We'll do no such thing. But yeah, I think I will come over. It might be nice to be around a family today."

"Cousin Tyler will be there," Lisa reminded Cyndi, raising her eyebrows up and down.

"You don't need to fix me up; I told you I'm fine and I mean it."

"Then grab your coat and come on. I've got a turkey in the oven."

Cyndi hesitated and then said, "If you don't mind, I think I'll drive my car. I've got one stop to make before I come over, but it'll be quick, I promise."

Lisa nodded. "I thought you might." She reached down on the ground behind her and pulled up a bouquet of carnations in the Christmas colors of red and white. Three candy canes were threaded through the arrangement, and it looked very festive. "I brought you these. Tell Ciara I miss her, and Auntie Lisa remembered how much she loved candy canes."

"Oh, thank you." Cyndi took the arrangement and smelled the fragrant flowers. "It's beautiful." She smiled at Lisa and gave her a hug. "I won't be long; I'll see you soon."

"We're counting on it. If you're not there in an hour, Jason will send out a search party."

"I'll be there. Thanks again, Lisa," she looked at the flowers, "for everything."

"You bet." Lisa winked. "See you soon." She turned and walked to her car, and Cyndi closed the front door.

She smelled the flowers one more time before setting them on the table and returning to her room to finish getting dressed. She applied a touch of make-up and some jewelry, and decided she looked pretty good considering her lack of sleep. As she left her room, Cyndi stopped and touched the picture of Gil on her dresser. "I love you," she told him. She picked up the picture next to his and smiled at her beautiful blonde-haired daughter. "I love you too, Ciara, and I always will." Setting the picture back down, Cyndi brushed away a tear and returned to the front room, gathering up the flowers, her coat and purse.

It was a short drive to the cemetery, a trip Cyndi could make in her sleep because she'd driven it so often. She entered the large white gates and took the first left past the angel statue reading, "Stevens." Several rows later, she stopped her car in front of the white marble stone which read, "Benson." Cyndi inhaled and exhaled carefully before she stepped out of her car. The snow covering the graves was untouched. For some reason, she expected to see footprints.

Cyndi knelt by the stone and wiped away the snow from the name nearest her. "Gilbert James, October 22, 1976—February 11, 2006." She reached across to the middle of the stone and wiped away more snow. "Ciara Michelle, June 12, 2002—February 11, 2006."

She nestled the flowers in front of Ciara and plucked one red carnation and one candy cane out to put in front of Gil. "Oh, I miss you two so much. I can't believe it's been ten months already." She twirled the candy cane around in her fingers and smiled as she stuck it in the snow by Gil's name. She inhaled the fragrance of the red flower and closed her eyes.

The deep red color reminded her of all the blood she saw when she first arrived at the scene of their car accident. It happened on a Friday. Gil got off work first, so he picked Ciara up from preschool, and they stopped for pizza on their way home. Cyndi got

the call on her cell phone; she hadn't even left work yet. She raced to the scene just as the ambulance was preparing to haul Gil away. He made them stop so he could tell Cyndi good-bye. She was frantic but he clasped her hand and told her he loved her, and to go to Ciara. The ambulance took off, and Cyndi was informed Ciara had already been taken to the hospital, but she was dead on arrival.

All Cyndi could see was blood everywhere. A drunk driver had appeared out of nowhere and Gil's car was totaled. Cyndi looked in through the broken windshield and saw a mangled bouquet of flowers and a crumpled pizza box. She got in her car and drove quickly after Gil's ambulance, but when she got there, she discovered he died on the way to the hospital.

She opened her eyes and the bright sun glaring on the white snow made her squint. She set the flower down for Gil by the candy cane, and smiled. "Thanks for last night, baby. I love your candy cane kisses."

She looked at Ciara's name on the stone. "Merry Christmas, sweetheart. Tell Grandma and Grandpa Benson hello for me. I love you, Ciara."

Cyndi looked at the gravestone. There was room for her name next to Ciara's, and someday, she would be buried here with them. Right after the accident, Cyndi would often lie down on the ground next to the two dirt mounds that covered her husband and daughter, hoping to somehow sink in there with them. She didn't feel that way anymore.

She still felt sad, for sure, and a part of her probably always would. But today, she felt loved—very, very much loved—and strangely hopeful for the future. "Merry Christmas." Cyndi kissed her fingertips and pressed them to the top of the stone. She stood up and headed for her car. Lisa, Jason and their family awaited her. The future awaited her. Cyndi smiled.

VAMPIRE CHRISTMAS

by

Susan M. Sailors

Amanda took several steps back to admire the mantel of the twelve foot wide fireplace. But then she frowned because the greenery was *still* crooked. She looked out into the entry hall, then up the stairs, but saw nothing but the gray stones of the old mansion covered in greenery. She sighed. She couldn't start putting the red bows up until all the greenery was hung properly. She was starting to feel like she was lost in a forest with no hope of rescue.

"Isn't anyone still here?" she called. Even though it was her turn to stay overnight, she hoped everyone else hadn't cleared out already.

Just as Amanda turned back to the mantel, she heard heavy footsteps bounding down the stairs. She knew that sound—Gabby, the new maid.

"Did you call?" Gabby gasped. Gabby ran around all hours, blond curls bouncing behind her, as if she was perpetually late and she was always out of breath.

"I was just checking to see if anyone else was still here." Amanda didn't really want Gabby's help. She'd prefer to do it alone.

Gabby shrugged. "Someone's upstairs. I think it's one of the other maids checking your room or something."

Amanda nodded. "That's fine. Are you leaving now?"

"Yep. Gotta get to the mall. See you on Monday."

"See you later," Amanda said.

Gabby tore off toward the front door, and of course, slammed it behind her.

Amanda sighed again. It had been one of those days. She turned back to try her hand at the decorations again, but a sudden thought made her stop. Linda had been the only maid to come in besides Gabby that day, as there weren't any guests at present, and Linda had left around three o'clock.

Amanda decided to go up and check. Gabby was probably mistaken, but Amanda couldn't think of any reason why someone would be in her room. As she went up the stairs, she glanced into the parking lot. She could just barely see Gabby's taillights disappearing down the road. Her own car was the only other one in the lot.

As Amanda neared her room, she felt a cool breeze drift past her. She looked down the hall, but the windows at the end appeared to be closed. She found her door open, and the draft seemed to be coming from there.

"Hello?" she called. She pushed the door open carefully. "Is anyone here?" She thought quickly. "I was just going to lock up for the night."

At the sound of a whining creak, she looked across the room. Her full-length mirror was moving, just like a closing door would. It reached the wall and shut with a click.

Amanda thought about calling one of the other managers on her cell, but she didn't feel like waiting for any of them to get all the way out to the mansion.

"Hello?" she called again. She moved toward the mirror slowly. When she reached it, she looked all around the sides of the frame. She didn't see anything to indicate that the mirror would swing outwards, but she gave it a tug anyway. To her surprise, it opened immediately.

"Shouldn't you knock first?" a voice said.

Peering into the darkness, Amanda saw a man standing in the opening, leaning against the wall. He was dressed in black pants, a white button-up shirt, and a black, old-fashioned jacket. His golden eyes shone at her out of his pale face like a cat's, and his long black hair fell past his shoulders in waves.

He smiled wickedly. "Well?" he prompted.

"Well, what?" Amanda yelled. "You certainly didn't knock before entering my room. Who the hell are you and what are you doing here?"

The man stepped forward into the light. "I must say, I think I like you." He glanced over her body slowly. "I like you very much indeed."

Amanda pulled her cell phone out. "Get out of there right now. I don't know how you knew about this passage or whatever it is seeing as how we didn't, but this is private property now and a place of business. If you don't either leave or explain yourself, I'm calling the police."

"You seem very sure of yourself. Most women would have called the police by now. Or at least screamed."

"Do I have a reason to scream?"

He considered this. "Not really, since you're the one who's intruding."

"Me? I'm one of the owners of this place."

"That might be so, but this is my house. I built it, and it will always be mine, you can rest assured of that."

"You built this house? Nice touch. Now I know for sure that you're a liar, or perhaps just crazy." She turned and headed for the door. "Come downstairs."

As Amanda reached the door, it slammed shut. She tried the handle but it wouldn't budge. "How did you do that?"

"Not ready to scream yet?"

Amanda glared at him. "Not on your life."

"You called me a liar. You don't believe I built this house?"

"This house was built over one hundred years ago. You didn't build it."

"Yes, I did."

"So that would make you Damon Allister."

He bowed mockingly. "At your service."

Amanda didn't even acknowledge his reply. She dialed 911 on her cell phone. She waited, but the phone never rang. She looked down at the screen, which was blank. She pushed the power button, but the phone wouldn't respond.

"I hate those things," Damon said. "Without a doubt, they are the most annoying invention of the past decades."

"What the hell did you do?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does! Let me out of here!"

"Would you like me to prove that I'm Damon Allister?"

"You can prove it to the police, I don't care!"

Damon unbuttoned two buttons on his shirt and pulled his collar aside. "Recognize that?"

Amanda looked at the pentagram burned into his neck. "That doesn't prove anything. You could have done that yourself."

"My father did that when I was ten years old to protect me from werewolves." He buttoned his shirt up and laughed. "It worked, actually. I was never troubled by werewolves."

"The story of Damon's scar is in our pamphlet. Everyone knows about it. It's one of the reasons we decided to buy this place and turn it into a bed and breakfast. Local oddities draw tourists in droves."

"Never attracted any before. Most people were too afraid of me. I was intrigued by your venture, so I let you continue."

"Let me out of here."

"I haven't proven my identity yet." He moved closer. "Damon had quite a way with women. They'd swoon in his arms, some-

times from fright. He was the ‘mad, bad, and dangerous to know’ type.”

Amanda folded her arms. “Not impressed. Gabriel Byrne was a better Byron.”

He laughed. “Maybe that’s what I’ve been waiting for—a woman who wouldn’t be the least bit impressed by me.” He reached around her and opened the door. “Shall we?”

Amanda turned immediately and headed for the stairs. “I’m calling the police on the house phone as soon as we get downstairs, just so you know. Your story needs work.” At the turn in the great staircase, she looked back and saw that he wasn’t following her. “Damn it.”

She hesitated, but then ran into the lobby and called the police. She didn’t feel threatened by the man, not really, but she knew it would be foolish to act like he wasn’t a threat.

She went back upstairs and checked her room, but he wasn’t there. She didn’t want to venture back into the secret passage because she didn’t know where it led or how well he knew the passages. She checked all the other rooms on that floor, but she was pretty sure he’d gone back the way he’d come. *Were there more secret passages? Could he be anywhere in the house?* The plans had shown no secret passages, and the restoration hadn’t revealed any rooms not in the plans.

* * * *

“Is that everything that happened?” the officer asked.

“Yes,” Amanda said in frustration. “I don’t understand why it won’t open now.” She stared at the mirror, hoping her mystery man could feel her mounting fury.

“He might have locked it from the inside. I’d hate to break it down since he’s probably gone, and you’re so close to opening.”

She sighed. “I’d prefer that as well. What can I do?”

“Well, we can move the dresser here in front of the mirror, and you can take another room for the night. And we can leave an

officer outside. You could call his cell if you heard or saw anything.”

Amanda nodded. She hadn’t told them about her phone, which now worked, or how the man had “locked” her in the room. She didn’t want the locals thinking she was some kind of kook.

“That sounds fine. I’ll go find another room.”

She finally decided on one down the hall and hauled her suitcase and briefcase down there. The room was plainer, but it had a king-sized bed. It would be nice to stretch out and forget about the evening’s strange events.

Someone knocked on the door just as she was heading into the bathroom.

“Derek will be outside, and he’ll circle the parking lot periodically. We’ll be ready to come back up here if you need us.”

“Thank you. That makes me feel much better.”

Amanda turned on the shower, but then changed her mind and started to fill up the tub. It was a large porcelain claw foot tub, and she’d been dying to try one of them out. She hadn’t brought any bath salts, but she checked the maid’s closet and came back with two rose scented candles. They would have to do.

The scent soon filled the warm air, and Amanda slipped into the tub, grateful for the relief it gave both her body and her mind.

She was just beginning to drift off when she heard his voice.

“Dreaming of a white Christmas?” he whispered close to her ear.

She jumped forward, splashing water all over the floor. She knocked her cell phone to the floor and it slid under the tub.

“Damn it!” she yelled. She looked up and saw the supposed Damon Allister leaning against the wall laughing.

“That wasn’t half bad. You’re lucky you didn’t slip though.”

She picked up a candle and hurled it at him. “How did you get in here?”

He caught the candle. "Careful there. You're going to ruin my walls. This is real marble."

"I know that! They're my walls now!" She grabbed a towel and jumped out of the tub.

"So you finally believe me?" he said with a smile as he got an even better look at her body than he had before.

"In about two minutes, there's going to be an officer up here. And you aren't getting away this time." She bent over and groped under the tub for her phone.

"Take your time. There's a lovely view."

She turned on him. "What do you want? Are you really prowling for a piece of tail, or are you just trying to drive me crazy?"

"I'm sorry, but did you just say 'prowling for a piece of tail' or is my brain addled by the fact that you're naked?"

"That's what I said. You can't seem to keep your eyes off me."

"But I have kept my hands off you."

"Which is the only reason I haven't tried to beat the hell out of you."

His face darkened. "I rather wish you could, actually." He looked directly into her eyes.

Amanda didn't know what to make of that comment. His eyes bothered her, though she also found them alluring. They just didn't look natural. They seemed wild and primitive. But she shook her head. He was just trying to distract her by speaking in riddles, and his eyes just happened to be an odd color. "I'm calling the officer." She turned around and went back to her search.

"Fine. I'll be gone when he gets here."

She moved to the door. "You aren't leaving."

He smiled. "Much as I'd love to stay, I should go. I was mistaken."

"About what?"

"I thought you were someone else, someone special I needed to find."

"I don't understand."

"You're certainly special, not just 'a piece of tail,' shall we say, but I don't think you're the one I'm looking for."

He turned away from her and walked toward the wall.

"Wait a minute. Tell me more. If you really believe what you just said, then—"

Her words died on her lips as she reached out to grab his arm and clasped nothing but air.

* * * *

Amanda knew she was being really stupid, but she was too stubborn to care. She kept the flashlight trained on the floor so the officer outside wouldn't see it and become suspicious. First she checked the rooms on her own floor, then she went downstairs. Finding nothing, she eventually ventured down into the cellar.

She shone the light into every storage room, but found absolutely nothing.

"Can I safely assume that perhaps you've reconsidered a few things?" Damon said.

Amanda whirled around. After she'd caught her breath, she said, "You could definitely say that. It's not that often men materialize out of nowhere in my bathroom and then disappear right in front of me."

"Are you ready to believe that I am Damon Allister?"

"If you are, that means you're a ghost."

He laughed. "Not exactly, but you're pretty close."

"Can we get out of here? This place is pretty musty, not to mention creepy."

"We could go back to your room."

She ignored how nice that sounded and rebuked the part of her brain that had dared to think so. "Let's try the common room."

They went back upstairs, and Amanda led them into the common room, waiting for him to sit down first before choosing a seat across from him. As soon as they were settled, Amanda said, "You

said you were never troubled by werewolves. Why was your father afraid of them?"

"You get right to the point, don't you?"

"You said I was close, so answer my question."

"We have some problems with...such creatures up here in the mountains."

"Creatures such as..."

"Vampires."

"So you're not dead, just one hundred fifty years old?"

Damon made a face. "I'm not quite that old, but you seem to get the picture."

She shook her head. "I came to find you in order to figure out what was going on. I'm not convinced."

"But you're open, shall we say?"

She thought about this. She didn't really need a man in her life right now, certainly not one who claimed to be a vampire. The question of his possibly telling the truth lingered in the back of her mind, but she pushed it aside.

"Okay," she began. "There is obviously something odd going on here, but let's get back to what you said earlier. That's what really made me curious."

"What?"

"When you said I wasn't the one you were looking for."

He smiled and leaned forward. "That got to you, didn't it? I thought it might."

Amanda sighed in exasperation. "You aren't helping your cause at all."

"And what is my cause?"

She wanted to say seducing her, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. "Convincing me not to have you arrested."

"Not a bad guess. Why don't you sleep on it?"

"What?"

"Wait until morning, see how you feel about me then."

“I’m not sleeping with you here.”

He stood up and moved toward her. “Good. I wasn’t planning on sleeping either.”

“Don’t come near me,” she protested, even though she didn’t move.

“Do you really mean that?”

“Part of me does,” she admitted.

He pulled her to her feet. “I like your honesty.”

“I’m not so sure about yours.”

“That’s understandable.” He pulled her into his arms. “Isn’t this much nicer?”

“It’s much stupider.” She felt she had to protest in some way. She couldn’t admit she was absolutely willing to go to bed with a man who was either crazy or a vampire.

“How about I show you some of my powers?”

“Like what?”

He shook his head. “I have to show you.”

“Okay,” she said shakily.

He gently caressed her cheek and looked into her eyes. Then he tilted her head up and kissed her lips gently.

Everything fell away at that moment. They were lying on a bed covered in silk sheets. Amanda’s pussy was throbbing with need, and Damon’s body was pressed against her as he kissed her breasts. His teeth raked over one nipple, sending waves of pleasure through her. She pressed her body against his, crying out for release. He bit her breast gently, and she saw a few droplets of blood gather there. He licked them away as he slowly entered her. She began to orgasm immediately, overwhelmed by it all and unable to take her eyes off him.

When she stopped trembling, he began pumping into her. He brought his face very close to hers as they both approached their climax.

"You are the one, Amanda. Only you can bring me back to life," he said.

She fell apart in his arms as he cried out his own pleasure.

And then it was all over.

Amanda was standing in the common room in Damon's arms. Her legs were shaking, and she could hardly catch her breath. Her pussy was hot and throbbing, and her breasts were heavy, but they were feelings of satisfaction, not need.

"What did you do?" She looked up into his eyes and saw intense heat there. She knew he was just as affected as she was.

"I just kissed you."

"The hell you did."

He laughed and pulled her closer. "Could any normal man do that?"

"And yet I still don't know what you mean."

"About what?"

She looked up at him seriously. "You said I was the one. You said I could bring you back to life."

"I knew the moment our lips met."

"But what does it mean?"

"It means you are the one who is meant to love me; the one who is meant to save me."

"But how do I save you?"

"It's pretty simple really." But he didn't explain.

She pulled away. "Go on. If it's so simple, enlighten me."

"We need to have a child together, then you must take the babe out into the sun. I was the only surviving member of my family. If someone with my blood can stand being in the sun, I'll be human again."

"That's a pretty tall order." She walked toward the window and looked out at the moon.

"But it's really not that difficult. It's quite natural."

"It's quite sudden." She shook her head. "I hope you have more than nine months to break this spell," she joked.

Neither of them laughed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was amazing, but I'm not about to promise to help you based on that."

"How about promising to love me?"

"That's an even taller order," she said. He did seem to be the kind of man she could love. She wasn't sure how she knew that. Thus far, he'd done nothing but confuse her and make her have an amazing orgasm. Well, two amazing orgasms. That didn't sound like a good foundation for a happy family.

"Look. I'm obviously not going anywhere. Why don't you just promise not to sic the cops on me again?"

She finally smiled. "I think I can do that."

"Well then, I'll let you get to bed." He kissed her hand, then began to walk away.

"You aren't coming with me?" She hated the disappointment she suddenly felt.

He looked toward the window. "If only we had the time. I'll come to you tomorrow night. Will you be here?"

"It can be arranged."

He smiled mysteriously. "Then I'll see you tomorrow night."

As he walked away, Amanda felt a rush of anticipation and apprehension. She still wasn't entirely sure what she was getting herself into, but the holiday season was definitely heating up in more ways than one.

* * * *

Amanda sat on her bed, trying to read. No one had questioned her volunteering to stay two nights in a row when Eliot had a family emergency. Amanda wasn't ready to believe in fate, but she seemed to be believing in vampires, so it really wasn't much of a jump.

She'd been unable to forget about her encounter with Damon the night before. She'd gone into the archives and looked at some of his pictures. There wasn't much room for doubt. If this man wasn't Damon Allister, he'd paid a pretty penny to some doctor so he could look like him. And when she'd examined the pictures, she'd had the oddest feeling, as if he were watching her. She didn't know what to make of that, as vampirism in the real world was a new subject for her.

She was anxious to see him again, but she was also apprehensive. Could she trust herself around a man with such powers? Her body wanted to argue that she should forget such thoughts, and the building ache between her legs was giving her some damn good reasons in support of that argument.

Someone knocked at the door.

"Come in," Amanda called.

The door opened, and Damon stepped in, closing the door behind him. "See? It's always better to knock."

Amanda smiled. "I guess so."

He sat down on the bed next to her. "So which business are we getting down to first?"

"The talking business. If we start the other way round, we'll never get to the talking."

"You don't trust my control?" he teased.

"I'm not sure if I trust mine."

"But how about a kiss first?" He pulled a sprig of mistletoe out of his pocket and held it over her head. "I traipsed all over the woods just to find it."

"I'm not sure I'm ready for another kiss, not just yet."

He clucked his tongue and put the mistletoe down. "So what would you like to know?"

"Everything," Amanda began, but then she paused. She wasn't sure she was ready to start talking about what was happening be-

tween the two of them, so she continued, "Will my guests be safe here? Will I be safe here?"

"Of course."

"You sound so sure."

"It's part of the curse, in a way. I was attacked by a vampire, and I bested him. I was going to kill him, but he offered me a deal. Back then, I still had dreams of a family and a normal life, but I didn't want to give up the house I'd built or my family land, which happens to be infested with vampires and werewolves. He said if I became one of the undead, my land would become sacred and no immortal would ever hunt on it again."

"So it was your choice to become a vampire?"

"I couldn't become a werewolf. My father had assured that." He rubbed the spot under his shirt. "And it's much easier for a vampire to control himself, as a vampire is still mostly human."

Amanda stood up. *Vampires, and werewolves, and hot sex, oh my*, she thought, hoping he couldn't read her mind. He looked up at her, waiting for another question.

"This is all new to me, so just be patient."

"It's hard to be patient when you're wearing something like that."

She looked down and groaned. She *was* wearing something she'd thought would be sexy. A black tank top and sheer silk pajama bottoms.

"Well," she said, "we will be done talking eventually."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"But what about the curse? Did you really let this guy bite you, then let him go?"

"No. I drank his blood." When he saw the look on her face, he added, "Out of a cup."

She laughed dryly. "That makes it sound so much better."

"And since I did this willingly," he went on, "I was given one way of freeing myself."

“But then what about the protection?”

“It’s eternal, regardless of whether I’m cured or not, and I do want to be cured.”

“Having a child.”

“Yes. I was the last of my entire family, so my cure will come when someone with my blood can stand out in the sun.” He smiled.

“Or be held out in the sun by my lovely bride.”

“That will really cure you?”

“It will purify my blood.”

Amanda sat down again, staring at the floor. A million things rushed through her head. A gorgeous man, who just happened to be undead, was in her bedroom and wanted her badly. She’d had the best orgasms of her life, even if they had been rather surreal, with this man, and she was looking forward to many more. But to devote herself, her life to him, and agree to have his child?

She looked up at him. “When do I have to decide?”

“As I said last night, I’m obviously not going anywhere, so I have all the time in the world.” He ran his fingers down her arm and took her hand. “But I think I know some ways to convince you.”

“Is that really fair?” she breathed, very affected by his touch and his nearness. The ache between her legs returned with new fervor as she looked into his eyes.

“I’m a vampire. We can be very ruthless.” He kissed her wrist.

She gasped as sparks of pleasure shot through her body. “Are you using your powers on me?”

He smiled, and his eyes darkened. “Not yet. I don’t want to overwhelm you.” He pulled her closer and kissed her shoulder as his fingers toyed with one nipple. “I’ll go as slow as you want me to.”

She let her head fall back as he started to kiss her neck. Would he bite her? She didn’t care, as long as he kept touching her. Her body was tingling. She wanted to wrap herself around him and

never let him go. She felt aroused and out of control, and yet she felt safe. She somehow knew being in his arms would bring her nothing but pleasure.

She ran her hands over his chest, pushing his coat off and reaching for his shirt buttons. Their lips finally met, and she moaned as their tongues danced against each other. His fingers trailed along her thighs and eventually rested on her hot center. She opened herself to him, wanting to feel his touch there desperately.

He undressed her quickly, and then sat back to look at her. "You're breathtaking, better than I remember." He pulled her into the middle of the bed and began running his hands over her body as if he wanted to memorize her every curve. When his hand returned to her pussy, she was dripping wet.

He smiled and lowered his head to her breast. "Let's see if you taste as good as you look."

She arched against him as his tongue and teeth played across her nipple and his fingers delved into her. She'd never felt so good, or so free. She moaned, almost ready to come.

He brought his face closer to hers. The intimacy of the moment was almost too much as she opened her eyes and looked up into his.

"We're perfect together. Absolutely perfect," he said. He ran his finger over her clit once more, and she came apart. He stifled her moan of pleasure with a kiss.

She lost herself in the taste and feel of him, kissing him deeply as her tremors subsided. She buried her face in his neck and breathed in his musky scent.

He pulled her close and held her tightly, looking into her face.

"You are fairly persuasive," she finally said.

"And we're just getting started," he whispered.

She ran her hands through his hair, and at the same time, she felt an amazing bulge in his trousers. She wanted him buried inside

her, needed to feel him go over the edge. "Then we shouldn't waste any time."

He smiled and began kissing her again. He had an open invitation to take her right away, but instead, he kissed her face and neck slowly, running his hands up and down her back. She had to admit his tenderness surprised her, but it also made her want him even more.

She rubbed her body against his insistently and reached for the zipper on his trousers, pulling it down quickly and running her hand over his hard cock.

He groaned. "Are you sure you want a passion-crazed vampire in your bed?"

"I've been looking forward to it all day long," she whispered as she wrapped her fingers around him.

He groaned again and she giggled as he tore his pants off and pulled her roughly against him. "I certainly won't leave you wanting. I just wouldn't be a gentleman." He rolled on top of her, then began sliding into her gently. When she moved her hips insistently, he thrust into her fully, and they both gasped.

"You're even better in the flesh," he said. He began to move slowly, trailing kisses over her cheeks, down to her neck.

"Will you bite me?" she asked.

"If you want me to," he said.

"I think I do."

He pressed his lips more firmly against her neck. "Then I think I will." He began to move in and out of her more quickly.

She barely felt the prick of his teeth, but she couldn't deny the way her senses heightened, her body tingled, and her pussy tightened around his thrusting cock.

She held onto him, feeling everything else drop away as it had the night before, as they came apart and became one.

* * * *

Damon held her until it was almost dawn. "I have to go soon."

"I know, but I'll see you tonight, won't I?"

"Of course."

She sighed. "Maybe I can see you every night."

"What do you mean?"

"I plan on moving here when we open. There's no reason I can't move now."

He pulled away from her and looked into her eyes. "Does this mean you're succumbing to my persuasion?"

She drew circles on his chest with her finger, then looked up. "I think so."

"It would be most convenient," he said as he kissed her. He pulled away reluctantly. "But I really must go."

She looked up at him. "Maybe someday you won't have to leave me at dawn."

He leaned over and kissed her again quickly. "That's up to you."

She rolled over and laughed. "I am used to getting my way."

He dressed quickly. "Then we'll just have to keep working on making sure you get your way. It will be very demanding," he teased. "We'll have to work on it every single night."

She stretched and put her arms around his neck. "Looks like Christmas is coming early this year."

"Good thing you've been such a good girl," he said. He kissed her one last time. "Until tonight."

He pulled himself out of her arms and vanished, just as he had before.

Amanda hugged her pillow tight and looked up at the ceiling, smiling as she thought how naughty she planned on being in the future.

ELF MISTRESS

by

C'ann Inman

“I think the cock should be a bit bigger.” Jennifer tilted her head to the side and studied Santa’s private dimensions.

Her assistant, Tracy, nodded. “I agree.” She tweaked the mold to allow Santa a little more length. “How’s that?”

Jennifer pushed her russet hair back behind her ear and narrowed her blue eyes. “Works for me.” She picked the mold up. “Make at least a dozen more. Then we’ll get started on the elves.”

She watched Tracy hurry away and sighed. They had about three days to come up with all the molds and implement them. The candy wouldn’t stay fresh if they did it sooner. Plus, she had to worry about all the other sections of her candy store, *Wicked Indulgence*.

There were tooth fairies to stock. Wedding items. Both naughty and nice. Those were year-round. And now that Thanksgiving was over, a whole two days ago, Jennifer needed to concentrate on Christmas. Her clients were already asking her when the display would be ready.

She rubbed her temple and told herself she would complete everything in time. She always did.

Tracy hurried back with the list of the other candies they would make. “We’re working on snowmen, elves, and the reindeer.”

Jennifer blew out a breath. “Give me a sample of the deer nuts as soon as possible. Have John whip up a batch this evening, and I’ll

set out samples tomorrow. If they disappear, then we'll stock them as an item."

Tracy nodded and made a note. Her brown eyes leveled on Jennifer. "You sure you don't need a break from this?"

Jennifer arched an eyebrow. "I'm sure. Not quit worrying. Sleep is overrated anyway."

"Sleep and sex." Tracy shook her head sadly. "Two things no woman should have to do without." Her brown eyes studied Jennifer's face. "Been too long. Don't you want to have someone to go home to?"

Jennifer shrugged. "Business first. Pleasure later." She would never admit aloud that sleeping by herself was a depressing reality. One she had no idea how to change. At least she helped others let their wild side loose.

She glanced toward the partition that separated her regular business from her somewhat wayward candy. *Naughty Novelties* was emblazoned across the top in large, crimson letters. And behind that partition? Candy you certainly wouldn't find at a mainstream distributor.

Tooth fairy suckers with large breasts. Jennifer made sure she was rather well-endowed. The trick was to make sure her wings didn't fall off while they made her. She came in cherry, orange, and blueberry. There were also chocolate suckers.

Hard candies that depicted breasts, pussies, and cocks. And even a large sucker that depicted people having sex. There were heterosexual, homosexual, and even a ménage a trois. Quite a mouthful.

There was flavored whipped cream in cans safe to use anywhere on a person's body. Homemade Jell-O shaped like penises and pussies. And different flavored syrups that lovers could use all over willing bodies.

Jennifer hadn't started out with the naughty side of business. But soon demands rolled in from friends who asked if she could

make candy just a bit sinful. And she found that she could. Word soon spread, and her business picked up considerably.

She now had a website and a catalog she sent out twice a year. Several of the sweet treats were mainstream. But there was a growing popularity for the somewhat sexier side of candy.

Tracy tapped her pen on her notepad. "John says no problem on the deer nuts. He's going to use that recipe you gave him." She chuckled at the thought of her husband's craftsmanship. "He seems to be having a good time."

"Excellent." Jennifer closed her eyes for a second. "How about we make miniature elf suckers? Both naughty and nice. I think the kids will like those." She snickered. "The nice ones." She glanced at her assistant.

"Great." Tracy made another note, nodding. "And we'll do the snowman poop?"

"Sure. Giveaways at the front door for the first dozen kids each day. But I also want the snowman flasher. John still has the molds, right?"

"Already on the table." Tracy laughed. "He's got the kitchen all decked out right now. Like a kid in a candy store." She glanced at Jennifer, and they both laughed.

"I want the display ready in three days. No later than."

"Sure." Tracy assured her one last time and left the room.

Jennifer watched her go and looked around. Three days wasn't impossible. And it would be well worth the effort. She yawned and stifled it quickly. No sleep for the wicked. Or at least for the owner of *Wicked Indulgence*.

* * * *

Jennifer opened her store to utter chaos. There were at least a dozen people on the sidewalk already waiting for her to unlock the doors. She did, quickly, and stepped back. The customers filtered through, and Jennifer watched them.

At least half headed straight back behind the partition to check out what naughty things had been made this year. Jennifer tried her hardest to come up with new and unique ideas for the holidays. She also employed at least three more helpers than usual to help her with all the customers.

There was a cash register on the naughty side so all her customers could purchase their items without scandalizing others. And one person who specifically stayed at the partition so no little person wandered through and was educated prematurely. She snickered and turned back to the counter.

Jennifer looked outside and smiled. There was a light snow falling. Just enough to make her long to be out in it. To catch a snowflake or two on her tongue. Winter was absolutely her preferred season and Christmas her favorite holiday. Hands down.

Red and green ribbons and tinsel decorated every inch of her store. Silver and gold tassels hung from corners. And there were silver and gold bells draped throughout the store.

Wicked Indulgence utterly embodied the holidays and all that was good in them. The smells, the sights, and the sound. Jennifer picked up an instrumental compact disc that she adored. It was upbeat but mellow. The tunes wove through the store fostering the exact ambience she craved.

She watched a mother with two small girls step inside and smile as a helper gave the children a gift bag with marshmallows and a couple of suckers in them. The woman inhaled deeply and immediately began shopping.

John was making gingerbread right now. Jennifer didn't stock the gingerbread houses. But she took orders for personalized gingerbread. One of her oldest clients ordered family gingerbread every year.

Each cookie handcrafted to reveal the recipient's likeness and hobbies. Matriarch gingerbread for her customer. Wide-brimmed

hat and clutch for the cookie. And a small string of pearls around its neck.

Jennifer snuck away briefly and went back to the kitchen to talk to her head chef. She inhaled deeply at the smell of chocolate and gingerbread. Jennifer was certain it was what Heaven smelled like.

She chuckled at the sight before her. If she thought the front was chaotic, then the back was pure madness.

“Put the sugar in after. After!” John scowled at one of the assistant chefs, a boy in his teens. Easygoing and mellow away from the store, John was an absolute terror in the kitchen.

“Yes, sir.” The boy nodded nervously and fixed his mistake.

Jennifer’s lips twitched. “Santa’s going to bring you coal if you keep scaring the shit out of my employees like that.”

John scowled. He would probably be pulling out his hair if he had any. His blue eyes darkened dangerously. “I don’t care what the old guy brings me. Maybe he’ll gift me with someone at least knowledgeable enough to handle simple directions.” He glowered at the boy again.

Jennifer tugged on his sleeve. “Come here, taskmaster.”

“Make it quick.” John glanced toward the ovens. “I have another batch coming out in five minutes. And if I don’t decorate them then...” He let the sentence trail off.

“Yes. I realize what a catastrophic event that would be.” Jennifer nodded. All the candy would be ruined.

“What do you need?” John glanced around the kitchen to make sure all his instructions were heeded.

“I’m going to need more Santa sticks and Santa sacks. Double the order on the deer nuts.”

John rubbed his hands together and grinned. “I knew those would go over great.” He smiled, showing the dimples Tracy was so fond of. “All gone?”

“Almost.”

Jennifer had come up with the idea to join two almonds with a bit of syrup. Then the almonds were covered and lightly covered in granular sugar. They looked just like a miniature replica of deer nuts. Customers were going crazy over them. One company already ordered five pounds for their annual Christmas party.

“Anything else, boss?” John looked at the oven again, and Jennifer smiled.

“Just more of the same. Lots of happy customers.” She hugged him quickly and stepped back out front.

There were two lines out front with at least four people each in them. Jennifer hummed a Christmas carol under her breath and opened another register.

* * * *

Mitch stepped into the candy shop and looked around. It was decked out to the hilt with Christmas decorations. There were angels and Santas in every corner. No elves. He snorted. *Go figure.* Highly underrated workers.

He tugged the hat down self-consciously on his dark, brown hair and glanced around again. The proprietor was doing good business. He lifted his head and inhaled deeply of the lovely scents in the shop. Too bad he’d probably have to close it down.

His hazel eyes roved over customers and workers until they narrowed on a woman who seemed to be giving orders. Mitch shook his head. *The owner is a woman?*

He reached around in his pocket before he found his cheat sheet. J. Eve. *Well, shit.* No first name. He assumed it was a male. Next time he would ask for a complete name. No surprises that way.

Mitch moved forward until he was within a foot of the woman. *Pretty. As far as mortals went.* Brown hair with striking blue eyes. Curvy underneath that sweater and jeans. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and stepped back abruptly as she moved forward.

The last thing Mitch needed was a distraction. He would take care of business later. First, he would check out exactly what the store had to offer. He glanced up at the *Naughty Novelties* sign.

Mitch rubbed his jaw against the slight stubble. He'd been in town for three days and was rather sick of it. He wanted to go home as quickly as possible. Thank God this was the last of his six stops he had to make before he could go back. Where the real work was.

His hazel eyes moved to the calendar, and he cursed under his breath. Being the manager had its ups and downs. Customer visits sucked. But the rest was great. Except Nick was pressing Mitch to make a choice with family plans.

Family plans, for chrissakes! Mitch scowled. Just because the old codger had been happily married forever didn't really mean Mitch wanted to follow in his footsteps. Nick warned Mitch that love would find him no matter what. But Mitch planned to put that moment off for as long as possible. He had duties. A job. A life not bound to another. And he liked it that way.

Mitch stepped behind the crimson curtain, and his jaw dropped. If the main shop was sedate, then this was wild.

Suckers of every description filled the wall on his left. He stepped closer, and his eyes widened. Couples in every sex act possible were depicted. And the crotch candy was unbelievable. Mitch leaned in closer and marveled at the intricate design.

"See something you like?"

Mitch jerked upright and glanced behind him. The lady from out front stood behind him, smiling. "We have all sorts of candies to suit every person's taste."

"I see that." Mitch's voice was gruff. The last thing he needed was the owner to see him ogling her naughty candy.

Jennifer moved forward and grabbed one of the smaller suckers off the counter and handed it to him. It was a small, cherry elf butt naked. She grabbed one for herself and stuck it in her mouth.

"These are popular right now." She took it out and licked it from top to bottom. "Tasty."

Mitch scowled as he looked down at the small stick in his hand. The poor elf's cock was small and rather pitiful between its legs. The small proportions would offend every elf he knew.

Jennifer looked at the scowl and took the sucker back out of his hand. "Or you can have the female version." She placed an orange sucker in his hand. Another elf, but this time with female parts. Her breasts were high with protruding nipples and a smooth pussy.

"Santa's going to bring you coal." Mitch tried to get the image of her licking the small elf out of his head. If she wanted to lick an elf's cock, he would be more than happy to produce one.

"Do you give every customer this level of attention?"

"Sure." Jennifer shifted the sucker to her cheek and grinned. "You seemed rather lost. So I thought I would come and help. First time in?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "Thought so." Jennifer motioned to his hat. "Aren't you hot?"

"No," he lied.

"Okay." Jennifer started with the suckers. "As you can see, we have lots of different flavors and predilections."

"What possessed you to start this type of shop?"

Her eyebrows arched. "This type of shop?"

Mitch motioned. "The *Naughty Novelties* part."

"High demand." Jennifer winked. "And it's fun. Our chef enjoys the challenge."

He scooped his hand into small glass of nuts and read the label. "Deer nuts?"

"Yes."

Mitch held them up and shook his head. "Dancer and Prancer would be pissed."

Jennifer threw her head back and laughed. "You think?"

"Pretty sure." Mitch fought back his answering grin to her laugh. He would not fraternize with her. Refused to. No matter how pretty she was. He forced the thought of the sucker out of his mind with a great deal of effort.

"Is there anything in particular I can help you with?"

He shook his head. "Just looking. Thanks." He watched the woman retreat back to the main part of her shop. Mitch bought two of everything and carried his bags back to the hotel.

* * * *

Jennifer watched the stranger go loaded down with bags and immediately walked back to the naughty side. She approached the register and smiled at Dana.

"What did the last customer buy?"

"The pretty one with the hat?"

"Yes." Jennifer nodded.

"Two of everything. Quite a sale."

"No kidding." Jennifer's blue eyes narrowed. There were only a couple of reasons that someone would buy two of everything. He either wanted to become a major customer, or he was ripping off her ideas.

"Did he pay with a credit card?"

Dana shook her head. "Cash. Over three hundred dollars worth. He seemed fascinated with the elf suckers. Bought quite a few of those."

"Thanks." Jennifer walked back to find Tracy, currently chatting with John in the kitchen.

John had three large cookie sheets full of gingerbread people. Adults and children decorated to suit every taste. Tracy sat on one of the empty counters and nibbled on a small one with red boots while John leaned back against one of the industrial ovens for a minute to rest.

"We may have a problem."

They both frowned.

“What do you mean?” John stood upright and crossed his arms. “Something I need to take care of?”

Jennifer’s lips twitched. “Simmer, studmuffin.” John took Jennifer under his wing like a protective older brother. He and Tracy pretty much adopted her.

“There was a guy in here a couple of minutes ago who bought two of everything.”

John scowled. “Did he now?”

Tracy shook her head. “So?” She took another bite of her gingerchild.

John looked at his wife and chuckled. “Stick with us here, Tracy. If the guy wanted to be a customer, he would have asked for a business card or catalog. If he were trying to start his own shop...” He trailed the sentence off.

“He would have bought two of everything.” Tracy jumped down off the counter, and her brown eyes snapped. “Well, I damn well don’t think so.” She brushed her hands together.

Jennifer nodded. “We don’t know for sure, but there was something different about him. I can’t quite pin it down.”

“What did he look like?” John had his notebook out, ready to make notes.

“Tall.” Jennifer closed her eyes. “Hazel eyes. Dark brown hair. Angular face. Strong jawline.” Her blue eyes opened. “He wouldn’t take off his hat, though it is warm in the store. He wore a black jacket. Black jeans.”

Tracy frowned. “And I missed that?”

“Careful, woman.” John pulled his wife to him and kissed the top of her head.

She laughed and ran her hands along his smooth scalp. “Who could compete with you?”

Jennifer smiled at the pair. “No sex in my kitchen.” The smile faded. “Let’s just keep an eye out for him, okay?”

“Sure.”

She walked back out front and tried to put the stranger out of her mind. But he never quite left.

* * * *

Mitch took his two bags from *Wicked Indulgence* and sorted everything out on his bed. Then he simply closed his eyes and wished to be home. The generic hotel room faded completely, and he found himself back in his bedroom at his house.

He relished the crimson comforter laid over his large, oak bed. Its gilded edges matched the rugs placed on the hardwood floor of his bedroom. A large dresser sat on his right wall while his bathroom door was situated across from it. Directly across from the foot of his bed was a large rock fireplace that even now had logs burning in it.

Mitch sighed. He made the other visits to the shop owners, but none stuck with him as the woman of *Wicked Indulgence* did. He glanced down at the bag’s contents. Nick would probably be upset about the contents of her store. He couldn’t see Nick offering her the job. Mitch picked up all the goodies and started for the main house.

* * * *

Jennifer sniffled miserably and dabbed her nose. She was not a good patient. And this damn cold pissed her off. It wasn’t a large one by any means, but she refused to go in to her shop even slightly sick and risk contaminating everyone else.

Tracy assured her everything would be fine. She would handle it. Jennifer knew she could. And would. But sitting at home in her holiday pajamas didn’t do it for her.

She glanced down at the erratic Santas all over her legs and across her chest. They seemed to dance up and down her legs while smiling genially and offering presents. They were only one pair in her ever-growing collection of holiday nightclothes.

Jennifer shuffled to the kitchen, feeling sorry for herself. The biggest season for her store, and she was stuck at home. She grimaced and poured herself some hot tea. Then she started to walk back to her bedroom to wallow in misery when someone knocked on her door.

She tilted her head to the side. Jennifer never had visitors. All her business associates came to the store. Tracy and John were at work. She looked out the peephole and almost choked on her tea. It was the mystery guy from the shop.

She hurriedly unlocked the door and stared at him. "What are you doing here?"

The man stepped inside and looked around. He was clearly displeased. When he looked down at her, his hazel eyes flashed. "I have a proposition for you."

* * * *

Mitch dreaded this meeting above all else. He would have to come clean about his visit and reveal a secret that could alter the mortal's world forever. The woman was driving him crazy, and she was totally unaware of it.

The night he arrived home, he dreamt of her. Her mouth. Her body. Mitch groaned and shifted in the doorway. In his dream, she did things to his body that drove him to the brink of insanity.

When Nick chose her, Mitch didn't know whether to curse, or cheer. How could he handle being around her all the time? Because in her new role, they would work side by side. His cock twitched in his pants, and he almost groaned. His annoyance made his voice gruffer than usual.

* * * *

"What?" Jennifer eyed the stranger warily. "And please," she added sarcastically, "come right in." She shut and locked the door. "What do you want?"

"To offer you a job." The man yanked on his hat self-consciously, and Jennifer frowned. "Do you have an earache or something?"

"No." The word was abrupt and annoyed.

"What kind of job?" Jennifer dabbed her nose carefully and scowled at the man. "I don't even know who you are." Her blue eyes studied him carefully.

"You'd be doing the same thing you are now."

She scowled. "Leave." Jennifer started to the door when the man's hand shot out and closed around her arm.

"Please." His hazel eyes sharpened. "Give me a chance."

Her arm tingled where he touched her, and she attributed the sudden dizziness to her slight cold. "Who are you?"

"Mitch." The man tried to smile. "Mitch Sheldon." He sighed. "Screw it." He reached up and pulled the hat off his head.

Jennifer's eyes widened at the sight of two pointy ears protruding from his head.

"You have..." She trailed off and motioned to his head. Her hand moved and traced the soft protrusions. "Wow."

At the first touch of her hand, Mitch closed his eyes. All the blood rushed to his cock, and he didn't wonder about the reaction. Something about this mortal called to him. And the sooner he got her out of his system, the better off they'd both be.

He reached up and covered her hand with his.

"Did it hurt?" she asked softly. "The surgery?"

"What?" Mitch looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"When they did that to your ears. Did it hurt?"

"Oh shit." Mitch raked his fingers through his dark hair. "I haven't had surgery, mortal. I'm an elf. Do you get it now?"

Jennifer gauged the distance between herself and the phone. She rushed around the side of the couch, but Mitch tackled her onto the cushions. She kicked and struggled to no avail. Panic crept

up, but she didn't understand the other odd feelings she had. Breathless. Excited. Safe.

Her blue eyes looked up into the man's hazel ones, and she stilled. "Let me call you some help. Okay?"

The man shook his head. "Don't say I didn't warn you." He covered her eyes with his hands, and Jennifer felt the room shift. When he removed his hands, she looked around in amazement.

Her living room was gone. She was in a bedroom of sorts. Her hand traced the soft crimson coverlet beneath her fingers. And the man still lay on top of her.

Jennifer glanced up and arched an eyebrow. "If you're having a delusion, apparently I've joined you."

"No delusion."

Mitch slid down her body, and Jennifer bit her lip to keep from asking him to move right back.

"Welcome to the North Pole."

* * * *

Jennifer sat upright with blue eyes wide and disbelieving. "What?" she shrieked.

Mitch looked down at her sprawled across his bed and forced himself to stay at least three feet away from her. It was damn near torture. "The North Pole," he repeated.

She exhaled and lay back down. Jennifer closed her eyes and counted to ten. Then she slowly opened them. "Holy shit," she muttered. Amazingly, her cold was gone. She dabbed her nose and glanced up at Mitch. "I'm dreaming."

"Nope."

Jennifer shook her head side to side. "Impossible." She sat up again and moved her russet hair off her shoulders. "I have no cold. I'm at the North Pole. You're here." She ticked the items off on her fingers. "I'm dreaming."

Mitch moved closer, unable to help himself. "And if this were a dream, mortal, what would you do?"

“Jennifer,” she muttered. “My name is Jennifer.”

“Jennifer.” She watched in fascination as the elf moved closer. What she wanted was simple. To taste the tall, dark stranger in front of her. To have those hands cover her body. It was her dream. *Why can't I do as I wish?*

She patted the comforter. “Come here.”

Mitch sank to the bed beside her, and she cupped his cheek with her hand. Slowly, so slowly, she brought his mouth to hers. At the first touch, her body jumped, as if in shock. And then all the pent-up desire she had poured out of her.

Their lips rubbed together, and Jennifer felt Mitch's tongue flick against mouth. She willingly let him in and groaned low in her throat at the erotic duel in her mouth. He seemed to find every crevice, every recess that brought her pleasure.

Jennifer lay back on the bed and purred as Mitch covered her body with his. She had no doubt that he wanted her. His cock pulsed against her thigh. Ready and willing. The knowledge filled her with a feminine power she didn't know she had.

Mitch moved from her mouth to her neck, where he found her rapidly beating pulse and flicked his tongue against the soft flesh. Jennifer's pussy ached as she imagined that tongue elsewhere, pleasing her. She shifted to try and move him where she wanted him.

But he wasn't having any of it. His hands moved up her arms and pinned them above her head. One hand stayed there while he halfway sat up and moved her tank top higher. Jennifer's breath heaved in her chest while Mitch's large hands skimmed across her belly and up higher. He moved the tank top over her breasts and gazed down at her. When he was certain she watched, he bent his head and took her taut nipple into his mouth and sucked gently.

She arched up against him, wanting more. Her body tightened as he flicked his tongue against the hard nub, and she cried out. But he still kept her hands above her head. Jennifer could have moved

them from beneath his, but she didn't want to. She would let him control the game. To do what he wanted to with her. The thought excited her even more.

Mitch moved his other hand from hers and brought it down. He cupped her breasts together and moved his mouth from one to the other, sucking and licking. Jennifer writhed under his ministrations and clutched the comforter in her hands. Such a talented mouth against her body.

And then those magic hands moved down to her hips and tugged gently on her pajama bottoms. Jennifer hadn't bothered wearing underwear. And she watched as Mitch's eyes darkened considerably as they gazed on her pussy next to his hand. He slid the pants off and moved his mouth to her left ankle. And then her knee. His tongue tracing some invisible path that left her breathless and wanting.

She spread her legs as she felt his head move higher and higher. Jennifer arched her body up, silently asking him to use his mouth on her. His mouth was against her in an instant, and she shuddered as she felt his tongue stroke her pussy folds and flick against her swollen clit. She moved her hand then and clutched the back of his head while he pleased her pussy.

The ache built and spread throughout her body, and she brought her other hand down to pluck at her taut nipple. Every nerve in her body stretched to the limit until Mitch gripped her hips in his large hands and worked her steadily against his mouth. Fucking her with his tongue. Making her scream in pleasure as her body spasmed over and over again.

Jennifer lay limply on the bed and licked her lips. Little after-shocks of pleasure still filtered through her system. She opened her eyes and saw Mitch stroking himself in front of her. She scooted to the edge of the bed and wrapped her legs around his waist.

His eyes widened for the briefest moment before he placed the tip of his cock against her slick opening.

“What do you want?” His voice was hoarse and strained.

“Your cock.” Jennifer lifted her ass up and rubbed herself against his hard length. “Inside me. Fucking me.”

Mitch groaned and grabbed her hips. He slid his large cock between her legs, and Jennifer tightened around him. He fit her perfectly. Mitch slid his hands under her ass and stroked her pussy with his hard cock. She moaned as she felt tension build in her body again. She would be happy if he never quit fucking her.

“Please,” she moaned.

Mitch’s body shook as he tried to restrain himself. Tried to postpone the inevitable. Jennifer smiled a wicked smile and tightened around him again. His groan told her everything she wanted to know. She worked her hips against him until she felt her body begin to spiral again.

“More,” she told him, breathlessly. “Give me more.”

The bed shook with the force of their bodies, and the headboard slammed against the wall. Jennifer watched Mitch’s cock slide in and out of her body, and she shuddered. The pleasure built again until it was all she knew. All she felt. Her orgasm ripped through her, and she called out his name over and over again.

Mitch shuddered, and she felt him collapse on top of her; her legs still wrapped tightly around him.

Jennifer blinked. “Wow,” she murmured.

He shifted and smiled down into her face. “Indeed.” He propped himself up and looked down at her. “So you’ll stay? Run the candy department here?”

She frowned. “What?” Her body still hummed, and she had problems concentrating. “What are you talking about?”

“You will stay. Accept Nick’s position. Be my Elf Mistress.” His hazel eyes looked deeply into hers.

Jennifer halfway sat up. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Mitch scowled. "You've lain with me. Come to this world. You will accept the position."

"You will kiss my ass." Fury lit deep within Jennifer's eyes. "We had sex." *Great sex*, her head amended. But no need to feed his ego now. He thought she would simply come to this world and make a life? *Leave her family? Her friends? Her everything?* He had lost his fucking mind. And besides, she was dreaming. *Aren't I?*

"I don't know what you're blathering about." Jennifer sat up and yanked her tank top on. She pushed him out of the way and reached for her pants.

His large hand moved to hers. "Please."

Jennifer stopped in mid-movement and looked at the man next to her. *Elf*, she silently corrected. *He's an elf*. She bit her lip.

"I have a life. A business. And just because Nick offers me some job in the candy department at the North Pole doesn't mean diddly. We are talking St. Nick, right?"

Mitch raked his hand through his hair, obvious frustration in every stilted move. "Obviously," he snipped.

Jennifer pulled her clothes on and stood up. "I believe in Christmas magic. I do." She glanced down at the elf in the bed. "But I don't believe this is for me. Can't believe this is for me." She put her hands on her hips. "I want to wake up now."

Mitch pulled on his jeans and jerked his head down. "I see." He put his hands over her eyes. "As you wish," he whispered.

* * * *

Jennifer woke up on the couch with a serious headache and no cold. She ran her hands down her body and told herself it was a dream. A sexy, sinful dream. She glanced at the clock and saw it was only a little past nine. She would go into work. Make a difference. Make some candy. Make her forget the erotic dream she had. The elf who made her body ripple with pleasure.

She growled low in her throat and shot off the couch with a scowl. "I'm going mental," she murmured. Jennifer dressed quickly

in jeans and another sweater. She tugged her brown suede boots on and pulled her hair back into a loose bun. The store needed her. And just because her subconscious was having a slight breakdown, that didn't mean she could ignore her priorities.

* * * *

Jennifer walked into her store and smiled at the customers. Tracy hurried around the counter and bombarded her with a huge hug.

"Oh my God! Where have you been?"

"What?" Jennifer's blue eyes widened in confusion.

"I've been trying to call for two days. And you never picked up your phone. I was going to call the police today." She frowned. "Or bust down your damn door myself."

"It's Monday, isn't it?"

"Monday?" Tracy eyed Jennifer slowly. "It's Wednesday, sugar."

"Wednesday?" Jennifer shrieked.

Several customers turned their heads, but Tracy waved them off and hustled Jennifer quickly into the back.

"Okay. Tell all. How in the hell could you lose two days?"

Jennifer's lips flattened. "I was busy having wild elf sex and being offered a job by Santa Claus."

Tracy reached up to feel her forehead. "Do you have a fever?"

She slapped her friend's hand away. "No. I don't have a damn fever." Jennifer closed her eyes. "I don't think I do." She sighed. "Remember that guy who bought all those items? Two of each?"

"Sure." Tracy still eyed her warily.

"He's an elf."

"Okay." Her friend drew the word out so that it sounded as if it had four syllables.

"Never mind." Jennifer blew out a breath and patted her bun. "I'm here now. Ready to work." She smiled reassuringly at her friend. "Everything else best left forgotten. Right?"

“Right.”

* * * *

But Jennifer didn't forget. Because every night for the next week, she had a visitor in her dreams. An elf who touched her body and made her tremble with desire. And one who knew exactly how to touch her. To make her cry out his name while his hands skimmed over her body to bring her unspeakable pleasure.

She woke every morning with an ache that made her edgy and irritable.

Her days at work didn't fill the ache. They brought it closer to her. The edges sharp and painful. What if she hadn't dreamed of Mitch? What if she actually was there?

The thoughts went round and round in her head until she thought it would explode.

Tracy and John watched her silently, but she felt their worried glances more than once. She was quite possibly losing her mind. How could she explain her overwhelming attraction to a man—elf?—she only saw once?

Jennifer drove home on Friday and slammed her car into park. She had the headache from hell, and irritation was about three hours ago. She was full-blown pissed off right now. How dare some guy finagle his way into her thoughts? Disrupt her life?

She slammed the door behind her and collapsed on her couch in the dark. Life sucked. Instead of being excited about Christmas, she was beginning to dread it. And there was no logical explanation for it.

Jennifer wanted to sleep. To sleep and dream of her elf lover. She closed her eyes and breathed in slowly. And out.

“Jennifer.” His voice whispered across her skin.

She shifted and moaned. “Mitch.”

“Tell me what you want.” His hand moved restlessly over her bare skin, and she trembled.

“I want you. Only you.” Jennifer opened her eyes and took in the glorious sight of Mitch’s body lying next to hers. She threw herself into his arms and molded her body next to his. She wanted to give him as much pleasure as he gave her.

Jennifer slid down his body slowly, letting her mouth and tongue trace a path along his muscles and hard planes of his body.

His stomach tightened as she nipped below his belly button and moved lower.

She took him into her mouth inch by agonizing inch. He threw his head back and groaned as she moved her mouth up and down his hard length while cupping his balls in her hand.

Jennifer licked all the way around his cockhead and flicked her tongue across the tip. Mitch threaded his fingers through her hair and whispered her name as she sucked him deeper and deeper down her throat.

“Enough,” he commanded.

He moved her up higher, spreading her legs on either side of his hips while he drove his hard cock into the core of her. Jennifer trembled as he pistoned in and out of her while clutching her hips tightly. She rocked back and forth, savoring the friction between their two bodies.

Mitch moved his hand between their two bodies and found her swollen clit. He moved his finger in tight circles around the bud until Jennifer was helpless and unaware of the sounds coming from her throat. She bucked against him wildly, searching for the release she needed.

“Come for me,” he murmured. “Come for me.”

Jennifer’s body jerked, and she felt the orgasm shudder through her with a force that left her blind and deaf to everything around her.

“Come back to me, Jennifer.” Mitch’s voice was soft in the darkness. “Come back to me.”

She jerked upright with her heart pounding and cursed the darkness. Jennifer lay back down and tried to sleep. But it was no use. Sleep wouldn't come.

* * * *

Jennifer looked like death warmed over the next day at work. She avoided Tracy and John with single-minded determination. She would take her defective mental faculties and deal with them herself, thank you very much.

The day dragged on interminably while Jennifer stayed behind the counter out front. She must have rung up forty people before noon. But she didn't remember a one. Her mind was preoccupied with a dark-haired demanding elf.

Jennifer was lost in her own thoughts when she heard the bell over her front door ring. She glanced up, and her jaw dropped completely open.

The curvy, older woman with wire-rimmed spectacles stepped inside her store and looked around. Her gray hair curled riotously around her head and framed her sweet face. Her blue eyes twinkled as they took in the sights and sounds of the store. A simple ivory shirt was tucked into the waistband of her black skirt, which tapered to shiny, black boots. She covered herself from the cold with a black leather jacket.

Jennifer loosed her tongue with a great deal of effort. *Surely not*. She came around the side of the counter with a great deal of effort and approached the older woman.

"Mrs.?"

"Just Nan, dear." The older woman smiled and patted her curls. "Just Nan." She picked up a likeness of herself cast in chocolate and smiled.

"Nan," Jennifer repeated faintly.

"Don't look so stricken, child." Nan's lips twitched. "I've only come because I was curious about you and your shop." She arched an eyebrow. "And a certain moody elf."

"Mitch." The name rolled off Jennifer's tongue of its own volition. She bit her lip.

"Aye. That's the one." Nan unwrapped the sucker and bit delicately into the smooth chocolate. "I had heard he offered you a position with us."

"Oh, he offered me a position all right." Jennifer's cheeks flooded with anger. "After he practically ordered me to stay."

"Ah." Nan grinned. "That boy always has been a bit impetuous."

"Don't forget headstrong and pushy." Jennifer bit down on the adjectives, sexy and sinful.

"Wouldn't think of it." Nan took another bite of the sucker and looked around again. "Nick really would appreciate it if you would think over his offer." She studied Jennifer again. "And I'm sure you realize all the other elves would appreciate it if you would give Mitch another chance to not act like such an ass."

Jennifer looked at her blankly, and the older woman winked. "Rather lot to wrap your head around, isn't it?"

"Yes," she managed.

"Think on it." Nan held up the sucker. "Do you mind?"

"Not a bit." Jennifer watched Nan look around one more time and nod approvingly. And then she was gone.

Tracy walked by and shook her arm gently. "Jen. You okay?"

"Huh?" Jennifer looked at her friend with large, blue eyes.

"That's it." Tracy steered her toward the back of the store. "Go home. Now." She bundled Jennifer up in her coat and shoved the car keys in her hand. "John and I've got it."

* * * *

Jennifer drove home with her mind a million miles away. Mrs. Claus came to her store today. *She did.* Jennifer nodded to herself. *Sure. And she mentioned the fact that her husband offered me a job. And Mitch was moody.* She went over the facts as best she knew them and sighed while she sat in her driveway.

Mitch was real. Her heart embraced the fact while her head kept pounding. She had approached the tinselly twilight zone. Not a comforting thought. *But Mitch's body next to mine? Rubbing against me?*

Jennifer's head fell back against her car's headrest. "Help me," she murmured, pleading to anyone who would listen.

"Will I do?"

She jerked her head to the side and clapped a hand over her mouth before she could shriek.

Mitch sat in the passenger seat calmly studying her. His dark, shaggy hair curled around his black collar while his ears pointed toward the roof. Those hazel eyes seemed to dissect every feature.

"You're real," she muttered.

"Aye. I'm real. And these." He reached out to take one of her cold hands in his. "These are real, too."

"Oh." The word came out short and confused.

"I've made a mess of this." Mitch leaned forward and rubbed his lips softly against hers. When he pulled back, he sighed. "I didn't expect you."

"That goes double for me," she mumbled.

Mitch chuckled. "I can only imagine." He was silent for another minute. "I want you to be my Elf Mistress."

Heat flooded Jennifer's cheeks. "Your mistress?" she repeated. All the nights she dreamt of pleasuring and being pleased by this elf came flooding back. She forced herself to remain calm. "And if I choose not to?"

Color drained slowly from Mitch's face, and he set his jaw. "You are still able to take Nick's offer. To be the candy maker."

Jennifer held her head high. "I deserve more than to be someone's mistress." She looked at him sadly. "Even yours."

Mitch blinked and a slow smile spread across his face. "I think I've miscommunicated my desires, Jennifer."

Her smile was wry. "I don't think you have, Mitch."

“A mistress is the head of a household. A woman who has power and authority.”

“Power and authority?” she whispered. “Not a...” She trailed off and searched for the right term.

“Not the ‘other’ woman,” he supplied for her. “The only woman.”

The only woman. The words wrapped tightly around her heart. “I would be your Elf Mistress?” Jennifer wanted to make sure there was a bit of clarification before she utterly made a fool of herself.

“Yes.”

Jennifer threw her arms around his neck and held tightly. “I’ll have to make arrangements at the store.” She pulled back. “I will be able to visit, won’t I?”

“Anything,” Mitch stroked her cheek with his fingers. “Anything you want.”

“Anything?” Jennifer slid him a heated glance.

He nodded.

She brought his mouth to hers. “I have a wish list inside. Let’s start at the top.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Billie Houston, aka Barri Bryan, is a former teacher and educator. She holds a BA in history and an MA in educational psychology from The University of Texas in San Antonio. Besides penning poetry, Billie cowrites romantic novels with her husband, Herb. Her poetry book *Brush Country* won an EPPIE in 2004 for best poetry collection.

Rusty Wicks lives in a small cottage on a secluded beach in Maine where she spends her time writing, water skiing and beach combing. Romance? Rusty loves it, and delights in bringing it with words to her fans.

Tina lives in the Midwest with her extremely supportive husband and very demanding cat. She has been writing seriously for two years, and loves creating new worlds and characters. She is convinced her success is due to the encouragement of her husband, friends, and the great teachers she had over the years. You can visit her at www.tinabendoni.com.

Skyler Grey has been creating stories since the age of ten and has been a lover of romance since the age of fourteen. Paranormal romance is one of her all-time favorite subjects to write and she enjoys adding a twist in her stories to keep the reader in suspense. Skyler is fourth generation Floridian, living on the tranquil beaches off the west coast with her husband and six children. Please visit Skyler's website and join her newsletter for upcoming contests and new releases at: www.skylerscove.com.

Michelle loves vampires and things that go bump in the night, so it's no wonder her creations are truly paranormal. While most people only dream of finding love, Michelle's characters find it, but in the most unexpected places. Visit her website at www.michellehasker.com

Sherrill Quinn has been writing for publication since February 2005. Her first book with Whiskey Creek Press Torrid was published in March of the following year. To help her keep her grip on reality (and pay some bills), she works part-time in Human Resources while she continues to write sexy stories. You can visit her at www.sherrillquinn.com.

Barb Baldwin comes from a family with three sisters and a brother, which made the Christmas holidays fun because there were a lot of presents under the tree! Barb likes to think she has preserved the best of the holiday traditions because now Christmas means having her family close at hand—Dave, her husband of thirty-seven years; her son, Tom, and wife Stephanie; and her daughter, Cassie and husband John.

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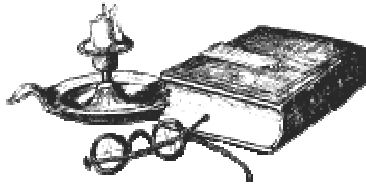
Jamie Hill was born and raised in the Midwest, where she still lives with her husband and two sons. She has always loved to read, with romance and mysteries being particular favorites. She enjoys writing romantic suspense and short stories with erotic and paranormal elements. Her first story for Whiskey Creek Press Torrid was *Far from Ordinary* in the *Summer Sizzlers Anthology*. Other WCPT Titles include *Sweet Reunion* in the *Fall Fires Anthology*, *Moving Day* in the *Lust Anthology*,

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Susan M. Sailors live in Knoxville with her husband and her cats Motley and Shadow. She writes in every genre and has many exciting new releases still to come from Whiskey Creek Press.

C'ann Inman is an Oklahoma author who loves to spin wild and wicked stories for her readers. She realizes that romance can be found in many places and many ways. Her stories celebrate the sensuality of relationships. *What He Wants*, an Erotic Paranormal Romance, is a number one bestseller for Whiskey Creek Press Torrid. C'ann also has short stories in *Winter Wishes Anthology*, *Spring Flings Anthology*, *Summer Sizzlers Anthology*, and *Fall Fires Anthology*. C'ann loves to hear from her readers. You can contact her through her website at http://chryswriter.tripod.com/cann_inman.

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