



Mrs. Claws

or

The NightSweats Before Christmas

by

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MRS. CLAWS
or The NightSweats Before Christmas

CHAPTER ONE

Still stinging from an unintentional insult, she stepped onto the broad concrete apron fronting Prairie Park Mall. Melting snow made walking a precarious endeavor. Preoccupied with that and the humiliating ordeal she'd just been through, too late she felt her Louis Vuitton croissant bag slip from her shoulder and hit the slush like a birthday cake dropped onto a dirty floor. She eyed it with stern condemnation, as if it had intentionally escaped from her custody. Then resignation set in. Sighing, she snatched it up without even bothering to clean it off and kept walking.

Last year she would have cursed vigorously enough to draw attention to herself. But it was no longer 2004. It was nearly the end of 2005. Like a western Fourth of July parade, the intervening march of days had left heaps of dung in their wake. And cleaning them up had drained her.

Lauren Elizabeth Rose Snyder Rose (whose married name was now bracketed by her maiden name, signaling divorce) wondered absently how her life would look if it was represented as a geometric figure. Lives that went smoothly were composed of arcs, she decided. They were like circles or ovals, spheres or eggs, or the flowing, curvilinear silhouettes of flowers. Lives that were fraught with difficulty--abrupt changes, rocky transitions, daunting hurdles--would be angular.

She'd dated sixteen men since her divorce. That alone translated into sixteen angles. Lauren began to chuckle. "Sixteen *squares*," she muttered, then almost slipped and fell in the icy parking lot. Concentrating on stepping gingerly in safer--and less slushy--spots, she finally managed to make her way back to her car.

Safely inside, she immediately pulled her cell from the slop-covered designer purse and called her sister. "Glenna, they think I'm *matronly*!" she said without introduction or preface. Neither was necessary.

Her sister Glenna sounded skeptical. "They actually called you that?"

Lauren began threading her car through the parking lot to the exit, steering with one hand. She had untold years of experience doing this. Driving on ice and snow was much easier than walking on it.

"Well, it *was* in the job description." Lauren wedged the phone between her jaw and shoulder as she grabbed the folded newspaper from the passenger seat and snapped it open. She read from the circled ad. "Ideal candidate will be matronly, personable, patient, and energetic." Contemptuously she threw the paper aside. "I could tell they were interested in hiring me. So they must think I fit the bill on all counts."

"Which means they also think you're...vivacious," Glenna said, obviously aiming for the sunny side. She laughed slyly. "Or else you were the only applicant."

"Oh, aren't *you* boosting my spirits."

"Laurie, why on earth are you doing this to yourself if you're going to take it all so personally? Good Lord, you should've known going into it that they wouldn't be looking for some middle-aged hottie to hawk a cosmetics line or exercise equipment. They're

hiring for Mrs. Claus, for crying out loud!"

Half musing, half fuming, the job applicant ignored her sister's question. "They must've seen my hair as white instead of champagne platinum. They must've seen me as plus-sized instead of--" Lauren searched for an ego-soothing word. "--statuesque. Dear God, I actually *look* the part of Mrs. Santa Claus!" Despair coated the last sentence like the soiled and melted snow dripping down the sides of the Vuitton bag.

"I repeat, if you're so damn sensitive about it, why are you putting yourself through this? You don't need a job. You already have a career. And besides, you hate the holidays."

Lauren didn't need to be reminded of that. Glenna, certainly aware of her slip, murmured an apology. From the age of eighteen to twenty-one, Lauren had wildly adored an architecture student--her first love, in fact--who'd been tragically killed in a freak accident on Christmas Eve while he was on his way to be with her. Now she was facing her first Christmas without Bill, her ex-husband of too many years. December didn't promise to be very joyful...which was all the more reason she must fight against caving in to despondency.

"My therapist--well, former therapist--suggested I find some diversion over the holidays, something to get me outside myself and into other people and the spirit of the season. Except now..." Lauren sped down an entrance ramp and merged smoothly with the freeway traffic. "...now I'm finding out how I really appear to other people. Now I'm finding out I'd make the perfect consort for a jolly old elf!"

Her sister laughed heartily and didn't bother to conceal it.

"Sure, sure, you think it's funny--you with the perfect life. Honestly, Glen, since the divorce I don't even know myself anymore!" She ran a hand through her expensive razor-cut platinum-not-white hair and shivered, wondering if she did in fact, at forty-three, resemble a dowager. This whole *uplifting* plan was going south real fast.

"You want me to come over tonight?" Glenna asked solicitously, although there was still lingering amusement in her voice.

"Tonight... No, you can't. It's Friday. I have a date."

"*Another* one?"

"Listen, love, I put out good money for all those matches at Perfect Fit dot com, or whatever the hell it is, and I'm going to wring what I can out of it."

Talk about the tables turning....

It wasn't that long ago that she'd been pumping up her little sister, that she'd been encouraging Glenna, the cautious intellectual of the family, to pursue a male stripper and trying to convince her that she *wasn't* too old or unattractive for this sublimely sexy younger man.

At the time, Lauren felt secure and self-confident in her own relationship. She had a marriage of nearly twenty years' duration. Her husband had a career that afforded them a cushy life and he had enough class--or so it seemed--to channel that life, their life together, toward better things.

But in the end, "better things" included a woman eighteen years his junior, and the rest...well, they turned out to be just *things*, after all.

Lauren found out the hard way that genuine, deep, abiding love was priceless. She just had to look at her starry-eyed sister to know. She sometimes wondered if it was envy piqued by Glenna's happiness and contentment that now drove her. Or maybe it was the

realization that she'd wasted precious years--perhaps her best years--being an unwitting partner in a charade and now she had to scramble to make up for lost time.

"I think you're trying too hard, Sis," Glenna gently interjected. "Don't force it. Just go about your business and see what happens."

The caring in Glenna's voice brought Lauren close to tears. This unexpected reaction startled her; she stretched her eyes, blinked a few times, and cleared her throat. That advice, born of experience, carried great wisdom.

"But *nothing* may happen," Lauren replied, embarrassed by the sound of the words: clotted, muffled. For the first time since the divorce, Lauren realized how fearful she was. She had always been the strong, smug, self-possessed elder sister. Now she was like a child again. "More years could go by, Glen, with *nothing* happening."

For a few seconds her sister didn't respond. But Lauren could've sworn she felt Glenna smiling. "Or *everything* happening," she finally said. "Take it from one who knows."

* * * *

Before Lauren went home, she detoured to her favorite salon and persuaded Bradley, her favorite colorist, to foil several pastel-colored streaks into her platinum-blond hair. It cost her nearly three hours and \$120, but the price in both time and money was, she thought, well worth it. Damned if she was going to be mistaken for an escapee from a nursing home!

When Lauren finally reached her house on Pearl Lake, she didn't pull up to the attached three-car garage. She impulsively stopped midway down the sweeping, tree-lined drive and just sat there, staring through the windshield at this fieldstone and log structure with wraparound porch that was both her home and her workplace. *At least*, she thought, *I still have this*.

It wasn't guilt that had prompted Bill Snyder to let her have the house. Had it been a factor in his decision, Lauren might have been able to muster some respect for her ex and enough charity of spirit to wish him well. But there'd been no guilt--not a shred, apart from some counterfeit remorse. Bill was simply consumed by an urgent desire to wash his hands of her, their property, and their memories, and move on to the greener grass of Boca Raton, Florida, where his new lady love awaited him...and his overstuffed wallet.

Lauren finally nosed into the garage, got out of the car and entered her haven. Strange how she never felt lonely here. Or maybe not so strange, since Bill had always traveled so much. She was used to being her only company.

She carelessly tossed her begrimed Vuitton bag on the kitchen's round antique oak pedestal table and went to check her email. After taking care of the messages relating to her interior design business, she searched for one from "celebration_time," the *nom de Internet* of her latest cyber-suitor. He was supposed to have sent her his address and directions to his house, about thirty miles away, just in case her car's GPS showed her the long route instead of the shortcut.

One more scroll and there it was: *Hi, Liz. Hope you've been having a good day. I'm looking forward to meeting you. Below are directions to my humble abode. I could cook us dinner or we could go out, whichever you prefer. I guess the most important thing is that we get to talk. I'm very flexible! Hank.*

"Celebration Time," she muttered, smiling and shaking her head. "Come on...."

Normally, Lauren--who always used her middle name with her "match-ups"--wouldn't even consider meeting a man for the first time on his own turf. But this guy, judging by the emails they'd exchanged, was sweet nearly to the point of naïveté, and Lauren developed an instinctive conviction that he was thoroughly innocuous--probably the most non-threatening male she'd ever encountered.

She was equally convinced she'd want nothing more to do with him after tonight. There was something fundamentally suspect about a naïve forty-five-year-old man. He might even--she quailed at the thought--be a mama's boy.

After printing out the message, Lauren's eyes zeroed in on his name: Hank. She leaned back in her chair, covered her head with her arms, and began snickering. "Oh, brother," she moaned.

Hank. It conjured up images of dusty boots and neckerchiefs and chuck wagon meals. She hoped he wouldn't be prone to saying "Yup, yup," while nodding like a bobble-head doll. She hoped he wouldn't call her "ma'am."

She wiped her eyes and sat forward. Okay. That was it. After tonight, she'd follow her sister's advice. No more grubbing around for love. She would, as Glenna suggested, just go about her daily business. *Que sera sera.* What will be will be. This frenetic dating game was becoming too much like a distasteful chore.

But when the phone rang a while later, the nature of Lauren's "daily business" was radically altered.

Prairie Park Mall wanted Lauren Elizabeth Rose Snyder Rose, reluctant matron extraordinaire, to be their Mrs. Claus of 2005.

I must have been the only applicant...

CHAPTER TWO

"Please, God, let this not be the place," Lauren murmured as she sat in her idling car. She double-checked. Yes, she'd turned in the right direction onto Plum Bottom Lane. Yes, the address and fire number matched the one Hank had given her.

Her only consolation was the fact that after this evening, she'd never have to lay eyes on the place again.

Although it was only early November, the expansive front yard was a riot of exuberant holiday kitsch. Multicolored lights glared around and glowed within every character, creature, and animal ever remotely associated with Christmas.

Elves--some brandishing toys like weapons or battlefield souvenirs--cavorted around a loaded sleigh. A full complement of reindeer, their names on little collars encircling their necks, was hitched to the sleigh as if ready for takeoff. And in the midst of it all, on the sleigh seat holding the reindeer reins and surrounded by toys and gaily wrapped packages, was Santa Claus. The grin on Santa's face, had it been on a real person, would have alarmed any security officer enough to give him a pat-down.

Farther away, a trio of carolers, their mouths frozen in perfect ovals, sang silently. Ebenezer Scrooge glowered behind the entire Cratchit clan. A crèche scene had so many mismatched figures that the Baby Jesus seemed on the verge of springing from his manger and sprinting all the way to Bethlehem just to escape the mutants. Scattered amidst these statues and more were the twinkling outlines of other Christmas icons. Lights flanked the walkway, wound through every shrub and tree, and outlined the house itself.

Lauren was tempted to fish in her purse for her sunglasses. She wanted to slink back to her car and leave...but, damn, she'd spent so much time and money tarding herself up for this evening!

Reluctantly she picked her way to the front door. The house, she finally noticed, was an attractive older well-maintained Cape Cod, probably quite cozy inside. Feeling a little more heartened, she rang the bell. It played the first few bars of "Jingle Bells," and that made her think again of the Christmas carnival in the yard. Warily she took a step back, imagining some *Little Shop of Horrors* poinsettia lunging at her and dragging her inside.

But the door opened quite normally, if a little abruptly, and a boy of perhaps fourteen stood there beaming at her. "Hi!" he said cheerily. "You must be Liz." He pushed his eyeglasses back up his nose and kept smiling.

"Uh, yes. Hello."

"I'm Ben." The boy stuck out his hand.

Lauren shook it. "Nice to meet you, Ben."

He stood to one side. "Come on in. It's a lot warmer in here than out there."

"Thank you."

As Lauren stepped into a foyer hung with oversized ornaments, she heard a man's voice call out, "Ben, who's there?"

The boy looked uncertainly over his shoulder, then back at Lauren. His smile wavered, became less confident. He turned back to the house's interior. "Hey, Dad, come out here a minute!"

Lauren's initial mild confusion was lurching toward edginess. Something was wrong here. Why hadn't "Dad" answered the door? And if she was to have dinner with him, why didn't she smell food cooking? Why was his son there?

A tall, quite striking man with wide shoulders, clean-lined features, and a shaved head appeared, frowning slightly, from a room on her right. He stopped, looking through his eyeglasses from Lauren to his son to Lauren again. Ever mindful of her appearance, she flashed him a dazzling smile.

"Dad," Ben said with a brightness as artificial as the front yard's, "this is Liz. Liz, this is...um...Hank."

The man slumped against the doorframe, rolling his head back and closing his eyes. He sighed. "Benjamin, get your bank out."

"Dad, just--"

"No. Go open your bank."

The boy cast a doleful look at Lauren before shuffling toward the stairway that rose from the left side of the foyer. She was aware of her mouth hanging open and her forehead collapsing toward the center as she watched him mount the stairs. Making a concerted effort to change her expression--although she couldn't erase her stupefaction--she turned back to his father. Surely *he* had an explanation.

"I'm sorry," the man murmured, looking at the floor. "There's been a...little bit of trickery here." He shot an uneasy glance at Lauren and tried to muster a smile, but the best his mouth could do was twitch up briefly at the corners. He shoved his hands in his pockets, crossed his legs, and resumed studying the terra cotta floor tiles.

Lauren didn't know what to say. She let out a breath and dumbly shook her head. The unmistakable chinking sound of spilling coins came from upstairs. Soon Ben descended, grasping the handrail and nearly dragging his feet.

With lowered head he approached Lauren and stuck out an arm. There was a ten-dollar bill between his fingers. "I apologize for making you drive all the way over here," he muttered. "Please let me pay for your gas." The little speech sounded rehearsed, as if he'd spoken the lines quite a few times before.

Lauren's face was rearranging itself again, and this time she couldn't control it. "What is going on?" she whispered.

The man straightened and tried to look at her. "Well, Ben has this tendency to play matchmaker...."

Lauren turned her eyes to the boy, who was still proffering the ten. She slapped a hand to her forehead. "Oh my God, *you* sent me those emails?"

Obviously embarrassed, he nodded. "I'm just trying to help--"

"Benjamin," his father said evenly, "how many times do I have to tell you that I don't want or need your help? How many times are we going to play out this scene before you get the message?"

"I dunno," the boy mumbled. "But if you're not gonna do it yourself...."

"Stop it. Now give the lady her gas money and go to your room."

"Keep it," Lauren said as kindly as possible, smiling at the boy. "Believe me, I've made longer trips for less. At least this one was...somewhat entertaining."

Ben's father went up to him, grasping him by the shoulders and steering him toward the stairs. He bent his head to the boy's ear. What Lauren picked up was certainly not meant for her to hear...but she had damned good hearing.

"Listen up. From now on I pick my own dates, okay? You know I don't like those overdone, plastic-fantastic women. And this one looks like she was run over by a cotton-candy wagon."

Lauren's cheeks flamed beneath her brushed-on blush. It was anger more than humiliation that made her blood rise. All remnants of her good-sport attitude fled. She took a few sharply clicking steps to the foot of the stairway as the man descended and she fixed her dove-gray eyes on his face.

"Now *you* listen up, bucko. If there weren't a child present, I'd probably suggest you do something to yourself that doesn't seem to be--" Her gaze quickly but pointedly slid below his waist. "--anatomically possible." *One low blow deserves another....*

The man's eyes didn't move from her face, but the lids stretched considerably. Ben, who was still lingering near the top of the stairs, pretended to sneeze, an awkward cover for the sniggers he was trying to suppress.

Lauren grabbed the newel post and looked up at the boy. "Sorry," she told him before turning her attention back to his father, who seemed on the verge of saying something.

But he didn't get a chance. Lauren was on a roll.

"You know, Mister 'Celebration Time', I'm surprised you don't find me absolutely irresistible." With a dramatic flourish, she indicated the overpopulated lawn on the other side of the front door. "You're obviously the freakin' *king* of plastic. There's enough of it in your yard to subsidize six Chinese factories!"

"Don't forget the electric company," Ben called down.

"Thank you," Lauren called up to him.

"Benjamin, go to your room!" Hank said irritably.

Lauren knew she'd worn out her thin thread of a welcome. She turned, marched to the front door and flung it open, preparing to flee this bastion of bad taste and worse manners. The lights blinded her for a moment and she nearly lost her footing on the porch steps.

She heard Hank's voice at her back. "Hey, this stuff was all made right here in the good old U.S.A.!"

"Yowza. Real snappy come-back," Lauren muttered to herself. Still walking away, she threw up a hand. "Congratulations. You just saved a dime store from bankruptcy."

"God, where have *you* been? There are no dime stores anymore." Hank's voice rose incrementally the closer Lauren got to her car. "Besides," he shouted, "five-and-dime merchandise was mostly from Japan and Taiwan."

Lauren could hear his boots--or what she assumed were boots--clomping across the porch and down into the yard. She abruptly stopped and turned to face him. So, he was one of those types who just had to have the last word, huh? Well, he wouldn't have it with *her*.

His left hand was fondly, protectively caressing the red-lit plastic nose of Rudolph. "And a lot of it has become very collectible," he added almost petulantly.

Lauren bent forward at the waist, the better to launch her final salvo. "I don't need a mini-course in retailing to know crap is crap!"

"And I don't need my glasses to know an overdone woman when I see one!" Hank hesitated a moment, as if he felt he'd gone too far, then shoved his hands in his pockets

and strode back indoors.

"*Humbug!*" Lauren kicked the figure of Tiny Tim, hoping to crack his crutch. Instead she cracked her toe. Crap was crap--but it wasn't always plastic; often it was made of cast resin.

Doubling over, she hissed, "Shitshitshitshit...shit...shit. *Shit!*" sounding like a steam locomotive laboriously braking. Muttering more invectives under her breath, she pulled off her right shoe and hobbled, wincing at the feel of the cold concrete beneath her foot, to the car.

When she was safely in her vehicle, she shot one more resentful glance at Santa's Suburban Workshop. Then something caught her eye. She peered at the house, making sure....

Hank the hunk was standing at a window, arms crossed over his sizable chest, watching her and laughing.

"At least I have hair!" she shouted.

CHAPTER THREE

"Honestly, it's been a nightmare," Lauren said to the client with whom she'd been shamelessly flirting.

She closed her notebook computer and began packing up her drapery fabric samples. It had been ten days since her ill-fated trek to the North Pole of the south. Although her toe was on the mend, her psyche still trembled at the thought of Hank's Holiday-from-Hell House.

The client chuckled. "Sounds like you're suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder."

The client's name was Tim Murphy. He was an executive at an advertising agency and seemed to be in his late thirties--a bit younger than she, but not by much--and had good taste to match his good looks. As soon as Lauren met him, she began silently applauding her sister's advice: *Just go about your business and see what happens.*

"I probably am," Lauren laughed. "That last encounter was what pushed me over the edge. God, if you could've *seen* that place!" She rose, gathering up her things and cradling them in her arms. "And then that rude man, adding insult to injury...." She refrained from mentioning the Tiny Tim incident, just as she had refrained from being too explicit about the nature of Hank's remarks. "I think I'm just going to lay low for a while. Who knows? Maybe Prince Charming will come along when and where I least expect it." Modestly, she smiled.

"You didn't expect to find him *here*, did you?" Tim asked, returning her smile.

Lauren didn't know what he was getting at. Her face fell. Had she been angling too obviously? Was he implying her hook would come up bare?

Was it just another humiliating kiss-off?

"No, of course not," she said a bit defensively. "I don't expect anything anymore. And I certainly wouldn't use my clients as a dating pool." *Uh-huh, right.* Feeling flushed, she turned her eyes down.

But Tim surprised her by asking, "Why not?" He lifted some of the heavy fabric from her arms and began walking toward the door. "I mean, if a client is ready, willing, and able...why not?"

Lauren slid Tim Murphy a cautious glance as she walked beside him. He was still smiling. Was it a sign of encouragement? Her heart beat a little faster. "Well, if that were the case...."

They stopped in front of the door.

"So, will you go out with me?" he asked.

Lauren curtailed her enthusiasm long enough to run down her mental checklist. He was intelligent, creative, neat, psychologically stable, financially secure, had no ex or children because he'd never been married, and had impeccable taste in both clothing and decor; he wasn't tall but he wasn't really short, either; his shiny brown hair was attractively trimmed and made a perfect complement to his flawless skin and blue eyes.

Yes, there was definitely potential here.

As demurely as possible, she answered, "I suppose I should be more coy, but...I'd love to."

They set a day and time. Tim politely suggested a certain restaurant and politely

awaited Lauren's approval, which she politely gave. He walked her to her car and opened the trunk and helped arrange her things inside. Before going back to the house, he gently squeezed her arm and said, "See you then. I'll make sure to call first."

Once Lauren was behind the wheel, she squirmed in delight and whispered, "Thank you, Glenna, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

She headed for her Mrs. Claus training session with a vastly improved attitude.

* * * *

David Dawson couldn't have been happier.

Even though the winter months were a little lean for an operating engineer, it wasn't the promise of a regular paycheck that brought him here. It was the chance to play--no, to *be*--Santa Claus for a full, glorious month.

As he drove to his orientation-and-training meeting, he couldn't seem to stop smiling. Being hired for this position was the greatest blessing he could have imagined. Following his divorce ten months ago, David hadn't found much of anything to counteract its effect on his mood and outlook. Not that the divorce itself had particularly bothered him--his marriage had been doomed from the start--but the loneliness left in its wake was beginning to seem interminable.

Now his gloomy world was scintillating again. Even the prospect of the warm bulky suit and itchy whiskers, the butt-numbing throne, the noisy and chaotic onslaught of gift-hungry children didn't dampen his spirits.

After parking, he walked jauntily to the building that housed the "Santa School," a recent and skillfully matched addition to the historic home in which the proprietors lived. Both the original residence and its extension had cedar shake siding and "rainbow" roofs, the sides of which had moderately convex profiles. Both had casement windows with diamond-shaped, leaded quarrels and iron L hinges. It looked just like the North Pole year-round residence of Mr. and Mrs. Claus should look. David couldn't wait to get inside.

His new employers had given him some background on the older couple who occupied the residence. They'd built the extension specifically to accommodate their enterprise. Because they were veteran impersonators of Mr. and Mrs. Claus--had even worked at Marshall Field in Chicago--they'd decided to supplement their retirement income by grooming wannabes for this underrated but crucially important seasonal profession.

David hitched up his shoulders as he approached the recessed entrance to the single-story addition. The entire doorway was framed by real evergreen garland entwined with bittersweet and studded with fruit. An iron knocker in the shape of a fir tree was secured to one of the rough-hewn vertical boards of the door.

For several seconds, David paused. He inhaled with relish the piney scent of the boughs, the milder but richer smell of weathered wood. He lifted and dropped the knocker three times; it seemed to thunder beneath his hand. He heard faint strains of music coming from within, then the creaking of floorboards. With a batlike squeal, the door opened on its iron strap hinges.

A snowy-haired man stood before him, a man with the kindest face David had ever seen. The fragrance of apples and cinnamon wafted out around him. "You must be

David!" he exclaimed, beaming and throwing up his arms. The exclamations didn't stop. "Welcome! Welcome to our enchanted kingdom! Please, do come in!"

When David stepped inside, the man's arms fell around him in an easy embrace. "I'm Herb Hendricks, the Santa Master." He grasped David's hand in both of his and shook it. "You *are* David Dawson, aren't you?"

"Yes." He looked into the man's startling ice-blue eyes. "Nice to meet you...Herb."

"Ah, you're thrown by the name, I can see. Not Christmas-y enough. But the wife and I don't play games with our students. You're adults; why pretend? So we're just Herb and Harriet Hendricks. It's only when we're in those suits--" He motioned to his left, where an opulent pair of Mr. and Mrs. Claus outfits on seamstress forms stood sentry beside a far door. "--that we fully assume our alter-egos."

With a guiding hand on his back, Herb led David to a pine table just inside the entrance. Its simple adornments were a cluster of candles and a glass vase full of candy canes. "Here. Have a seat. There's a just a little paperwork for you to fill out. I'll take your coat."

As David removed it, Herb immediately assessed him with one bright-blue look. "Oh, you'll be just fine, just fine. Good size, nice face--handsome, a little weather-beaten, strong but gentle." He grabbed David's biceps. "Powerful arms. That's good. You'll need 'em." Winking, he pulled the chair away from the table.

Still a bit dumbstruck, David sat down and began filling out the papers before him. Herb continued his chit-chat. "It's unusual for us to work with only one or two students at a time. Normally we have scheduled classes with eight, ten, sometimes up to twenty participants. But Prairie Park Mall is, let's say, a *big* client, and when they tell us, 'Bring 'em in and teach 'em *now*', we do it."

David stopped writing, his pen still poised over the paper. His eyes roamed the spacious room. "This place is beautiful." He glanced up at the proprietor.

Herb, certainly detecting the awe in his voice, smiled in a satisfied way and let his student absorb the ambience. He patted David on the shoulder and said, "I'll be right back," then ambled to the door flanked by the suits and disappeared behind it. Given where it was situated, that door must lead into the main residence.

Appreciatively, David studied his surroundings. The room made him think of a dining hall in a centuries-old manor house: large rubble-stone fireplace with primitive wood mantel; exposed ceiling beams; rough-plastered walls. There were two ornately carved dark wood chairs with red velvet upholstery and matching footstools on either side of the hearth, which was fronted by a plush sofa. A pair of sturdy pine tables, longer than the one at which David sat, were positioned at right angles to either end of the sofa, midway between it and the room's end walls. Both tables were encircled by tucked-in chairs.

Naturally, the hall's decor reflected its purpose. Brass andirons with pinecone finials stood before the burning logs in the fireplace. The mantel was sumptuously heaped with blue spruce and cedar boughs. Pinecones nested among them and wild-grape vines wound through them. Goose-feather trees stood at either end of the mantel, taller ivy topiaries stood beside them, and a brass coach-lantern with red glass panes stood in the center. Pine garland was draped around the entire room. A glittering crystal snowflake hung from each section, echoing the subtle pattern of snowflakes on two large forest-

green area rugs.

The room's focal point was, of course, its Christmas tree, standing regally in one corner and laden with ornaments, tinsel, and old-fashioned, large-bulbed lights. In the other three corners, thick candles burned atop wrought-iron stands bearing sprigs of holly. David was tempted to get up and examine the tree--the ornaments looked unusual, maybe antique, and the tinsel seemed to be lead, no longer available in this country--but at that moment, Herb re-entered the room.

He set two steaming mugs on the table. "Have some mulled cider," he said. "It'll warm your bones...and your heart."

"Thank you." David could feel the old man's shrewd eyes studying him. He took a sip of cider--delicious!--and turned his attention from looking to listening. "What's that music? Where is it coming from?"

"It's a recording of carols played on antique music boxes and other old music machines. We pipe it in from our office."

Smiling, David closed his eyes and listened while he savored the taste of the cider and took in, again, the dream-like interlaced smells of this magical place.

"You like it?" Herb asked quietly.

David nodded. "I love it. I love all of it."

Herb was uncharacteristically silent for a moment. "I think, Mr. Dawson, it's Christmas that you love."

David's smile became more wistful. "Yes. It's Christmas that I love."

* * * *

Lauren squirmed, this time *not* in delight.

She was sitting in one of the two changing rooms with attached baths off the main hall opposite the residence. There were four dressing tables in each. She and Harriet Hendricks were the only people in this room. In the other, Harriet had told her, Santa would be born, and Lauren would meet him for the first time when they were both in their new incarnations.

"Gosh darn it, will you sit still?" Harriet put her hands firmly on Lauren's shoulders and pressed down until her student got the message. "This face paint is gonna end up in your hair and smeared all over your face. You don't want to look like a drunken clown, do you?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to look like a drunken clown no matter *how* still I sit." Each time Lauren glanced into the lightbulb-ringed mirror on the wall in front of her, she grimaced and flinched. That wig--God!--all fluffy, gleaming white curls with a red bow at the crown. She looked like a poodle at a dog show!

Harriet let out an exasperated sigh. "I can tell you're new at this." She braced herself on both arms of the chair and looked into Lauren's eyes. "Listen to me. You have to focus on what I told you about getting into character. Empty your mind and *absorb* what I told you. I don't mean just the details of applying the makeup and setting the wig and getting the costume to sit right. I mostly mean--"

"I know," Lauren said wearily. "Giving myself over to the 'transformation', going with the flow of it."

Harriet straightened. "That's right." She reached for a gray pencil, leaned over

again, and began simulating wrinkles on Lauren's barely lined skin. She smelled of peppermint. "With each little step in the process, you should let yourself--*let* yourself--feel the joy of becoming the character. As you watch yourself change, you should let yourself be taken over by the spirit of Missus Claus...by the spirit of Christmas."

The spirit of Christmas.... Lauren knew that was the problem, not her increasingly fragile vanity. The weight-enhancing costume was only a costume, after all, and it could be removed. The pink nose and red cheeks and gray lines were only applied colors, and they could be washed away. It wasn't what she had *on* her but what she didn't have *in* her that made this experience so difficult.

The high induced by Tim Murphy's invitation had worn off, and Lauren was once again battling the holiday blues.

Harriet's fussy movements abruptly stopped, her attention momentarily trained on something else. "It sounds like your husband is next door."

"My *what* is *where*?"

"Your male counterpart, Mister Claus." Harriet returned to her work. "Herb must be starting to make him up."

"Oh. *That* husband." Lauren exhaled in relief. Now that the new arrival had been brought to her attention, Lauren did pick up faint muffled sounds coming from the adjacent room. Until now, she hadn't given any thought whatsoever to the stranger with whom, for a month, she must forge a peculiar bond. Her stomach butterflies suddenly multiplied.

"Did I scare you?" Harriet teased, with a hint of a smile.

"You wouldn't have to ask that if you knew my husband...or rather *ex*-husband."

Harriet patted Lauren's face with powder. The knowing smile was still in place.

"Might he be one of the reasons you're not in the holiday swing of things?"

Lauren made a face at her new face in the mirror. "One of the reasons."

"I take it you're still without a partner, then."

Ouch. "Correct."

"Nothing wrong with that," Harriet said offhandedly. "Okay, stand up. Let me see the finished product." As Lauren awkwardly rose, unused to moving in padding and petticoats, Harriet evaluated her. "Well, you're a bit long in the limbs." She analytically poked at Lauren's midsection. "But we can fake more plumpness to counterbalance that. Besides, our Santa is apparently on the tall side, so your height won't be all that noticeable. You do have a lovely face and wonderful smile...although your eyes are more sultry than sparkling. But the fake spectacles do help."

Lauren tried digesting these comments. She supposed she shouldn't feel either flattered or insulted; the woman was simply doing what Prairie Park Mall paid her to do.

"So, are you trying to meet new men?" Harriet began putting all the makeup she'd used into a festive little gift-bag.

"According to my sister, I'm trying too hard."

"Ah. Well, 'take some time to be alone. See what colors thy soul doth wear'."

Lauren gave her a curious look.

Turning from the dressing table, Harriet adjusted and smoothed Lauren's costume. "That was on a plaque a good friend gave me after my first husband died. I can't remember where the quotation's from." She moved behind Mrs. Claus to perfect the apron's bow.

"I've spent a lot of time alone," Lauren said.

"I don't mean alone while you watch tv or do household chores or work at your computer or whatever. I mean, alone while you're *still*. Pensive. No high level of concentration on anything, no distractions, maybe just simple activities."

Lauren considered the difference. Come to think of it, she'd never spent time by herself under those circumstances. She tried twisting around to look at Harriet. "You mentioned your *first* husband. You mean you and Herb haven't been--?"

"No, we haven't been Herb and Harriet Hendricks forever, just for the past thirty-two years."

"Sounds like forever to me," Lauren murmured. But her droll response concealed envy--the kind of aching envy, untainted by bitterness or resentment, she now felt for her own sister.

"Time flies when you're happy," Harriet said. "In any case, that's good advice I gave you. Take it." Musing, she flicked at the wig's curls. "Too many people try too hard--to find love, achieve success, make money, please others, impress others, do what society expects...including celebrate the holidays. They try so hard they don't even know themselves after a while."

She stood still and looked Lauren straight in the eye. "But don't force it, *any* of it. Don't buy the hype and get caught up in the hubbub. You'll only end up making yourself and maybe others miserable. *Do* take time to see what colors your soul wears...and let that knowledge be your guide."

The implication, insofar as it related to this job, was clear: If your heart's not in it, don't do it. She was giving Lauren a chance to bail out.

Lauren studied her made-over self in the mirror. Actually, she didn't look bad...not bad at all. She had to admire Harriet's skill in turning her into a kindly old woman--a look that was greatly enhanced when she smiled. Anyone, herself included, would like to know the person who stared back at her from that fairy-tale looking-glass.

Lauren's mind was made up. "I want to do this, Harriet. Because in the hours when I *am* alone--and there are plenty of them--I think this experience will help me see those colors."

With a smile and a nod, her tutor said, "All right, then. Let's go out and meet the mister."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Lauren, this is David; David, Lauren." Paternally, Herb smiled.

David bent his left arm over his newly constructed dome of a belly, bent the right across the small of his back, and bowed like a twelve-year-old boy standing before his dance partner...in the 1940s.

Lauren thought it was a hokey but charming gesture and curtsied in response. Herb and Harriet applauded. With nervous chuckles, the new Santa and Mrs. Claus shook hands.

"Well, do you find me suitable?" David asked his new mate.

She could have been seventeen or seventy--there was no accurate way of gauging her age, not that it mattered--but he did catch an intriguing glimpse of tapering leg beneath her voluminous skirts. The lines around her eyes seemed partially composed of the real thing but mostly drawn-in. Her eye color was arresting: a dimensional gray, both clear and smoky. Her mouth looked good in lipstick.

Boy, he'd been without a woman too long. If she did turn out to be either an ingenue or a grandmother, he'd feel like a pervert. Forcing himself to get back into character, he rubbed and patted his round belly.

"You could've just stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting," Lauren said, pleasantly surprised by how convincing he looked. "So, you're perfect."

Was he? What manner of man lay hidden beneath all that red and white fabric and hair and rouge? Strange, but her curiosity was more sharply piqued by this disguise than by all the blather that men posted about themselves on the Internet. All she could tell about David was that he had large hands with dark, silken hair on the backs, was maybe six-two or -three, and had deep-amber eyes that made her think of milk chocolate generously laced with caramel.

Stop it, she told herself. *You're probably just hungry and he's probably a codger.* She wondered fleetingly if he could be a rich codger, then realized it didn't matter to her. *Well, at least he seems congenial enough....*

"You two look wonderful together!" Harriet effused, clasping her hands before her chest. She turned to her husband. "I don't think we've ever had such an imposing pair. They *do* look larger than life."

"Yes indeedy." Equally delighted, Herb put his hands on Lauren's and David's shoulders. "Now assume your places and we'll proceed." He guided them to the velvet upholstered chairs, which he'd moved closer together.

As Mrs. Claus bunched her skirts together, preparing to fit her layered hips between the armrests, she miscalculated the position of the seat and nearly slipped off the edge of the chair to the floor. But Santa was there in an instant, catching her up in his fake-fur-cuffed arms. They were arms that moved swiftly and confidently and grasped her with obvious strength. She had a sudden and discomfiting sense of him *not* being a codger but a quite virile, maybe middle-aged man.

"God, I feel like an armadillo in drag," she murmured, as much to herself as her rescuer...who snorted a single laugh somewhere between the back of his throat and his nose. Embarrassed, she glanced apologetically at his face. It bore a mature smirk that even his phony facial hair couldn't conceal.

"Well, you don't look like one," he said in a low voice. "And you smell great, by the way."

Lauren's fascination grew. "Thank you...David." Oh, she liked his name, too.

Put together, her reactions could only mean one thing: He was married.

Harriet, who'd been fluttering on the periphery of this little drama along with Herb, grabbed Lauren's hand and asked her if she was all right.

"Yes, yes, I 'm fine. I just need to get used to my new figure." Lauren wouldn't allow herself any more disturbing glances at Santa. As carefully as possible, she settled herself in the chair and smoothed her skirts. But, however unintentionally, Santa wasn't allowing her the privilege of ignoring him.

As he too sat down, he said, "I feel a little off-balance myself." *Yeah, in more ways than one....* David wiggled in the chair. "I'm not used to all this bulk in front of me."

Lauren pursed her lips and kept staring at her lap. *So, he doesn't have a beer gut....*

"Believe me, you'll feel comfortable in no time," Herb said. He and Harriet seated themselves on the sofa, facing their students. "Having a second identity is like having a second home. You settle into both."

Harriet nodded in agreement. "We'll give you some movement tips a little later."

Now!" Herb clapped his hands once, signaling the start of business. "There are some things you need to learn in order to do your roles justice. Feel free to break in at any time and ask questions."

Harriet laid a hand on her husband's arm, politely interrupting him. "First, though, we should explain some things, like why we've given you virtually no information about each other." She looked from Lauren to David. "This is our philosophy. Unless the actors are married, they should only know each other as Santa and Missus Claus. That prevents both discord *and* chumminess--and each can undermine the portrayal of your characters. Stable married couples can read each other and avoid these stumbling blocks; new acquaintances can't. So always maintain a respectful, professional distance. Come to work, get in character, and *then* interact. That's the approach that will make you believable."

"That shouldn't be too difficult," David said affably. He didn't *want* to get close to his co-worker. She'd already titillated him, and this job meant too much to him for some pointless fascination to put him off course.

Lauren slid him a critical look. He did seem proud of his new self, maybe too much so. If he brought a gung-ho religious fervor to this job, she'd kill him.

"Don't you *like* socializing?" she asked too tartly. Damn, if only he were short and old and didn't have large hands and strong arms and eyes like fine European confections....

Stop it. Stop it right now. You might not be acting like a loose woman, but you're thinking like one. He's married...probably.

David gave her a critical look of his own; didn't she understand what their mentors were getting at? "Of course I like socializing--well, sometimes--but the Hendrickses have a good point." *Besides, lady, you're already proving too much of a distraction.*

Herb jumped in before the head-butting escalated. "In this case, too much familiarity is a bad thing. You don't need to know one another's background. It could

affect how you play off each other. You'd be more likely to bring your problems to work with you if you got too comfy with your partner. You'd be affected by each other's moods."

"We've seen it," Harriet added. "The better a Claus couple know each other, the more tempted they are to engage in private conversations and private eye contact, to exchange jokes and opinions and all sorts of other personal messages that don't have a place in the performance of their duties. The public picks up on that sort of thing...which is not only off-putting but makes it harder for them to suspend disbelief."

Herb leaned forward, arms on knees. "In other words, *stay focused*."

"Makes sense to me," David said. Hesitantly, he glanced at his co-worker, who seemed a little testy. "I don't have a problem with that."

Suck-up, Lauren almost muttered but did manage to keep it in. She wondered why his eager cooperation bugged her. She tried to be positive. "Well, it is nice to know that if one of us is having a bad day" --*meaning me, since I'm not the cheerleader this guy is turning out to be*-- "the other can take up the slack."

Herb clapped his hands and pointed at them. "See? That's another benefit! We all have off days." He turned to Harriet. "Now, Mother, would you like to give them the general guidelines, then run down the dos and don'ts for Missus Claus?"

Harriet lifted a clipboard from her lap. "Santa, you're to address your wife as 'dear'. Missus Claus, you're to address your husband as 'Santa'. Don't deviate from this while you're before the public. Always maintain a good-natured expression, even when you're not speaking with anyone. Don't be afraid to laugh--warmly--but never shriek or guffaw. Be patient and helpful, as needed. Remember: You both epitomize kindness and generosity and good will; you're everybody's image of the ideal grandparents. Lauren, don't make a face. You can do this if you set your mind to it and open your heart to it."

"Sorry," Lauren said. "It was that *ideal grandparents* part...."

"You're *actors*, for crying out loud," Harriet reminded her. "Think of this as an *acting* challenge. It shouldn't have anything whatsoever to do with your self-image."

Lauren felt chastened. "You're right. You're absolutely right. Don't worry; I'll re-orient my thinking."

"That's all you have to do, hon." Harriet turned to the next page on the clipboard. "Lauren, these are all suggestions--some stronger than others--but they're all designed to make you the best possible Missus Claus, one who'll be the perfect complement to Santa and help enrich the experience of Christmas for hundreds of children."

Then Harriet did something Lauren found startling. She lowered the clipboard, and with a look so pointed it couldn't fail to penetrate and lodge within Lauren's consciousness, she said, "You're making memories. And you will forever remain a part of those memories."

Lauren felt a shiver. She hadn't thought of this job in those terms...and it was a daunting realization. Slack-faced, she blinked at Harriet. There was no other response she could muster.

"Anyway," Harriet continued, lapsing back into her crisp but kind teacher persona, "apart from what we just told you, consider these things. Before you go to work, spritz yourself with a scent or dab on an essential oil associated with the holidays. There's a wonderful store at the mall--I think it's called Inhalations--where you can find just about any fragrance in just about any form."

"Good idea," David interjected, nodding. "Smells are very evocative. I should do the same." He couldn't wait to find just the right one.

"Just steer clear of the girlie perfumes," Herb added with a wink. "Find an earthy, evergreen scent."

David made a circle with his thumb and forefinger.

Ooo, go for the gusto, big guy. Lauren was again tempted to roll her eyes but resisted the urge.

"Second," Harriet went on, "don't wear any makeup, except what's standard...and it's all in the bag I've given you. The mall will see to it that your costume is laundered regularly and your wig is washed and set. Don't accessorize on a whim. This is *very* important. In fact..." She leaned forward, peering at Lauren. "I'm a little troubled by the fact that your eyebrows are rather dark. Maybe if you dabbed them with peroxide...."

"Harriet," Lauren said, "I'll end up looking like an albino. And I do have a regular life to live."

David couldn't help turning his head to study her coloring, but it was difficult to discern beneath all the added layers. She did have an attractive profile.... *Damn it, if you can't keep your imagination in check, at least keep your eyes to yourself.*

"I'm wearing these stick-on eyebrows," he told Lauren, trying to be helpful. He realized he couldn't avoid looking at her--not all the time. Speaking to someone without making eye contact was downright rude. "Maybe you could use the same--"

She stopped him with a single glance. "Don't even go there."

"It's not that important," Harriet said, ending the discussion and, for the time being, restoring peace. "Next point. As I said before, always address David as Santa--*always*. Put a sweet-mannered lilt in your voice. Yours is kind of throaty, so maybe that's something we'll work on later. And smile pleasantly. Remember to keep smiling."

"What if my cheeks start cramping?" Lauren asked. She absolutely hated unnatural smiling. Whenever she and her sister, as girls, watched beauty pageants and parades with "queens," they always looked for and laughed at the telltale facial twitching that resulted from holding a smile too long.

"You don't have to grin like an idiot," Harriet said, feigning impatience to cover her amusement. "Just maintain an open, welcoming expression." She looked at David. "Santa has to do the same thing...so at least you'll have a partner in suffering." She gave Lauren a teasing, private smile, quickly withdrawn.

Lauren began to realize she had more of an ally--and asset--in Harriet Hendricks than she'd realized. Little by little, she began to feel more optimistic. David, she noticed, was simply staring at his interlinked hands.

"Finally, you might consider baking your own cookies to put on the platter that will be on a table next to your chair. The mall might provide cookies, but they're those boxed atrocities that *taste* like they came out of a box. I mean, how out of character is *that*?"

"Mother's a stickler," Herb said, affectionately patting her leg.

"I think that's a great idea!" David effused.

Lauren wanted to tell him to mind his own business. Instead she said to Harriet, "You need to know that kitchens and I don't...uh...get along real well. Except when I'm decorating them." She could easily forgive the assumption, though. It was largely unthinkable to most women of Harriet's generation that a female would despise cooking.

Herb shot an ambiguous glance at his wife, whose only response was, "Oh."

As usual, David, a true Mighty Mouse among Santa impersonators, jumped in to save the day. "Maybe I could do it. I love to cook, and I especially love holiday baking."

"No kidding?" Herb said, genuinely flabbergasted.

Lauren looked at David as if he'd just claimed to be an alien abductee. Maybe he was. He certainly wasn't like any other man *she'd* ever met. It occurred to her he might be gay, which could explain a lot. Yes, that was it: He was either gay or the quintessential house-husband, and both possibilities made any interest on her part a waste of time and energy.

"I can't make any promises, though," David added. "It depends on, you know, time constraints, mostly."

What's he going to do next, start yodeling? Lauren turned her eyes skyward and gave a subtle shake of the head. She couldn't help it. Not just gay and/or hopelessly domestic, but El Dorko Supremo! She started channeling her thoughts toward Tim Murphy, with whom she'd be having that dinner date at the end of the week.

"Well, you give it some thought, David," Harriet told him. "The mall might cover the cost of ingredients, but I don't know if they'd compensate you for your time. In any case, it would pretty much be a labor of love." She looked back and forth between the students. "Now we come to the most important aspect of your roles: how to interact with the children."

David brightened. Although he didn't think he'd need much coaching, he sat up straighter in his chair and became keenly attentive. This was the fun part.

Lauren had never had children. Although friends' and relatives' kids had always adored her, this was the part of the job that made her most apprehensive.

"You'll encounter all kinds of situations," Herb said. "We'll try to cover the most common ones. Basically, if you use a combination of common sense and sensitivity, you'll do fine." He bent over the arm of the sofa and pulled up a soft-sculpture doll the size of a toddler, then dipped down again and hoisted a somewhat larger hard-plastic doll. He and Harriet approached Lauren's chair. Herb continued holding the make-believe children.

Lauren recoiled, as if they were going to start pummeling her with the dolls.

Harriet seemed to pick up on the reaction. "Lauren, your role is fairly limited," she said, probably by way of reassurance. "When you go the mall for your on-site orientation, you'll see that Missus Claus is seated some distance away from Santa, to his right. You essentially serve as the greeter. The kids and parents will be lined up to *your* right. Here's the basic procedure." Harriet proceeded to mime what she was describing. "There will be some sort of barrier--probably a heavy decorative cord--separating the whole North Pole area from the people in line. When one child gets down from Santa's lap, you simply unhook the cord from its post, extend a hand to indicate the next child can come through, give him or her the little sack of candy and trinkets the mall provides, then rehook the cord."

"What if a kid doesn't *want* to come through? What if he or she is kicking up a fuss?" *Oh, God*, Lauren thought, simultaneously cursing her therapist, *what have I gotten myself into?* She hadn't really examined all the details of the job before she'd applied for it.

"An intractable child is more or less the parent's problem," Harriet said, bringing

Lauren some relief. "You might say something along these lines: 'Wouldn't you like to see Santa and tell him what you want for Christmas?' Sometimes that makes the child reconsider. But if the resistance continues, like I said, it's the parent's problem."

"And if the adult forces the issue," Herb added, "you simply tell the adult, diplomatically but firmly, that it isn't a good idea to coerce a child into seeing Santa. You suggest they leave, or maybe come back another time, and then you immediately turn your attention to the next people in line."

"Oh, man," Lauren sighed, imagining some irate mother arguing with her or pushing her aside.

"Come here," Harriet said, beckoning with her fingers. When Lauren rose and did so, Harriet put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry about it. Believe me, you've definitely got what it takes to blow off the troublemakers."

For no particular reason, Lauren glanced at David. He seemed to be soaking this in with great amusement. There was an obvious--and, to Lauren, irksome--smile beneath his whiskers. *Just wait*, she thought.

"Anyway," Harriet continued, "if someone is *too* aggressive, you simply motion over the security guard. There's always one posted just at the edge of the North Pole area." Harriet grabbed the hard-plastic doll from Herb's arms and stood it on its feet. "Now. What are you going to do with your little visitor?"

Lauren hesitated, then pointed at the big man in the Santa suit.

Herb made a buzzer noise, the kind that signals a wrong answer on a game show. Lauren jumped. David burst out laughing. Lauren shot him another glance, this one not as neutral as the last.

Harriet was chuckling. "Wrong." She exchanged looks with her husband, who was standing with his arms linked over his midsection, smiling. "There will be a low, red-carpet-covered ramp leading up to Santa's dais. If the parent chooses to escort the child, you give them some word of greeting after handing them their free gift and make a graceful motion"--this Harriet did, gracefully extending her arm and hand in David's direction--"that indicates the way to Santa's throne."

"And what if the adult *doesn't* accompany the child?" Lauren asked.

Harriet bent over and tenderly placed her hands on the plastic doll's nonexistent shoulder blades. "You very gently steer him or her toward Santa."

She turned and took Lauren's hands, then put them on the same spot. The doll instantly toppled forward and fell on its face.

David laughed more. "Thank God for liability insurance."

Blushing, Lauren turned her eyes up to him. "I'll get the hang of it," she murmured.

Yeah, after a few broken noses, David thought. This was becoming a much more entertaining day than he'd expected.

"Of course you will," Harriet said to Lauren. "Now, sometimes a child wants its hand held. If that's the case, take it immediately. And always be sure to say something that seems appropriate. Kids are as different as adults, and you'll have to learn real fast how to read each one. What you say will depend on the child's age and sex and whether the child is shy or bold, reluctant or eager, withdrawn or personable." They both straightened, and Harriet looked at Lauren. "Know what I mean?"

"I think so. What you're saying is I pretty much have to wing it."

"Like at a cocktail party," David interjected. He'd decided she was definitely the cocktail party type: didn't seem too grounded in daily realities.

There was an archness in his tone that hadn't been there before and Lauren found herself unable to ignore it. She turned her eyes to him. "Ha, ha," she said dryly.

Still smiling, he unwaveringly met her gaze. "Ho, ho."

Lauren could've sworn he was drawing certain conclusions about her--his look somehow seemed more invasive, more perceptive--and she suddenly felt like a specimen under a microscope. She didn't like being examined.

She'd also decided he wasn't gay, although the precise reason for her change of attitude wasn't clear to her. It had something to do with his taunting, which almost seemed...flirtatious.

"When's it going to be *his* turn?" she muttered irritably.

"In a minute," Harriet said. Herb gave her a soft poke in the ribs and communicated something with his eyes that Lauren couldn't decipher.

"So," Lauren said, "who's responsible for getting the kids off Santa's lap and down the exit ramp?"

"That would be Ralphie," Herb answered. He turned to his wife. "*Is* Ralphie going to be working this year?"

"I think so."

"Who's Ralphie?" Lauren asked. She didn't much care. All that mattered to her at the moment was that she wouldn't have to work *both* sides of the dais. If she had to scramble back and forth, she'd be sweating like a pig and panting like a dog--a pretty nasty cross-breed that wouldn't make for a very appealing Mrs. Claus.

For some reason, the question made Herb grin. "Ralphie's a little guy who'll be your elf. He's absolutely indispensable, a veteran."

"Oh, really?" David chimed in. "So am I."

The Hendrickses started snickering. "Uh, David," Harriet said, "Herb meant that Ralphie's a veteran *elf*."

"Oh. Well, that I'm not."

Softly, Lauren giggled. Hmm, *that* took him down a peg. When she regained her composure, she asked, "So, what do I do while a kid is on Santa's lap?"

"You can sit down for a while, make small-talk with the next people in line, maybe answer questions. Always keep an eye on Santa, though, in case he seems to need help." Harriet handed both dolls to Herb. "You'll get a much better feel for the set-up, and your role, when you have your orientation at the mall. By the way, you'll have regular break periods for going to the bathroom, sprucing up, catching a bite to eat, that sort of thing. So it's not like you'll be on for hours and hours nonstop."

"Thank God," Lauren breathed.

"Any questions?"

"Not at the moment."

Herb clapped his hands together. "Okay, then. David, ready for some lessons?"

"Can't wait."

"Good. I have a feeling you'll be a fast learner." Toting his model children, Herb approached David's chair.

Lauren wondered if Herb's statement carried an implied jibe at her. *Well, I probably deserve it*, she thought laconically. Blowing air up to her forehead, which had

begun to perspire, she dropped onto the sofa. She couldn't wait to get out of her costume. The wig was making her scalp perspire. Harriet had earlier suggested she dust the interior with talcum powder, and Lauren made a mental note to get some.

"Once we knock this out," Herb said, "we'll have a brief voice-training session. Maybe do a little work on movement, too. But it's especially important, David, that we get your laugh right."

Yeah, ho-ho this, Lauren thought, watching him. Hitching up her skirts several inches, she crossed her legs and bobbed the uppermost foot.

David tried his damndest to ignore her, but his eyes seemed to have a will of their own. Was she intentionally teasing him or just trying to get comfortable? He couldn't tell. Her expression was completely bland.

Herb was explaining the proper way to lift a child, to hold a child; explaining why, in this hysterical day and age, it was crucially important to be mindful of where you put your hands, of what you said and how you said it.

He positioned one of the dolls on David's lap; it hit the floor like a sack of potatoes. Lauren threw her head back and laughed that languid contralto laugh of hers, kicking up a leg as she did so...and David, swallowing hard, forced out a chuckle as he forced his eyes away from the creamy sweep of thigh that disappeared into the darkness beneath her skirt.

"David...?"

"Hm?" His head jerked in Herb's direction.

Harriet coughed once behind her hand. Lauren looked at her and saw she was trying to conceal a smirk. She grabbed Lauren's hand and whispered, "Let's go find some refreshments while these guys take care of their business."

Lauren put both feet on the floor, prepared to rise from the sofa. "Okay. I am a little thirs--"

But before Lauren could move any further, Harriet raised Mrs. Claus's hand to eye-level and suddenly chirped, "Oh, gosh, Herb...we forgot the rings!"

He gasped, then lifted David's left hand. "You're right, my dear. Better go get them now, while we're thinking about it."

Harriet scurried toward the door to their residence.

Confused, Lauren looked from Harriet's receding back to Herb's face. "What rings?"

David, brow furrowed, watched Herb as well.

"Your wedding rings, of course. You are *Mister and Missus* Claus, but since neither of you has your *own* wedding ring, we have to provide them." Herb shook his head and said, largely to himself, "I can't believe we forgot that. We have to remember that we're getting more and more divorced and widowed students--"

"Here they are!" Harriet came toddling back toward the fireplace, holding the rings aloft between thumb and forefinger.

David and Lauren looked at each other, then self-consciously looked away. A question that had been looming in both of their minds had finally been answered.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sitting on the hand-loomed rug with her legs tucked beneath her, Lauren spilled the collection of multicolored plastic fingernails onto the coffee table. They fanned out with a clatter. Her sister Glenna and four other friends were seated--some on the furniture, some on the floor--all around her. Candles and oil lamps cast a dancing, ghostly light on the exposed-log walls of Lauren's living room.

The girls were having their monthly Saturday night sleep-over.

"So tell us about your date last night," Darlene Smolinski said. She rose from the couch. "Anybody need a drink before the tale begins?"

Holly Bertram waved an arm as she sipped the last of her decaf and Kahlua.

"Start dishing," Dar said, "I can hear from the kitchen."

Hearing about Lauren's dates had become part of their ritual. The narratives were always guaranteed to be amusing. She'd already told them about the Hank disaster, and now it was time for Tim Murphy, a man who sounded infinitely more promising.

"Once you get going on those nails, you won't be able to concentrate on telling a good story." With a wry smile, Janet Brodsky rearranged herself in the port-colored leather recliner. "Why are you bothering with that nail nonsense anyway?"

Lauren was still picking out the plastic nails that would fit the best over her own fingernails. She concentrated on the red ones. In response to Janet's question, she held up one hand for public viewing.

Glenna, sitting on the floor across from her, grabbed the hand and examined it. "You're nibbling them again...but they don't look bad at all. With just a little smoothing and shaping and some subtle polish--"

"There's more to it than that," Lauren said. "I have to do *something* to assert my identity while I'm in that costume. It might be cute, but it isn't me." She'd already told them about her new job and the Santa School. "I can't show my own hair. I can't wear the makeup that looks best on me. I can't wear the fragrance that smells best on me. I can't accessorize. I can't even wear my own damn shoes. What does that leave me with?"

"Plastic fingernails?" Corliss Wagner ventured, picking one up to study it. The other women laughed.

"Corly, do you see a little packet of decals over there?" Lauren peered to her right, trying to see what was on the coffee table near the end of the couch where Corliss sat.

Darlene returned from the kitchen just beyond the breakfast bar and delivered Holly's spiked decaf. "Get on with the story already!" She sank back onto the couch on Lauren's left.

"You mean these?" Corliss slid a small packet off the table and held it up to her eyes. With a disbelieving look, she dropped her arm to her lap. "You can't be serious."

"Just give them to me." Lauren snatched the packet out of her fingers.

"Let me see." Glenna reached across the table, but Lauren swatted her hand away.

"Hey, how's 'Dilly Bean'?" Holly, sitting like a sultan amidst three huge floor pillows, poked at Glenna's ribcage.

Glenna did a half-turn. "Would you please stop calling him that?"

Janet sat forward. "Yeah, how the hell *is* our favorite fantasy?"

"I'd appreciate it," Glenna announced, "if you'd all stop drooling over my

husband."

"Sorry, but that isn't possible," Janet drawled. "There are no other candidates for the position of community lust-ee. We can't lust after Holly's boyfriend; he's a punk. We can't lust after Roger--"

"Because he weighs as much as a major appliance," Corliss said of her husband.

"We can't lust after Al, because we never see him." Janet looked at Darlene. "You still have him locked in the basement, Dar?"

"No. I've moved him to the shed."

"And we can't lust after *my* man," Janet concluded, "because I don't have one." She sipped on her martini. "Maybe Laurie can toss a few of her rejects my way. My standards are lowering by the week."

"Which brings us back to Laurie's date," Darlene said more emphatically. "God, why can't we ever get on a subject and see it through to the end?"

"But Glenna didn't answer my question!" Holly protested.

Lauren craned her upper body in Holly's direction. "'Dilly Bean' is doing fine. Finefinefinefinefine. Just as hot as ever and even more successful than before. You satisfied?"

"Yeah," Holly muttered, "but I can see *you're* not."

"Well, that may just be changing," Lauren murmured.

"Which means...?" Darlene prompted.

Lauren had finally managed to segregate ten acceptable plastic ovals from the sprawling tiddly-winks pile on the table. "Which means I had a lovely dinner last night at a lovely restaurant with a thirty-nine-year-old man who's easy on the eyes and financially comfortable. And I think he likes me."

"Do you like *him*?" Glenna asked quietly, touching the back of Lauren's hand.

Lauren shrugged. "Yeah, I like him."

"Don't sound so thrilled," Janet said. She underscored her sarcasm by getting up to fetch another drink. "You were considerably more lively when you were describing whatshisname with the lawn ornaments."

"Hank." Lauren began extracting tiny decals from the packet. She still thought about Hank occasionally but wasn't sure why. "Well, you know, I just don't want to get my hopes up. I've had this same level of attraction to some of the other guys I've dated, and I still got fed up with them. Or they got fed up with me." She glanced at the group, then turned her eyes back to the table. "What I'm *not* going to do is sail into a new relationship on a wing and a prayer...both powered by some pathetic desperation. I promised myself that from the start." With a teasing smile, she glanced at her sister. "Look what *almost* happened to Glenna."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Glenna said with a grimace.

"So you didn't, like, do the do?" Holly asked Lauren. She sounded disappointed.

A few of the women groaned.

"Jeez, Holly," Darlene said, "not everybody bangs their buns off on the first date. At least I don't think they do." She called to Janet, "Hey, bring something in here to eat, would you?" then turned back to the topic at hand. "I've been out of circulation so long, I don't know *what* people do on dates anymore."

"I've been out of circulation so long, I don't think I *have* any circulation," Corliss added.

"Do you think it's because," Holly asked quite seriously, "Roger maybe cuts it off when he lies on top of you?"

Darlene, who at that moment had a mouthful of rum and Coke, doubled over with an explosion of laughter, blowing a good portion of her drink as well as rejected fake fingernails across the coffee table and into the room beyond.

Glenna shrieked and ducked as plastic shrapnel flew past her face. Corliss, moaning "Oh my God," collapsed sideways onto the couch cushions. Tittering, Lauren threw her arms over her head and rocked back against the couch, clocking Corly in the head. Laughing and *ouching*, she rolled onto the floor.

Janet swung around the corner of the breakfast bar. "Now what did I miss?"

"Another...another Hol-gem," Darlene choked out.

"Oh, crap!" Janet looked at Holly, the only woman in the room who hadn't moved. "What did you say?"

Holly seemed befuddled. "I just asked a very logical question."

The laughter erupted afresh. Janet gave up and went back to the kitchen to get snacks.

"*What?*" Holly said, becoming annoyed.

Still snickering and holding her stomach, Darlene stumbled into the kitchen to grab a towel.

Lauren swabbed at her eyes. "You okay, Glen? You were right in the line of fire."

Chuckling, Glenna pulled a fingernail from beneath the neck of her sweater and pitched it at her sister.

Lauren frantically started patting the coffee table. "Oh, hell, I hope those decals are still here."

Corliss slid them toward her and Lauren began carefully picking tiny pieces from the package. "Jan, while you're up, put on another CD. Maybe that Mannheim Steamroller Christmas album." She added, primarily to herself, "I need to start getting in the mood."

"I'll do it," Holly said, still disgruntled. "If I can't *say* anything right, maybe I can at least *do* something right."

"Oh, Hol, you know we love you," Glenna said over her shoulder.

Holly rose from the floor, took a step, and immediately tripped over one of the pillows that surrounded her. The women howled.

Corliss jumped up and headed for the bathroom. "Damn it, the dyke finally gave way. I just wet my pants!"

"On my *couch*?" Lauren wailed.

Corly's voice floated down the hall. "Hey, at least it's leather--no soaking in."

Darlene, who'd been mopping up rum-and-Coke spray from the hardwood floor, ambled over to the couch. "As long as I've got the towel in my hand...." She wiped the cushion. "There's nothing on here, Laurie. Her cotton granny-undies must've absorbed it."

Holly had finally managed to make her way, safely, to the entertainment center concealed within an old cupboard, on which Lauren had expertly painted a worn-looking floral decoration. "When I'm through with this," Holly muttered, "I'm just gonna sit still and keep my mouth shut...after I get something to eat."

"Let someone else feed you." Lauren let out a dramatic sigh. "You maniacs are destroying my house." Pre-polished red fingernails aligned before her, she began

applying the decals. "I'm rethinking the tree-trimming party," she grumbled. The girls always came over to decorate Lauren's handpicked balsam fir on the Saturday following Thanksgiving.

Janet returned from the kitchen and deposited a copper tray heaped with cheese, crackers, breadsticks and fruit on the coffee table. She leaned over to study Lauren's statement of individuality. "You've got to be kidding!"

Corliss returned from the bathroom and, after feeling the couch cushion, sat down. "What do they look like?" She and Dar both tilted in toward Lauren, still on the floor between them. "HO, HO, HO, HO, HO, and five more HO's," Corliss said. "In white."

"Oh my God." Glenna dropped her head to her hands.

Darlene studied the nails Lauren had already done. "Some of the decals are crooked. Did you notice?"

"That's okay," Lauren said. "It makes for a more light-hearted appearance, as if my fingernails are...you know...rocking with laughter."

Holly bent over the coffee table to have a look.

"Stay out of my personal space," Lauren told her accident-prone friend.

Holly backed off by a few inches. "But you can't have ten HO's. You have to have three or six or nine. It's 'ho-ho-ho', not 'ho-ho-ho...ho...ho'."

The women started giggling again.

"I'll bet that Hank guy would be impressed," Corly said. "Maybe if you did your hair in Christmas colors, too...."

As soon as she heard the crescendo in their giggles, Lauren shot a warning look around the room. "Don't ever bring up that incident again. And don't any of you even *think* about laughing until I get these babies safely stashed away."

* * * *

"This is definitely out of the ordinary," Herb Hendricks said, taking off his coat and hanging it over the back of the stool. "I mean, you shouldn't be alarmed or anything, but I don't normally have private chats with our trainees."

"Then why me?" David asked. He'd been dying of curiosity since Herb had called earlier in the week, asking to meet with him. They'd decided on a cozy micro-brewery pub that was roughly midway between David's home and the Santa School.

The bartender approached to take their orders. David opted for a traditional Bavarian-style weiss or wheat beer, but Herb literally went for the gold: a gleaming amber ale incorporating a Belgian Trappist triple-yeast culture.

Herb eyed the beer with relish when it was placed in front of him. "I have a taste for a *doppelbock*," he admitted, "but I won't drink it before February. Right now it's out of season, as far as I'm concerned. However..." He hoisted the glass. "This will do just fine."

"You're a beer connoisseur, huh?"

Considering Herb's level of enthusiasm, the pull he took on his ale was fairly modest. Clearly, he savored it. "Kind of. I've also been brewing my own for over twenty-five years." He rotated his stool to the left, so he could face David. "Now, back to the reason I wanted to see you."

David took a drink. "To tell you the truth, I've been a little anxious since you called. I hope you don't think I was a disappointing student."

"You? Oh, my goodness, no. I think you'll be one of the best Santas we've ever had. You slipped right into the role, embraced it from the inside out. And that's the way to do it."

"Thank you." David smiled. The compliment warmed him more than the weiss was doing. With the tension seeping out of him, he became more inquisitive than apprehensive. "What is it, then?"

Herb wiped his upper lip. "It's Lauren."

At the mention of her name, David felt a small fluttering in his stomach. The reaction bewildered him. "What *about* Lauren?"

"What do you think of her? Do you like her?"

Oh, damn, had some of his reactions been inappropriate? Did the Hendrickses pick up on his occasional lapses in attention? Did they see him as too much at the mercy of her quirky, sometimes arresting behavior?

David quickly took another drink. "I think she's maybe a little eccentric. I get the feeling she's smart. I know she can be smart-*mouthed*. But I really can't say that I like her or don't like her, since she's still pretty much a stranger to me."

Herb was nodding as David spoke, apparently agreeing with his assessment.

"Well, kiddo, I'm afraid you're going to have your hands full with that girl."

Nervously, David chuckled. "I've already gotten that impression."

"Yeah, it was hard *not* to get that impression." Herb, too, seemed amused, but his amusement was tempered by obvious concern. "Boy, I feel like I'm telling tales out of school. But this is just such an unusual situation. I mean, you two will be working together, but there's this...disparity in your attitudes. I feel it's my duty to clue you in about a few things, just to prepare you."

David took a heftier swallow of the weiss. "Now you're beginning to scare me."

Herb curled a hand around his arm. "Oh, hey, it's nothing *that* serious. At least I don't think so. My wife says I'm overreacting, and maybe I am. She has a lot of faith in Lauren and I have a lot of faith in my wife's intuition. But, like I said, I think you need to be prepared for some bumps in the road."

"Prepared...how?"

Herb lowered his voice, even though it was doubtful anybody in the pub knew either of them. "This is where guilt starts biting my behind. And if I didn't think you were a stand-up guy, I wouldn't be talking to you now. But I know you'll keep this conversation to yourself." He studied David's face. "Am I right?"

"Yes," David said quite earnestly.

"Okay, here's how it is." Herb lubricated his throat with more ale. "In a way, Lauren was the only applicant for the Missus Claus job. You remember Ted Berenger, the guy who hired you?"

David did. How could he forget?

"Well, Ted's immediate, hands-down first pick was an older lady who's done this for about eight, ten years with her husband. But her husband's been ill, so she bowed out at the last minute--decided it was more important to stay home and take care of him. The only other applicants were an elderly lady who was hard of hearing and a twenty-something woman who was, let's say, *way* out of sync with the character--had tattoos and

piercings and sounded like a Valley Girl when she talked."

"And that left Lauren," David concluded.

"Yup. And that left Lauren. Ted really had no choice but to go with her."

"And the problem is...?"

"She has a kind of Grinch-y attitude toward the holidays."

David raised his eyebrows and pulled his mouth down. "Hm. I wonder why she even bothered applying, then."

"That we don't know. Ted probably asked her, but most of the information he gets through applications and interviews is confidential." Herb finished his ale. "So I wanted to tell you, David, that you have to be especially patient and especially vigilant. If Lauren drops the ball, you'll have to pick it up. I'm sure Ralphie will be a big help, but you might have to do a lot of covering for her, too. Just keep your eyes and ears open. If something doesn't look or sound or feel right--in relation to the performance of your duties, I mean--you're gonna have to try to *make* it right...or at least deflect attention from it."

David chewed on this warning, but Herb hadn't given him much to sink his teeth into. "I wish I had a better idea of what to expect," he muttered.

"I wish you did, too. But nobody's gonna know until you're on the job."

David drank more beer, thought more about Lauren's mind-set. "If I only had some clue about why she feels the way she feels..."

Herb perked up. "Oh. Well, I might be able to help out with *that*. Harriet did find out that Lauren's husband left her not too long ago and she hasn't had much luck on the dating scene. Being forty-something hasn't improved her outlook any." Herb paused, frowning slightly. "Why are you smiling?"

"Sounds like *my* story," David said.

And he had a feeling there was more to worry about than Herb realized.

CHAPTER SIX

"David can't make it until later," Ted Berenger explained. He led Lauren to the impressive arched entrance of the North Pole diorama. "Go ahead: Wander around, take it in, get a feel. I'm going to see if Ralphie's here yet. He's your elf." Ted gave Lauren an encouraging pat on the arm. Then he paused, the line of his gaze moving beyond her. "Oh, here's Ralphie now."

Just as Lauren was about to execute a turn, her meet-and-greet smile in place, she could've sworn someone pinched her butt. She whirled around. No one was there.

But Ted was talking to that no-one. "Ralphie, this is our current Missus Claus. Lauren, meet Ralphie, our perennial elf."

Her eyes inched down...and down...and there he was. "You're--!"

"Nice ass," he said, sticking his hand out to her.

Ted groaned. "Ralphie, don't start."

Numbly, Lauren shook her co-worker's hand. She was still so flabbergasted her mouth hung open, speechless.

Ralphie had no such problem. "Go ahead, you can say it: midget, dwarf, stubby little shit." Broadly, he grinned. "Just don't call me *short*."

"You didn't know Ralphie was a little person?" Ted asked Lauren.

She shook her head. "Herb and Harriet left that part out." She was finally coming to her senses. She stared at Ralphie more boldly. "No wonder you make such a great elf. Now you just have to learn to keep your damn hands to yourself."

Ralphie barked a laugh and swatted her on the wrist. "You're okay. I like you already."

Another man in a suit hailed Ted, who excused himself and walked several yards away. Ralphie immediately winked at Lauren and made a clicking noise. "We should have fun at the company party."

"What if I have a date?" Lauren tried not to show her amusement. She didn't want to encourage his sassiness.

Ralphie blew air through his lips. "No problem. Can't you see I'm--" He made his arms into wings and, flapping them, scurried behind Ted. "--very good at flying beneath the radar?"

Ted turned. "Get away from me," he said and smoothly segued back into his conversation.

Lauren tittered. "Not *that* good," she said to Ralphie, who was walking back to her, dragging his feet and acting crestfallen.

He shot a disgusted look over his shoulder. "Ted knows me too well. I have a lot better luck with strangers." With a toss of the head, Ralphie straightened his suitcoat and tie. "Anyway, you don't have to worry...*this* time. I won't be at the party. It's the same old crap every year and a big yawn. Now, where were we?"

"*We* weren't anywhere," Lauren said, smiling at him. "But if you behave like a gentleman, I'll let you show me around."

"And if I don't behave like a gentleman...?"

"I'll just have to knee you in the forehead."

Ralphie hooted. "Oh, I *love* a bitch!"

"Then you'll adore me," Lauren assured him. She gave Ralphie her hand.

* * * *

"So, are you seeing anyone yet?"

David couldn't fail to notice the depth of Christine's indifference. His ex lifted one hand, fingers curled into the palm, and studied her perfectly manicured fingernails. He could've told her he was engaged to Paris Hilton and it would barely have elicited an arched eyebrow. Then again, her eyebrows were already curved with architectural precision, and she wouldn't want to disrupt their symmetry.

"Not on a regular basis," he said, crossing his arms and resting his back against the doorframe. He rotated one wrist and checked his watch, making sure he could get from her apartment to the mall in time for the appointment he'd set up with Ted Berenger. He wondered if Lauren would be there--an idle thought that stirred him more than it deserved to.

"You should try harder," Chris suggested, her shadowed eyelids folding up as she looked at him.

"Why? What's the rush? I'm content." *Sort of...*

Chris shrugged. "It would make me feel better, I guess."

The statement irked David. *It isn't about you*, he wanted to say. But she wouldn't understand. Her intention was likely to sound concerned about him, sensitive to his needs. To *sound* that way...not *be* that way. In Chris's world, appearance and actuality carried equal weight.

David smiled to himself. Yeah, those uplifted boobs and that eye-popping reddish mahogany hair with the meticulously placed highlights came straight out of her genes, as did the perfectly manicured fingernails and wrinkle-free face, smooth as a plum skin. In her mind, no doubt, she was a natural beauty.

"Well," he said, "try not to lose any sleep over it."

She actually seemed to take the statement at face value. David's smile broadened for an instant, but he pulled it back in. *Not only self-absorbed, but sharp as a rubber mallet.*

"Honestly, David," she said with some animation, which was unusual for her, "I don't think this Santa gig is going to help your chances any."

"I'm not doing it to meet women, Chris."

She didn't hear him. She wouldn't have gotten the point if she *did* hear him. She prattled on, intent on dispensing her wisdom. "I mean, I know how you love Christmas and everything, but I don't think this is going to work to your advantage. Well, yeah, I suppose it *could*...if you don't mind meeting poor single mothers who are looking for some chump to take care of them and their spawn."

David cast his eyes to the ceiling. "I'm not trying to wring some *advantage* out of this...not the kind you're thinking of, anyway."

Chris's sigh told him he was a lost cause. It also told him that her interest in the conversation was rapidly waning and she was starting to get restless. She began fingering the gold necklace at her throat. "Well, Wyatt should be calling soon...."

David nodded. *Oh, that's right...the new sugar daddy, the bearer of gifts.* "I have an appointment anyway." Even if no call was forthcoming, David knew she couldn't

conjure any more patience for fifteen minutes of small-talk with him than she could for fifteen years of marriage to him. He made a bigger show of checking his watch. "I should just be able to make it on time."

And maybe see Lauren out of that costume....

* * * *

Aside from catching one high-heel on the red carpeting and almost going down (which made her think of Holly the klutz), Lauren was actually having an enjoyable time. The diorama was delightful, its colorful backdrop curving inward around its centerpiece: Santa's dais with its large, elaborate throne. The backdrop had been expertly painted to resemble the interior of his workshop, with gaily wrapped packages heaped behind workbenches where elves happily toiled at making toys--dolls and jack-in-the-boxes and coaster wagons, pogo sticks and catchers' mitts.

"I guess stacks of CDs and computer games wouldn't have provided too much visual interest," Lauren commented wryly, and Ralphie laughed and agreed.

A Saint Bernard snoozed in one corner. Two broad windows set into the wall afforded glimpses of the North Pole landscape outside the workshop--obviously, these views were created on half-boxes affixed to the outsides of the windows--and the effect was enchanting. Swells of blue-white snow, highlighted with glittery paint, were softly bottom-lit, making them shimmer. Stars twinkled above them. Through one window the moon shone, its airbrushed face smiling serenely at a pole painted with red and white swirls. Through another, Santa's sleigh and reindeer could be seen, ready for the big night. Icicle lights hung from the outer top portion of each window frame.

Aside from the throne, the only three-dimensional objects in the diorama were a small table on Santa's right, a tall electric candelabrum somewhat behind the throne on his left, and a large decorated tree toward the back. Just as the Hendrickses had said, carpet-covered ramps led up to and down from the dais. At the foot of the down-ramp was a mailbox stenciled with LETTERS TO SANTA--EXPRESS MAIL.

Lauren examined the Mrs. Claus area. Again, the Hendrickses had accurately described it. Her more modest chair was stationed at the foot of the entrance ramp. She too had her own small table. An empty white wicker basket, bedecked with silver-threaded red ribbon, stood on the floor.

"What's this?" she asked Ralphie.

He bent at the waist and peered into it. "Empty," he quipped.

"I meant what's it *for*."

"Well, hell, you gotta be more specific," he grumbled. "It's the mall's contribution to childhood obesity. Or it will be, when it's filled."

Ted Berenger joined them. "Ralphie, she doesn't need your editorial comments. Besides, you're not exactly svelte yourself."

Ralphie held out his arms. "How much *svelte* can this frame show off? Stretch me a little and you might begin to see some."

Ted turned to Lauren, who was chuckling. "It's for the bags of candy you'll be handing out to the children," he told her.

"Don't forget the sucker-coupons that are hidden in there for the parents," Ralphie said.

Ted shot him a warning glare. Ralphie clapped a hand over his mouth, as if he had no control over what came out of it. Then Ted's expression abruptly changed. "Oh, Ralphie, remind me: We have to make sure to pull the bags with the Rumblestix."

Ralphie saluted. "Sure thing, boss."

"The what?" Lauren asked.

"Rumblestix," Ted repeated. "It's a new candy that's supposed to be test-marketed during the holidays, through free samples. But when we tried it ourselves--"

Ralphie mimed an explosion, puffing out his cheeks and splaying his fingers in front of his face.

"Yeah, that about describes it," Ted said with a smile.

"What was the problem?" Lauren asked.

"The candy is made to look like little sticks of dynamite," Ted said, "and that alone should tell you something. Anyway, as soon as you put it in your mouth and it starts reacting with your saliva...well, it starts this horrible sizzling and popping--pretty powerful, actually--and then an intensely sour flavor is released."

"Lip-puckering, eye-watering," Ralphie added. He made a face to give life to the description.

"Oh no!" Lauren covered her mouth. She could almost taste it.

"We decided it might be a bit too much for some of the kids," Ted explained, "especially the younger ones, and especially without any kind of warning." He looked back and forth between Lauren and her elf. "So remember, it's the red bags with the white polka-dots that we have to keep *out* of the basket."

"I'll be sure to double-check," Ralphie assured him, and Lauren said she'd keep a sharp eye on the candy bags as she doled them out.

Ted lightly laid a hand on Lauren's back and looked at her through the pristine lenses of his wire-rimmed glasses. "So, do you feel adequately prepared? Think you know the drill?" He'd run through the routine with her before Ralphie showed up.

"I'm sure I can handle it," Lauren said, giving him her most self-confident smile.

"Good girl." He gave her back a reassuring pat as he shook her hand. "So, I'll see you at the kick-off party. Your and David's costumes will be there for you to change into. Now don't forget!"

"How could I forget?" Lauren said brightly. The costume prospect didn't exactly thrill her. She'd be going to a party--her first in a long while--attended by dozens of front-office people and executive types...and she'd appear fifty pounds heavier and thirty years older than she actually was! At least she'd be able to make her entrance looking good.

Ted waved affably as he walked away. Lauren looked at Ralphie and with a grimace mouthed, *Good girl?*

Ralphie clapped his hands in glee. "Ha-ha, I knew that would grab you! Just be glad you're not my size, or he would've patted you on the head. Now go lie down next to your dish. I think it's over there by the Saint Bernard." Ralphie pointed at the workshop scenery.

"Are they all like that?" Lauren asked.

"All who?" Ralphie escorted her down the hall behind the diorama that led to one of the mall's obscure exits.

"All the big-bugs who run this place."

"Pretty much," Ralphie said. "Squeaky clean, condescending geeks with sticks up

their butts." They stopped in front of the door. "Actually, Teddy Bear is one of the more tolerable suits-with-heads. At least he has a sense of humor...sometimes." Ralphie gave her a shrewd look. "He's married, by the way."

"And I'm not interested." Lauren bent toward him. "*By the way*." She would have reamed him for his implication had she known him better. "Besides, what I'm wearing at that party ain't a-gonna seduce nobody."

Ralphie's eyes warned her of his grin before it appeared on his face--a look she would come to know well.

"Except maybe Santa," he crooned.

* * * *

When David met Ralphie, he was only a bit less stupefied than Lauren had been. "My God, you really *are* a little guy," he said.

"No, in fact I'm not. It's an optical illusion."

David's uncertain smile was testimony to his confusion. He hoped he hadn't insulted Ralphie. It was hard to tell. Trying to remember if he'd ever before had to bend over to shake the hand of an adult, he tried not to lower his body too obviously and instead rely on his arm to bridge the gap. He looked at the solemn face that stared up at him and reminded himself not to shake the man's hand as if it belonged to a child. Yup, this was definitely a first.

"Your perception is skewed," Ralphie explained quite soberly, "because you're exceptionally large...like Gulliver among the Lilliputians." His eyes twinkled their advance notice--and then, broadly, he smiled.

David's sigh of relief was audible. He shook Ralphie's hand with genuine warmth. "Yeah, I guess everything is relative. Anyway, it's nice to meet you. I hear you're my indispensable right-hand man."

Ralphie looked dubious. "You didn't hear that from Berenger."

"No, from Herb and Harriet."

"Oh, okay. That makes more sense. They're *nice* people."

David's attention kept being diverted by the diorama, and especially by the seat of honor in the middle of it. He felt an anticipatory tingle. A memory suddenly surfaced. When he was very young, he used to wish he could shrink himself down to the size of his toys and play not just with them but in and among them. He wished he could walk in and out of his Lincoln Log fort and the cars he pushed around the floor and the sand castles he built at the beach. He richly envied his sister for having a whole furnished dollhouse--an exquisitely detailed, make-believe yet somehow real world that begged to be explored with proportional hands and eyes.

And here he was, at the age of forty-five, at the threshold of that fantasy's realization. He was about to step into the alternate world of his own imagination....

Ralphie was peering up at him through narrowed eyes. When David finally noticed him, Ralphie said, "You're one of the rare ones, aren't you."

"I beg your pardon?"

Ralphie's eyes swept over the North Pole scene. "You won't be *in* it," he said thoughtfully, "you'll be *of* it." He looked back at David. "Like me."

David's tingles intensified, concentrating in the center of his body. It felt, he

imagined, like falling in love. But that was a threshold he'd never approached, much less teetered on, and from the looks of things, he likely never would.

Ralphie kept watching him. "Let's take our tour."

David took a deep breath and let it out. "Yeah, let's do that."

"Too bad you just missed Lauren," Ralphie said offhandedly. "Of course she'll be at the party, though. Are you bringing a date?"

David's attention shifted like a tectonic plate. He glanced down at his elf, who glanced back up at him with a feigned innocence as thin as onion skin. This time, it was David's eyes that did the talking, and they said, *Why, you cagey little s.o.b.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I said, I'd like you and David to come to the party together," Ted repeated into the phone.

The cell nearly fell out of Lauren's hand. She scrambled to retrieve it, grateful she wasn't on the freeway.

"In costume," Ted added.

This time, Lauren almost threw the phone. "What? Are you out of your mind? I'm bringing a date!"

"David might be, too. Don't worry, we have it all covered."

Lauren felt a little dip of regret, but it was easy enough to overlook...under the circumstances. "How could you possibly have it *covered*?" she asked acerbically.

"Lauren, I know this will be a rather unorthodox date for you--"

"*Unorthodox*?" His placatory voice had done little to calm her. "I suggest you get out your dictionary and find a more appropriate word. Try *abysmal*. Try *disastrous*. Ted, I'm committed to being a responsible employee and team player and all that other..." She almost said *bullshit*, but her self-censor, thank goodness, was on the job. "...positive stuff," she concluded. "But you need to walk in my pumps for a minute. I've just started seeing this man. He's a lot like the people who'll be at that party. And he's the first guy I've met since my divorce who has any appeal whatsoever."

"Lauren, you don't have to tell me this."

"But you need to understand!" she shrieked, then cautioned herself against sounding hysterical. "Listen, I had to muster some real *chutzpah* to ask him in the first place. It was bad enough knowing I had to change into that costume once I got to the party. But I consoled myself with the fact that he'd at least see me at my best before and afterwards...maybe even be tickled by the transformation. But now you're telling me that he has to have the Christmas Crone on his arm from start to finish, and not only that, but we have to arrive as part of some kinky threesome or even foursome that includes freakin' Santa Claus!"

Lauren had worked herself into such a lather that her voice had again begun to spiral. She didn't care anymore. If Ted was so insensitive that he couldn't sympathize with her plight, he could take a flying leap.

But he was chuckling. "I'm really sorry," he said--sincerely, it seemed. "I know how my wife would react if she were in your position. But look at it this way: You'll get to ride in a limo; you'll be one of the stars of the show; and you'll please some very influential people. Besides, if your boyfriend is cool, he'll get a kick out of it."

Okay, he was finally making some sense. Lauren tried to adjust her perspective. But no matter which angle she viewed this from, the whole setup pretty much sucked. Except for.... "What do you mean, ride in a limo?"

"Oh, I was getting to that. Okay, so you get in costume at home and your date meets you there, which I assume he would do in any case. David picks up his date, if he has one, brings her back to his house, and then gets in his costume. Or she meets him there, whatever. The mall will send a limo to your place and David's to pick you all up and bring you to the party. Take you back home, too. Champagne *gratis*, I might add. You could end up having quite a good time."

Could was the pivotal word there, Lauren thought. She just wished she knew Tim Murphy well enough to be able to gauge his reaction in advance. It would help put her mind at ease.

Who the hell is David bringing...?

Lauren's stomach twisted. She didn't stand a chance (and she wondered if and why she even wanted a chance) of him noticing her. It was a foregone conclusion that every other female at the party--the bona fide matrons included--would be a whole lot more attractive than Mrs. Claus.

* * * *

Even as David opened his front door and saw her standing there, he couldn't believe he was doing this--taking his ex-wife, whom he didn't even like, to a party. But going alone, especially if Lauren had an escort, would've made him feel like a big fat loser in a Santa suit. He had *some* pride.

Until he opened the door....

"Oh, *Gawd*," Chris drawled, dramatically rolling back her head. She was done up to the nines, of course, and what with all the hair styling and dying and the various strata of cosmetic enhancement, not to mention the skin-tight dress, she could've passed for a call girl.

Who'd be embarrassing whom tonight? David wondered, starting to regret his decision.

Lips twisted and head shaking in disapproval, Chris sidled past his rotund belly and stepped into the foyer. "I am definitely going to make it clear to everyone who'll listen that this is *not* a reunion date. There could be some choice men at this shindig."

"What about Wyatt?" David asked. Hadn't she said she'd been seeing some guy with that name?

Chris was smoothing her dress, obviously intent on making it cling like yet another layer of paint. "What *about* Wyatt?"

"Well, wouldn't he be a little perturbed, knowing you're chasing after other men?"

"Why should he care? We're not engaged, for goodness' sake. Besides, I'm not chasing after other men. I'm doing my ex a favor."

Oh, that's right, David thought. He'd forgotten her favorite--and, by now, threadbare--rationale: She never hit on guys; *they* hit on *her*...as she sat eagerly and seductively in the center of her web.

David put his hands on his broad shiny black belt. "Aside from the fact that you're ashamed to be seen with me, how do I look?"

Chris stepped back and gave him the once-over. "You look great...for Santa Claus. That's the problem."

David leaned past her and looked out one of the door's sidelights. "Our limo's here. Try to put on a happy face."

If it doesn't crack your paint job....

* * * *

When Lauren answered the door, Tim's smile fell and faded like the sun slipping

below the horizon.

Oh, great, Lauren thought. *Just great*. She could already see how *this* evening would go. "Please, come in," she said, smiling and touching his forearm.

Still eyeing her with an expression Lauren didn't care to analyze, Tim cleared his throat as he stepped into the kitchen. "Well, this is a new look for you." He didn't attempt to so much as kiss her on the cheek.

She laughed lightly. "Yes, it certainly is."

"Pretty convincing." It didn't sound like a compliment. "And the mall managers really wanted you to come dressed this way?"

Lauren started feeling defensive. Was he assuming she *chose* to be in this getup? "Yes, they insisted on it. Why else would I be wearing it?"

Tim shrugged and gave her a weak smile. "Misguided Christmas spirit?"

Oh, brother, she thought. *You've got a long way to go before you know me*.

"Sounds like the limo's here," Tim said. He sighed. "Well, these should be good hunting grounds for me. Bagging Prairie Park Mall or even one of their bigger stores as a client would be a major coup."

"You're going there to schmooze?" Lauren said in disbelief as she fumbled with her wrap. Belatedly, Tim helped her.

"Why not?"

You're supposed to be going because you enjoy my company, you jackass, not because I'm your foot-in-the-door! Lauren sighed. "Yeah, why not?"

As they walked outside, Tim tossed her a crumb. "Love your house, by the way. And you've really made it look fantastic inside."

"Thanks." *And bite me*.

The limo driver stood beside the door he had opened for them. Inside, Lauren could see David's red-and-white bulk. Gathering her layered and aproned skirts, she improvised a strategy for seating herself as gracefully as possible. Then she spied David's date.

Not only did the woman look like a mannequin, which was distracting enough, but she was seated across from David, not next to him. Half in and half out of the vehicle, Lauren had instantly to decide where to put her cushioned behind. Crouching awkwardly, she turned one way, then the other, then the other again. She caught a glimpse of David's date brushing at her face as she grimaced and made little sounds of disgust.

"Just sit down, will you?" the woman said irritably. "Your skirt nearly took out one of my contacts!"

Lauren felt the band of her apron tighten as David grabbed it and pulled her down beside him. Half of her butt bounced off his right thigh. There was barely enough room on the seat for both of them.

"You don't want to sit over there," David whispered into her ear. "Believe me."

Lauren gave him a quick bewildered look, then glanced at his date. "Sorry," she murmured humbly.

Tim slid in and sat beside the mannequin. They exchanged fetching smiles.

"I suppose it's time for introductions," David said. With that enormous white beard and his hands linked over his belly, he looked like a great-grandfather presiding over a family reunion. He used his left hand to indicate whom he was addressing and referring to. "Chris, this is Lauren, my co-worker. Lauren, Christine."

Arm maximally extended, Lauren tipped forward across the expanse of leg-room. Chris hesitated, then limply stuck out her hand. Lauren shook it and immediately had an overwhelming urge to toss it aside, as if she'd accidentally grasped a dead frog. Nevertheless, she managed to smile.

"Nice to meet you, Chris. I'm afraid our costumes take up quite a bit of space."

"Yeah, I'd say so," the woman answered distastefully.

Lauren turned to David and mimicked his previous motions. "David, this is Tim. Tim, David...reputedly one of the best-looking Santas the mall has ever had."

The men shook hands. Then Tim and Chris immediately turned to each other and said hi.

"Hey, how about breaking out that champagne?" Lauren suggested. "We might as well get what we can out of this." *And boy, could I use a drink...*

Tim, the less encumbered of the two men, passed out the champagne glasses then pulled the bottle from its ice bucket. Wrapping a towel around the cork, he smoothly extracted it. Everybody seemed happier and more relaxed once their glasses were full.

"So, David, what do you do when you're not playing Santa Claus?" Tim asked with polite interest.

"I'm a crane operator."

"Ah." Tim nodded. He clearly had no interest in skilled trades.

But Lauren was intrigued. She wasn't immune to the primitive mystique surrounding men involved in construction work. "Really," she said to David. "You operate heavy equipment?"

"Yeah. I guess you didn't know that. Just like I don't know what *you* do."

"Interior design."

"Lauren's a superb decorator," Tim added. "She's in the process of doing my house. That's how we met."

It was David's turn to be impressed. "Wow. You know, I've been thinking of hiring someone like you to work on *my* place." He chuckled. "I have no aesthetic sense whatsoever."

"If you mean *taste*, that's the truth," Chris muttered, then sipped champagne as she looked at him over the glass.

Tim snickered at the barb, but David ignored her. "What kinds of...styles do you do?" he asked Lauren. Was that the right word to use? He wasn't sure.

Lauren was proud of her skill, and his interest in it pleased her. "Whatever style you want: urban industrial, techno-pop, Paris apartment, English cottage, British colonial, Alpine, Oriental, American twentieth-century retro, American colonial, Shaker, Adirondack lodge, north woods rustic, western, southwestern, antebellum southern--"

David was laughing. "You sound like Johnny Cash singing 'I Been Everywhere'."

"When it comes to interior design," Lauren said without pretense, "I pretty much have been."

"Maybe, when our jobs are over, we can set something up."

Their eyes met and lingered. With a nervous smile and quick nod, Lauren looked away.

"You should check out Lauren's place," Tim said to David, a little too helpfully, "if you'd like to see an example of her work. She lives on Pearl Lake." He gave Lauren an inquiring look. "What's the address again, babe? One-eleven Ember Drive?" Without

awaiting her response, he affirmed, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure it's one-eleven. That cottage is a testimonial in three dimensions. Of course the setting doesn't hurt," Tim added with a chuckle.

Silently damning men with good memories, Lauren sought refuge in her glass of champagne. She noticed gratefully that David hadn't jumped at Tim's suggestion. Then again, he definitely wasn't the presumptuous type and that, combined with the Hendrickses' warnings, virtually ensured he'd keep his distance. To get away from the subject once and for all, though, she studiously refrained from looking at David and instead turned her attention back to Tim.

It was a futile attempt at escape. He was engaged in a quiet confab with Christine, who was giggling quite...moronically.

CHAPTER EIGHT

For the first few hours or so of the party, which was held at a rather chi-chi hotel, David and Lauren had little chance to be with their dates--unsatisfactory as those dates were turning out to be. After being formally paraded into the large ballroom and introduced to the crowd, they met various owners, managers, and other executives associated in one way or another with Prairie Park Mall. They even led a sing-along--comprised, of course, of Christmas carols--and then led the buffet line before assuming their places at the center of the main table.

Dinner essentially turned into a pep rally. Two speakers instructed and motivated the guests. Lauren found all this blab about "maximizing the holiday trade" not only a colossal bore but a colossal turn-off. Profit *über alles* was never a philosophy she espoused. She hated even more the thought of manipulating the public's buying habits. No wonder so many people were drowning in debt! David must have felt the same way, because he leaned toward her at one point and whispered, "Don't ever forget: The C in Christmas stands for *commercialism*."

At that point, Lauren grabbed the notebook and pen that were positioned above each place setting and wrote, H=hype, then tilted it for David to see. He smiled, catching on immediately. He slid his own notebook in front of him and wrote, R=retail outlet.

And so their game continued: I=insanity; S=sales; T=tawdry; M=materialism; A=accountant; S=shopping mall (to which Lauren added *snow-job*).

She and Tim barely spoke to each other. He was busily chatting up some suit sitting on his right. David and Chris barely spoke to each other. She was flirting with some suit on her left.

After dinner, when the band began to play and the dancing started, Santa and Mrs. Claus had only one more performance to give before being released from the spotlight. Ted Berenger grabbed a microphone and invited them to lead the guests in the evening's first dance.

As soon as David approached Lauren and took her hand, they both knew this wasn't going to be easy. And their self-conscious smiles communicated that knowledge. Because their costumes wouldn't allow for any contact closer than arms' length, they made the most of it by assuming a proper ballroom-style position for their waltz.

And they both loved it.

"You're leading really well," Lauren said, "considering what we're up against." Playfully, she bumped against the artificial swell of his belly.

"That's because you, dear, are light as a feather." David's use of the name by which he was told to address her was more than facetious. He actually felt something like affection when he spoke the word.

"But make your circles wider," Lauren advised. "I'm a little tipsy."

"Good idea. I am, too."

They floated in broad loops around the floor. Lauren glimpsed Chris, his date, shimmying up to Tim Murphy, her date, and curling a hand over his shoulder, then leaning toward his ear, then laughing. His arm went around her waist.

"Did I make a bad move?" David asked.

"Hm? What? I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

"You're frowning. Am I getting clumsy or something?"

"It isn't you who's making bad moves," Lauren said dryly. She'd had just enough to drink to speak her mind. "David, why did you bring Chris? All evening it's like she's been--"

They executed another turn, and David spotted his ex. "Soliciting johns?"

"To be perfectly frank, yes. She's humiliating you."

"Funny...she led me to believe it was the other way around."

"Where did you find her? Not some escort service, I hope." It was an offensive and possibly hurtful thing to say, and Lauren immediately felt contrite. "I'm really sorry, David. I didn't mean to imply--"

"That I couldn't come up with a decent date? You'd be right. But I didn't have to resort to an escort service." He glanced disdainfully at Chris, undulating in her Spandex cocoon. "Although I'd probably have ended up with a classier companion if I *had* called one."

Now Lauren was thoroughly confused. "Then...who is she?"

With great embarrassment, David made his confession. "My ex-wife."

Lauren's eyes grew wide with astonishment. "You actually married...that?" But they were so *different*.

The music stopped; the crowd applauded. David bowed, Lauren curtsied, and together they moved to a far corner of the room near a door. On impulse, they went through it and found themselves in an empty hallway, where they both leaned against a wall and wiped their foreheads.

"It's an old story," David said, picking up where they'd left off. He felt a need to explain, to save face. "I got her pregnant. We hardly knew each other, but two people don't have to know each other to have sex. So I wanted to do the right thing, the responsible thing. That's how I was raised. I didn't want to be a father *in absentia*. Chris was more than happy to go along with it. She had no intention of being faithful anyway, so marriage wouldn't really cramp her style. Best of all for her, though, operating engineers make pretty damn good money. And that's one woman who salivates over men with money."

"I've gathered that. But you *did* end up divorced."

"Oh, hell yeah. It was inevitable. We both wanted it...for obvious reasons. So we decided to wait until our boy became high-school age and then go for it."

Rotating his body so his shoulder braced him against the wall, David studied Lauren's face. All evening, it seemed, he'd been seeing through the heavy makeup. He was starting to think he liked what he saw. "I have another confession to make."

She rolled her head to look at him. Damn, he had absorbing eyes. And his mouth, peeking out from beneath that cloud of whiskers, promised....

Sluggishly, Lauren made her mind switch tracks. She was only feeling this way because they'd just danced and she'd been drinking and she hadn't been with a man in months and David could be so sweet and--

He interrupted her rambling and not entirely unpleasant thoughts with his confession. "Don't hit me, but I've been wondering what you look like under all that...guss."

Lauren's eyebrows rose, fell. "I don't think that's a word, David."

"Well, you're gussied up--right?--so the stuff you're covered in must be *guss*."

She started giggling. "Okay, I'll buy that. We're not in a Scrabble tournament, after all." She swung an arm toward him and lightly touched his hand. She did it again, and this time he caught her hand by hooking one of his fingers around one of hers. The simple contact jolted her. "I've been wondering, too," she said in a quavering, girlish voice she didn't recognize.

David's eyes glinted--toffee in the chocolate, sugar crystals in the caramel. "Wanna play doctor?"

Somewhere near her solar plexus, Lauren quivered. "What about our dates?"

"They can't play. Actually, I don't think they'll even miss us." David more assertively grabbed her hand. "Come on. There's gotta be some nook or cranny we can duck into for a while."

Screw the rules, David thought. *We're adults.*

Lauren thought the same thing.

Hand in hand, trying to muffle their naughty-child laughter, they tiptoed down the hallway like a couple of cat burglars. They tried one door, then another, then a third.

"Can you imagine what we must look like on the cameras," David said, "creeping down the hallway in these outfits?"

Lauren's hand flew to her mouth. "I forgot about that." Her eyes scanned the walls and ceiling. "I don't see any cameras."

"Maybe they're only in the public areas."

David tried another doorknob. It resisted at first, then turned. They slipped into the dark room, closing the door behind them. David turned on a light. It was a closet whose shelves were stacked with tablecloths, napkins and napkin rings and lined with candle holders, vases, containers of silk flowers and other decorations. Used linens--or what must have been--were in a large laundry bag on the floor. David swept an arm toward it, inviting Lauren to take a seat.

Her heart was pounding now. She felt as if she were in junior high school, under the bleachers with Kenny Ives. No date she'd had since her divorce had made her feel this way, and she suddenly thought, *Why am I going this? What if he's a real troll?*

David knelt on the floor in front of her. Slowly he began removing his whiskers. Lauren closed her eyes. She felt him take off her granny glasses. Then, with a touch so exquisitely gentle it made her shudder, he lightly ran his fingertips across her forehead and down her temples, his thumbs over her eyebrows and eyelashes.

"I love the color of your eyes," he whispered, and his hands continued their delicate exploration of her face. "It's very seductive."

"You're giving me goose bumps," Lauren said. Her throat was dry.

"Good. Would you like more?" His large hands cupped and slid down her neck, then to the collar of her dress.

Lauren felt him undo the top button, then the next, then the next. She could no longer bear to sit still. Swaying forward, her shallow breathing making her dizzy, she reached for him, for this large man with the large and tender hands.

Their mouths came together unerringly, hungrily, and their moans blended as David eased her back onto the stuffed bag and lay beside her. He leaned over her and kissed her again, one hand cradling her face, the other tracing the swell of her breasts between the parted bodice of her dress. She hiked up one leg. He didn't need directions. His hand immediately went beneath her dress, and she felt its maddening slow glide

across her belly, over her hips, down her leg.

"I want to..." David began to say, then stopped. Suddenly diffident, he didn't know how to put into words what he wanted. *Make love* was entirely inappropriate; they didn't love each other. *Have sex* was too cold. Every other euphemism was either too cute and juvenile or too crude. Then Lauren rescued him.

"I do, too," she said against his lips.

She already loved his mouth. She wanted to feel it on every part of her body. She lifted one hand to it. He licked and kissed the balls of her fingers. They rolled again, he kissed and nibbled at the fleshy bulge of breasts, and Lauren felt a giggle in her throat. Not only was his false belly thwarting her attempts to caress him, his Santa wig tickled. And not only that, she was purely and simply...ecstatic.

David's wondrous hands crept back up her body, knees to head, as he once again dipped over her. Lauren felt her wig come loose and fall off. Then...

...nothing. She opened her eyes and saw David abruptly pushing himself up and away from her.

Unsteadily, he took a few steps backward. "What are you doing here?" he breathed in disbelief.

Dumbstruck, Lauren gaped at him. Did he have narcolepsy? Some disease or disorder that obliterated his short-term memory? "I'm...I'm your *wife*." She grabbed the Mrs. Claus wig and shook it in the air between them, reminding him.

With no change in his expression, David slowly raised his hand to his head and slowly pulled off the leonine Santa wig.

Lauren's jaw dropped. "Oh...my...God..." she whispered. Her lips, like two slats of wood, barely moved. "You're...you're *Hank*!"

The shaved head gave him away. She stared at him a few beats longer, then her face collapsed in thought. "I thought your name was David."

"It *is* David. My middle name is Henry, which Ben shortens to Hank whenever he tries to fix me up on the Internet. Remember Ben, my son?"

Lauren nodded. "The boy with the bank."

"So, what's with *Liz*?"

"My middle name is Elizabeth, which I shorten to Liz whenever I try to fix *myself* up on the Internet."

Unbelievable, David thought. "By the way, was your foot all right?" His eyes glinted. "After you kicked Tiny Tim, I mean."

"It was my toe," Lauren said, getting sulky. How like him to remind her. "It was okay after a week or so."

When she allowed herself to look at him--really to look at him, all prejudice aside--she saw again that he was quite an attractive man. It was difficult to pinpoint exactly how and why. He was just ruggedly, maturely, handsomely *masculine*, and the look was both strengthened and softened by his eyes. But....

But he'd said all those insulting things about her!

"You...you said all those insulting things about me! You said I was plastic and overdone and looked like a cotton candy wagon!" Lauren awkwardly scrambled to a sitting position and began buttoning her dress.

"I didn't say you looked *like* one, I said you looked like you'd been run over *by* one."

Lauren was breathing harder, only now it wasn't from passion. Her jaw had begun to jut out belligerently. "And tonight I've probably lost my boyfriend because *your crappy taste* extends to women and you brought some bimbo here who came on to him!"

David did not, at this moment, need to be reminded of *that* particular lapse in his judgment. "Let me tell you something, Cotton Candy--which, by the way, is a great name for a stripper--"

"What are you implying?"

"Nothing, never mind."

She bolted up from the laundry bag and grabbed the open front of his Santa suit in both fists. "You tell me what you meant!"

David averted his eyes. Lauren nevertheless intuited his meaning, and she recoiled in horror and outrage. "You were equating me with that...that *creature* in there!" Her hand shot out to point in the direction of the ballroom. "You think we're cast from the same mold, don't you?" She was referring, of course, to his ex-wife.

"I don't know," David mumbled, not entirely honestly. He *was* making that comparison, and now, knowing how unfair he was being, he wanted to be off this subject...fast. Besides, Liz\Lauren looked like she wanted to blacken his eyes. Both of them.

He started talking again, to distract her. "But I do know that if your *boyfriend* is so shallow he'd go for someone like Chris, and such a hound that he'd do it while he's at a party with another woman, I've done you one huge favor by bringing those facts to your attention. So you should thank me for bringing 'that bimbo'."

Grudgingly, Lauren had to admit he had a point. Tim Murphy had failed a crucial test. He was neither her boyfriend *nor* worth hanging on to, and she was lucky to have found out so quickly. But she wasn't going to let David know she agreed with him.

"Well...at least Tim doesn't have a flat ass," she huffed, wanting to hurt him, wanting to hurt "Hank" like he'd hurt her.

"*What?*"

"You're an equipment operator, aren't you? So you probably have a flat ass."

"What's it to you? *You'll* never see it. And I'd rather have a *flat* ass--although I don't, by the way--than a *fat* ass."

Lauren's eyes widened, then narrowed murderously. "I do not have a fat ass," she said in a tight voice, then added, "...much." She tried repositioning her wig. "Ralphie thinks it's nice."

"*Ha!* Ralphie? From his vantage point, he couldn't tell a nice ass from a pair of doorknobs!"

"He has the *best* vantage point," Lauren countered.

A saner voice in her mind told her, *I can't believe you said that. This conversation is deteriorating rapidly. Get out. Look what he's done to you. Look what he's doing to you. Run for your life!*

Lauren fumbled almost frantically to make herself presentable enough to get to a ladies' room. With a final furious glance over her shoulder, she blew out of the closet.

David's hands hung limply at his sides. "Hey, I'm sorry," he said to the door. Why couldn't he say it to her face?

He suspected she wasn't in the least like Christine. And he knew she had a nice ass. Because, before his hand slid down the smooth slope of her thigh, it had scaled that

soft promontory and copped a tantalizing feel.

And that was a hell of a memory to take away from this disaster of a party.

CHAPTER NINE

On the Friday after Thanksgiving, Prairie Park Mall, decked in its holiday best, was shimmering and glittering and packed with shoppers. Lauren still felt stuffed from yesterday's feast at her sister's house. But that's not why she almost felt like throwing up.

It was her first day on the job. *That* was why she almost felt like throwing up.

As she approached the North Pole diorama, a most incredible sight shocked her out of her queasiness. Amid the hustle and bustle a fantastic figure appeared, a jingling figure with pointed ears and upturned nose, with conical cap and striped stockings and shiny slippers with arcing toes.

The creature cavorted toward her and then stood, legs apart and hands on hips, blocking her path. "Hi, sweet cheeks!"

"Ralphie!" Lauren cried. She bent over to examine the face that beamed up at her, the face with the perfect bright-red circles centered over its cheekbones. "Is that you?"

"No, it's Arnold Schwarzenegger." He threw his shoulders forward and hunkered into a pumped-up wrestler pose.

Lauren chuckled in disbelief.

Then Ralphie spun around and flipped up the pointed tails, hung with bells, of his green waistcoat with its gold-braid piping. "*Now* do you recognize me?"

Lauren lightly swatted him on the head. "Behave yourself. There are children here...teeming hordes of them," she added tensely.

Ralphie waved away her rebuke. "Ach, they love me."

"Hey, am I early enough?" Feeling discombobulated, she'd forgotten to put on her watch.

Ralphie took Lauren's left hand and began walking with her toward the diorama. "Hell, yeah. There's plenty of time to get ready." He stopped suddenly and raised her hand before his eyes. "Why do your fingernails say OH OH? Are you alarmed? Frightened?" He peered up at her--utterly guileless and utterly wicked.

Lauren glared at him and yanked her hand away. "You're reading them upside down, Einstein."

"But you do look a tad green around the gills. So I guess you're anxious."

"A little." *For all kinds of reasons....*

"I've got a cure for that. Just concentrate on the music or the sound of the fountains."

Lauren tried. It helped a little. She checked her right hand to make sure she was still holding the makeup bag Harriet had given her. Yes, it was there. Given how zoned out she felt, she wouldn't have been surprised to discover she'd dropped it or left it in the car.

"Come on, I'll show you the dressing rooms. The mall sort of cobbles 'em together every holiday season. I'll even help you--"

"No, you won't," Lauren had enough presence of mind to say. She let herself be led to the corridor that ran behind the diorama.

And then she spied David.

It was the first time she'd seen him--since that doomed blind-date, anyway--out of his Santa costume...and, oh damn, how good he looked! When she'd met "Hank" she'd

had some sense of his physical appeal, but everything had happened so quickly and was so screwed up that night she hadn't really...well...*noticed* him.

But there, just down the hallway, the same tall man with a strong profile stood ramrod straight, hands tucked in jacket pockets and pulling the soft suede of the coat tightly around his broad shoulders and back. His jeans were just tight enough...and he had, Lauren noted, a *gorgeous* ass.

He was talking to Ted Berenger and apparently didn't notice her.

Ralphie glanced up at Lauren, down the hall at David, back at Lauren again. Then he called out, "Hey, guys, look what I found! Can I keep her?"

Lauren wasn't even sure if her legs were still moving.

Ted smiled and waved.

David turned his head and body slightly in her direction. His stomach was flat as a plank. And the front of his jeans showed a breathtaking counterbalance to that delectable, tight behind. Lauren felt faint. His melted-candy eyes seemed to bore through her.

Then, with no further sign of recognition, he turned back to Ted. "Guess I'll go get ready now," David murmured.

Ted clapped him on the back, flashed him an encouraging smile. "Herb and Harriet said they'd try to make it. They always go the extra mile for us. But if they're not here by your starting time and you need some help, just ask Ralphie."

David nodded, eager to disappear into the room before which they were standing. As he opened the door, his peripheral vision picked up Lauren's form drifting closer, closer....

He closed the door behind him, took a deep breath and let it out. "Get a grip," he whispered to himself.

She somehow looked quite different from the impression he'd gotten of her that ill-fated night at his house. Then, in the merciless glare of his well-lit foyer, all he'd seen was hair that reminded him of Easter basket grass and a face splashed with makeup. In short, he'd seen his ex-wife...because his vision was distorted by distasteful memories that remained too vivid.

Today he was seeing Lauren with different eyes, unclouded by the past. That bias he'd been harboring had dissolved. Today he saw a classy, statuesque woman--a lovely woman--dressed in a beautifully tailored suit that flattered her figure and emphasized the silken grayness of her eyes. The style of her collar-length, feathered hair was just casual enough to give her a breezy, youthful air without seeming inappropriate or silly. The pastel streaks, not nearly as garish as he'd remembered them, suggested an impish independence of spirit...and seemed just right for the woman he was in the process of discovering.

But something else, David knew, was altering his vision--memories.

As he looked at the Santa suit hanging near the makeshift dressing table, as he sat down and arrayed his face paint before him, he thought of the two times he and Lauren had been together. He thought of her expressive face and her wit, of how she'd made him laugh, made him just plain feel good. He thought of her pride and sauciness and vulnerability, all intriguingly bundled, all continually playing off each other. She'd handled herself with great grace and charm at that boring party. And then, when they'd snuck off together....

David pressed his lips together and stared at himself in the mirror. "Admit it," he

muttered to the troubled face that looked back at him, "you want her. And you don't know what to do about it."

She probably despised him. And he certainly deserved it.

* * * *

"Ralphie, you can leave now," Lauren told her elf. That eyeful of David had shaken her, and she moved aimlessly around the little room where she was supposed to transform herself into a saccharine-sweet, merry old woman. Freshly laundered and neatly pressed, the components of her costume hung from wall hooks on the left side of the room.

Ralphie was standing just inside the closed door, arms crossed over his chest. "Something going on between you and David?" he asked point-blank.

Lauren's heart stuttered. She spun around, prepared to snap a denial at him. But her voice was weak and breathless and completely empty of conviction. "What are you talking about? No, of course not." She immediately turned away, afraid her face would betray her.

She heard Ralphie utter, "Hm," then heard the door open as he prepared to leave. "I could've sworn--"

"Ralphie, go. Now."

"Well, if there isn't something going on, there should be."

Ted Berenger's voice boomed from the corridor. "Ralphie, did you pull the Rumblestix?"

Lauren pivoted.

"Got it all under control, boss," Ralphie said.

Holding the door frame, Ted leaned over him into the room. "Lauren, don't forget to double-check those sacks. Remember, red with white polka-dots means *verboden*."

She nodded as Ted pulled back into the corridor, then she flopped into the chair before the dressing table.

Cupping a hand around one side of his mouth, Ralphie stage-whispered to Lauren, "Oh, he's so masterful. Don't you love it when he talks like a Nazi?" With a shiver of feigned delight, he finally made his exit.

Smiling and shaking her head, Lauren turned back to the mirror...and her own thoughts. She upended the bag of cosmetics Harriet had given her. First, though, she had to remove her own makeup. The mall had provided a jar of cleansing cream and several boxes of tissue, which sat on the table to her right. On her left was a tray bearing a pitcher, a tumbler, and a small bowl of fruit. The matching ceramic pieces, all cobalt blue with white bands around the rims, were decorated with snowflakes.

As she made herself over, Lauren couldn't help but think of David, doing the same just across the hall. She couldn't help but think of his deep pleasure and satisfaction when he was at the Santa School. Did he bake cookies for today? she wondered, and laughed softly.

Seen in the light of his boyish enthusiasm, that resplendent village in his front yard made perfect sense and was actually quite...heartwarming. She couldn't help but think of how much she'd enjoyed his company at the party--although she'd tried strenuously to deny it on the dismal ride home--and how their clandestine encounter had

sparked a passion she hadn't felt in countless years....

Lauren stopped what she was doing and dropped her forehead to her hand. She sighed.

This has to cease. It's nothing more than a stupid schoolgirl crush on some boor who gets his kicks out of ridiculing me. But we have to work together, so I'll just keep my distance and do my job and tolerate him. And then I'll go home and...

...take some time to be alone.

Lauren knew she needed to do that. Eventually, she would have to take Harriet's advice. Because she sensed that David Henry Dawson and this whole crazy, entrancing, endearing world of the North Pole and even Christmas itself were conspiring to change her life. And she would sure as hell need to figure out, sooner or later, just how and why.

* * * *

"You'll have to wait for Lauren," Ted told David, who was already sweating inside his Santa suit. "Shouldn't be long."

"Do we always have to make our entrance together?" David pulled down his beard just enough to let some air touch his face. He decided to leave it that way until they were ready to assume their places.

"Always," Ted said. "Arm in arm." He checked his watch. "I'll be right back. I have to see what Ralphie's up to." Like a man on a mission, which seemed to be his customary attitude, he strode away.

David slumped against the wall and cast a surly look at Lauren's dressing-room door. He shoved a hand beneath his wig and scratched his head. At least the talcum powder was working--for the most part.

The door across the hall swung open and Mrs. Claus stood there, holding her apron and looking harried. "Would somebody pl--?" Her eyes locked onto Santa's face, then her head swiveled to the right, to the left. "Are you the only one here?"

"Yes. Waiting for you." David couldn't keep the irritation out of his voice. "We have to walk out together."

"What's wrong with your beard?"

The question prompted David to touch it. "Nothing. It was just getting a little warm under there."

Indecisively, Lauren fidgeted. "Well, I need some help getting this damn thing tied right." She raised the hand clutching the apron. "Harriet wants a nice, big, perfectly symmetrical bow."

"So...are you saying you want *me* to do it?"

Frustrated, Lauren swept her arm before her, indicating the length of the corridor. The apron's ties fluttered like streamers. "I don't see anyone else around. Do you?"

Sighing, David straightened. "Okay." He walked over to her. "I don't have much practice doing this. Chris never wore aprons." As an afterthought, he mumbled, "Well, maybe she did when she was playing a bedroom game with one of her boyfriends."

Lauren raised her eyebrows as she handed him the apron.

"Uh...you'll have to turn around," David said.

She realized she was still staring up at him. His mouth, revealed by the pulled-down beard, had riveted her attention. Decidedly unsettling memories--*sensory*

memories--were bobbing into her mind: the feel of his mouth on hers, on her ears, her neck, her breasts; the startling and sensual nibbles and licks that punctuated the assertive soft press and flex and glide of his lips....

"Is something wrong with my makeup?" David asked. His voice sounded strange to him. Those eyes, those well-deep eyes of hers were swallowing him up.

Numbly, Lauren shook her head. "Oh...I guess I *should* turn around." Slowly she turned around.

She felt David lean over her slightly, pressing against her back, as he brought the apron around her waist. He smelled like bayberry. She felt a delicate, warm gust of breath briefly caress the side of her face.

Closing her eyes, she indulged in a delicious fantasy: pivoting toward him, putting one hand on the side of his face and the other on his chest; kissing him deeply while tearing open his jacket, stroking and squeezing the smooth skin overlaying the hard pectoral muscles--

At that moment she was distantly aware of David's hands flattening against the waistband of the apron and slowly circling her body, front to back, to smooth the band. Her legs were weakening. He said something, softly, and she melted into a turn so she could face him once more and--

"Oh, for goodness sake, let *me* do that!"

Startled, Santa and Mrs. Claus bumped against each other as their movements faltered. Harriet Hendricks was scurrying toward them, her hands already making for the apron's bow. Herb, smiling, shuffled behind her.

"I'm glad *someone's* come to my rescue," David said with a tight laugh.

Lauren glanced up at him. What did he mean? She suddenly felt ashamed of her imagination's erotic side-trip. To banish all remnants of it, she took a few steps toward Harriet, who gave her a quick hug before spinning her around.

"I commend your efforts, David," Harriet said, "but it looks like you tied this with your eyes closed." She fussed with the bow.

"Maybe his mind was elsewhere," Herb suggested. He walked up to David and clapped him on both arms. "You look great. You *both* do." He started repositioning the beard. "Excellent job. *Excellent* job."

"They smell good, too," Harriet said to her husband. "Did you notice?"

"Of course I did, dear." Herb stood on his tiptoes and sniffed David. "Bayberry. My favorite."

"And cinnamon," Harriet said. She gave Lauren a pat on the small of her back, signaling the apron was just right.

Lauren faced her. "Thank you," she said, and impulsively gave Harriet a kiss on the cheek.

Harriet glowed. "Oh, you're the one who will shine, not I. Same is true of David."

She went over to her husband and linked an arm through his. Like proud parents, they beamed at their protégés. David extended a hand to Lauren; when she took it, he curled her arm through his. The Hendrickses beamed brighter.

Ted appeared at the business end of the corridor. "Five minutes," he called.

"We would've been here sooner," Herb said, "but of course we had to stop and talk with Ralphie."

Harriet laughed. "He almost ran us over!"

"Ran you over?" Lauren wasn't sure what they meant.

The two couples began a leisurely stroll down the hallway and toward the diorama.

"When he's not working on the dais with Santa," Herb explained, "he rides his elfmobile around the people in line. Their patience can wear a little thin sometimes, and it helps keep them entertained."

"He'll ride it around the mall, too," Harriet said, "sort of advertising Santa's North Pole Workshop. And believe me, Ralphie knows how to get attention."

"I don't doubt that," David said with a chuckle.

They stopped just behind the diorama. Lauren heard a loud, atonal hum of mingled voices, the occasional excited scream or dissatisfied wail of a child, the strains of the song "Sleigh Ride" being pumped over the mall's sound system.

With edgy smiles, she and David glanced at each other. She felt his biceps contract, as if giving her hand a reassuring squeeze, and in return she briefly tightened her fingers on his arm.

Ted suddenly appeared, looking like he was on methamphetamine. "When you hear 'Here Comes Santa Claus'," he said breathlessly, "walk onto the set and take your seats."

And not five seconds later, that cheery holiday classic began to play, its volume cranked up to herald the much-anticipated arrival of Santa and Mrs. Claus.

"Merry Christmas!" the Hendrickses said to them in unison.

David curled his free hand over Lauren's, where it rested on his arm. They strolled around the side of the diorama. The people in line--and there were dozens--began clapping. Some children squealed in joy, others jumped up and down, a few began crying. With no prompting, Santa and his missus paused and waved to the crowd.

Ralphie came spinning out of nowhere and joyfully hugged both of them around the legs. Then he turned to the waiting throng and threw his arms up, again and again, rousing them into a bubbling froth of Christmas cheer. The applause intensified, and smiles began to bloom on previously vexed faces.

With no thought whatsoever, Lauren felt her own face spontaneously expand into the biggest, most irrepressible smile she'd ever given the world.

Maybe there was still some fragment of Christmas spirit left in her after all.

CHAPTER TEN

And the whole world, it seemed, had come to see Santa Claus at Prairie Park Mall this busy day. One after another, Lauren handed out gift bags and admitted children--both eager and hesitant, both by themselves and led or carried by a parent--to the big throne where they could share their fondest desires with the big man in the red suit. Ralphie's antics kept everyone in a good mood.

Between cordially idle conversation with parents, Lauren watched David. She saw how adroitly he handled the kids, how intently he listened to them. She heard his jolly and convincing Santa laugh. He was, as Herb and Harriet certainly anticipated, a marvel of good-natured patience.

Lauren couldn't help admiring him, but she resisted admiring him too much and too unreservedly. It seemed that without even trying, he'd already upset her equilibrium and plunged her into confusion...and that was territory she found disturbingly unfamiliar.

She lifted yet another colorful sack from the gift-bag basket and handed it to a tremulous child. Then her brow furrowed. As the little girl made her way up the ramp to Santa's throne, Lauren turned her attention back to the basket and began poking through the bags.

She hadn't imagined it: Two or three of the dreaded red sacks with white polka dots were still buried among the others.

Lauren caught Ralphie's attention, mouthed his name, and motioned him to come to her.

He scampered over and bowed. "Yes, ma'am?"

She leaned forward. As discreetly and quietly as possible she said, "You missed some of the Rumblestix bags."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did. Look in the basket. There's one near the top right now."

Ralphie tilted to the left. Beneath lowered lids, his eyes shifted toward the gift bags. "Sure enough."

"Well, shouldn't you pull them out right now? If we get any busier, I might inadvertently grab one."

"Just leave them there and pay attention." Ralphie turned and was about to leave.

Lauren grabbed his hand. "Leave them there?"

His eyes glimmered. "Yes. Trust me." With a sly smile, he scurried back to his post near Santa's throne.

Lauren shrugged. Ralphie must've known what he was talking about. Maybe Berenger wanted them there for show, in case one of the Rumblestix salesmen came by. Maybe he just liked the way they added to the vivid mix of holiday colors in the basket. In any case, she would do as Ralphie said and simply make a point of avoiding those bags.

Their lunch break came midway through their shift. This, the most frenetic shopping day of the season, would be their longest day at the North Pole--six grueling hours. From now on, they'd be working four-hour shifts, three in the evening and three during the day, making for a six-day workweek. Children unfortunate enough to visit the mall when Santa and Mrs. Claus were away would have to settle for putting their wish

lists in the "Letters to Santa" mailbox.

After making sure both ramps were roped off, Ralphie set out a "SANTA WILL RETURN IN 45 MINUTES" sign. Santa descended from his dais, walked to where Mrs. Claus sat, and once again offered her his arm. Together, with their elf falling into sprightly step behind them, they headed for the break room the mall had put together near their dressing rooms.

"How'd it go for you?" David asked Lauren.

Once they were behind the diorama, she slipped her arm out from under his. She didn't want to give David the impression that she liked being cozy with him. "Good," she said, then glanced up at him. "You...um...did really well up there."

David looked at her, but Lauren had already turned her eyes forward. "You think so?"

"Mm-hm."

"Well, I'm outta here," Ralphie announced.

Santa and the missus turned to face him. "You're not having lunch?" David asked.

"Hell yeah, I'm having lunch." Ralphie motioned down the corridor. "But not in *there*."

"You don't mind running around the mall in that suit?" Lauren couldn't imagine doing it herself.

"*Driving* around," he corrected. "And why should I mind? I love it. The shoppers love it. The kids love it." Ralphie gave them a sardonic smile. "Therefore, the mall loves it." He saluted them. "Well, see you in three-quarters. Take advantage of your break." With a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows, Ralphie turned and sauntered away.

Lauren and David entered their break room. It had a table that could comfortably seat six people, in addition to a recliner in one corner and a chaise against one wall. The lunches they had pre-ordered in the morning were already there, waiting for them.

David immediately removed his hat, wig, and beard, then pulled open the Velcro closure on his jacket by several inches. Lauren, following his lead, took off her beribboned wig and fluffed out her hair with her fingers. Somewhat self-consciously, they sat at the table across from each other.

David unwrapped a fork and began tackling his taco salad. "I, uh...I've been meaning to ask you how you got home from the party. You just sort of...disappeared."

Lauren's heart sprinted at his mention of it. She'd been trying to put the whole evening out of her mind. Without much appetite, she picked at her broiled chicken-breast sandwich. "I asked Ted to call me a cab. *That's* how I got home." She ventured a look at him. "I imagine your limo ride with the two horny toads wasn't exactly a delight." Spontaneously, she gave David a small, sympathetically teasing smile. "Did they make out in front of you?"

"Well, I'm sure they made out--although how Chris could get her moves going in that dress is beyond me."

Heartily, Lauren laughed. "She probably peeled it off."

David's embarrassment over his ex-wife freshened. He could feel his face flushing. "Yeah, she probably did. But I was spared having to watch the spectacle."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I took a cab home, too. So the 'horny toads' had the whole limo to themselves."

"*Rbbitt*," Lauren croaked, then added in a high, breathless voice, "Oooo, ahhhh, yes yes yes, baby, yesss. *Rbbit*."

They exploded into laughter. David coughed, covering his mouth to keep from spewing cheese and lettuce across the table.

"Oh, damn," Lauren said, wiping her eyes. "Now I have to re-do my face."

Struggling to swallow, David nodded. "Looks that way. So, I assume whatshisname had to retrieve his vehicle from your house."

Lauren nodded. "Tim. Yeah, I heard him pull up. He even came to the door. I was already in bed, so I didn't bother answering." Her appetite had miraculously returned and she took another bite of her sandwich, then a sip of diet soda. "Actually, I wouldn't have answered the door if I *had* been up." She tacked on an editorial comment: "Jerk."

"He was probably going to placate you so you'd finish decorating his house without, like, having the walls painted with giant pinwheels or something."

Although irked by this likelihood, Lauren still had to smile. "You're right. On both counts." She continued to eat. "What about Chris? Did you get to see her?"

"Hell, no," David said. "She didn't even bother coming to the door. I think she practically dove from the limo into her car. I heard her lay rubber on my driveway."

"Must've been in a hurry to get somewhere," Lauren said archly.

"No doubt."

They ate in silence for some moments. Lauren wondered if and how she should broach the subject of their own make-out session, but the fact that David didn't even seem to be thinking about it made her reticent.

Then she remembered all the old insults--and especially the implied comparison of her with the skanky Christine--and she couldn't have brought up the encounter if her life had depended on it.

David kept wrestling with the issue of apologizing to Lauren. He couldn't tell her how much he'd enjoyed being with her if an apology didn't pave the way. She wouldn't believe him. And he certainly couldn't tell her how much more he wanted to happen....

Lauren hadn't intended to look at David any more than was absolutely necessary, but something had been puzzling her throughout lunch. "What's on your head?" she asked curiously, then murmured, "I know it isn't hair."

David felt his scalp, trying to figure out what she was talking about. "Oh, it's powder. Because of the wig."

Lauren began tittering. "Your head looks like...moldy cheese!"

"Yeah, well, what's on *your* head?" David asked tartly. "Were you caught in the middle of a paint-ball fight?"

Lauren glared at him. So he was going to start with the hair comments again, huh?

"You'd better watch it, mister," she said, pushing up from the table and grabbing her wig. "I can make your life miserable out there." She pointed in the general direction of the North Pole set.

"Oh, yeah? How?"

Now why did he have to go and ask that? Lauren didn't have a clue how she'd follow up on the threat. But it sounded good.

She marched to the door and made a haughty exit, slamming the door behind her. David heard the door to her dressing room open and slam shut. He expelled a silent laugh and shook his head. Why couldn't he resist the temptation to needle her and just keep his

mouth shut?

"You're already making my life miserable," he said to the air...and wondered if, in this suit, it was possible for him to kick himself.

* * * *

Separately, they returned to their stations after lunch and resumed the business of welcoming visitors to the North Pole Workshop. Santa happily ho-ho-ho'ed and rubbed his belly. Ralphie the elf was even more effervescent, his store of energy obviously replenished by food. But Mrs. Claus, however kindly she looked and acted, was still simmering inside.

Very near the end of their shift, a boy of perhaps seven or eight tried ducking under the velvet rope and grabbing candy from the gift-bag basket beside Lauren's chair. She caught his wrist just in time. "I'm afraid you can't do that, honey," she said. "You have to wait your turn."

"Why?" he asked snottily, then added, "My *name* is Austin," as if he'd taken umbrage at the "honey."

Concealing her annoyance, Lauren looked up to identify his mother. She finally caught the woman's eye.

"Why can't he just have one now?" the mother asked in a clipped voice. "We've been waiting in line for twenty minutes."

"Prob'ly longer," Austin said petulantly.

"I wouldn't be surprised." His mother's eyelids fell as she spoke--suggesting, at least, that she was looking at the person she addressed--but Lauren got the distinct feeling the woman didn't really *see* her.

Lauren's simmering intensified. She understood that look. The mother was definitely upscale--one of those meticulously dressed, thirty-five-ish types whose politeness was brittle and tintured by a sniffy, imperious attitude...and who overindulged their kids without ever disciplining them. Lauren could read this as clearly as if it were a steel-gray aura, or a sign hanging from her neck with the name of a wealthy suburb printed on it.

Lauren abandoned her Mrs. Claus voice. "Twenty minutes. Whoop-de-freakin'-do. Other parents have managed to stand here for an *hour* and still control their children, none of whom has been discourteous enough to shove his mitts in the candy basket."

The mother lifted her eyebrows but was apparently too shocked to speak.

Lauren again looked at Austin and again donned her Mrs. Claus persona. "You'll just have to wait your turn," she said with a smile, "*sweetie*. Santa should be ready to see you in a minute or two."

Austin frowned. Disgruntled, he looked up at his mother. He pumped her arm with one hand, and with the other grasped and pulled at the red velvet rope. "I'm hungry! I'm sick of waiting!" He rocked back and forth between her hand and the rope.

"Look, Austin, it's almost your turn," his mother said, pointing at the dais and shooting a quick, sharp glance at Lauren. Ralphie was helping a small, perhaps three-year-old boy descend from Santa's lap.

"It's about time," Austin said, impatiently pulling the rope to and fro. "I want my candy. And I don't like standing by this stupid lady."

Trust me, Ralphie's voice said in Lauren's mind...and, in a flash, understanding dawned.

"This stupid lady" reached into the gift basket. Her hand emerged with a polka-dotted sack. Smiling beneficently, she handed it to little Austin as she unhooked the velvet rope and admitted him to the North Pole Workshop. He was already opening the sack as he approached Santa.

Nearly holding her breath, Lauren watched. Austin's mommy circled around to the exit ramp. Lauren heard the boy snap at Ralphie, "Leave me alone," then turn to his mom and say something. He refused to get on Santa's lap--his mother had likely prohibited this, uptight as she was, or else the kid thought it was "stupid" and didn't want to bother--and instead he stood in front of the throne, shifting from foot to foot.

Lauren could see his mouth working. He seemed simultaneously to be chewing candy and rambling out his "wish list," which went on forever. What else could it be? Lauren thought. Certainly not a discussion on world affairs. She saw David continually nodding.

Then David said something to him. Austin fired a hand forward and shouted, "You're a *phony*!" before he skipped down the exit ramp and into his mother's arms. They moved away together as Austin offered Mommy some candy from his sack.

Ralphie looked at Lauren and grinned from pointed ear to pointed ear. He'd certainly seen the gift bag with the white polka dots. He gave her a double thumbs-up.

Lauren smiled back as she admitted the last child in line. She felt, following Ralphie's sign of approval, like a student who'd learned her lesson well. Her eyes followed the suburban mother and son as they made their way to the escalator. Ralphie, too, was watching them as he helped the last child onto Santa's lap. Only David, out of the loop, was clueless.

And then it happened.

Austin's cheeks puffed out. By degrees, his face reddened. With a hair-raising *BWAAAAA!* he spewed a mouthful of partially dissolved red Rumblestix onto his mother's white designer coat.

At that moment David was helping the last of his little visitors get down from his lap. He happened to look in the direction of the mother and son just as she flung up her arms, took a few teetering steps backwards, and gaped in horror at the front of her coat. Austin was coughing quite melodramatically--no doubt to wrest Mommy's attention from her outer wear and divert it to his inner torment--and when she finally bent over to comfort him, he rewarded her with a gob in the face.

Still clutching his bag of candy, the boy continued to hack and sputter. David noticed the line of his mother's toxic glare as she swabbed at her face: It arrowed straight to the North Pole Workshop. He turned to look questioningly at Lauren. She had her head lowered and one hand over her mouth, but her eyes were surreptitiously fixed on the scene still playing at the foot of the escalator. Her body was shaking.

It was a moment before David realized she was shaking from bottled-up laughter. Then he caught a glimpse of striped stocking behind her chair. Casually, because he didn't want to invite more of the mother's scrutiny, he rose from the Santa throne and approached Lauren.

What the hell has she done now? And what the hell is Ralphie doing hiding behind her chair?

What Ralphie was doing was sitting on the floor, hoo-hooing and ha-hahing as he repeatedly slapped his leg. When he saw David's quizzical look, he pointed at the gift-sack basket, then at Austin and Mommy. Suddenly, David made the connection.

He leaned toward Lauren and asked, "Did you give that kid some of that nasty candy?"

Spasmodically, she nodded. Ralphie erupted into giggles.

David was shocked. "Intentionally?"

Lauren rolled moist eyes up to him, paused, nodded again.

"Who do you think you are," David grated, "Willie Wonka? You can't be..." He glanced at Austin, who was now flipping his tongue in and out of his mouth like a dog eating peanut butter. David's voice developed a hitch. "You can't be..." His voice jumped again and fell, broken. "...singling...out...kids...to punish. Oh, God...."

That was it. He couldn't contain his own laughter any longer. Tears oozing from his eyes, David felt the bottom of his ribcage connect with the top of his false belly as he not-quite doubled over. "Hand me one of those tissues, would you?" he asked Lauren.

She was still tittering like a madwoman. "You didn't say *dear*," she chirped.

"*Dear*, my ass. You're evil."

Lauren might have been having a whale of a good time, but she was still miffed over what David had said at lunch. So she had no compunction about telling him, "Then get it yourself, fat boy."

Ralphie scrambled to his feet and stuttered, "Come on, Evil Woman and F-fat Boy. We'd b-better get our butts out of here. I think Mommy Dearest is coming after us!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Nothing more came of it?" Darlene asked.

Lauren stepped back from her seven-foot Christmas tree and squinted. It was the only way to tell if the tiny white lights were evenly distributed. "Nope. We made our getaway before the mother reached us. Then she must have decided that shopping took precedence over seeking vengeance." Carefully, Lauren repositioned a portion of one light string, then a portion of glass-bead garland, then bent down to adjust the miniature wooden fence that surrounded the tree. "It really wasn't worth the time and effort to complain. After all, the mall doesn't *make* the candy. And it was free to begin with, so it's not as if the woman was out any of her precious money."

"I think that boy got what he deserved," Corliss said. She lit another cone of incense. "Yuck, I can't stand bratty kids...except my own bratty kids, of course."

"I especially can't stand bratty kids with snotty parents who have their heads up their asses," Darlene added. She looked at Corly as she walked to the breakfast bar. "But that's not you, hon."

"Of course not. I know better. If I got my head up there, I'd never be able to get it out." Corliss was always making fun of her weight, even though it wasn't much above average for her age and height. "That's what Roger would tell me, anyway."

In chorus, the women hooted a protest. "Oh, yeah, *he's* one to talk," Darlene said, "Mister My-Cheeks-Could-Serve-As-King-Size-Bed-Mattresses."

"Roger would make a good Santa Claus," Holly noted, then looked at their hostess.

Lauren braced herself. The subject of Santa Claus had inevitably come up and curiosity loomed dangerously within Holly's expression.

"That Santa *you* work with--" Holly said, as predictably as "Bless you" after a sneeze, "--what's his name again?"

"David," Lauren supplied quietly.

"What's up with him?" Holly asked.

The question startled Lauren. "What do you mean?"

Darlene, dipping into the bowl of homemade eggnog on the breakfast bar, interpreted the vague inquiry. "She probably means when are you going to do the do with him."

The women laughed in agreement.

"I have a feeling we're already not getting the whole story about that guy," Janet said, "so she sure as hell isn't going to cough up any really juicy tidbits." She picked through another box of old blown-glass ornaments, some made in America by Shiny Brite, some made in Poland and Germany and the former Czechoslovakia. Janet lifted one and held it up, admiring it. The ornament's glitter caught and spiked the light.

You're damn right I'm not coughing anything up, Lauren thought. She'd been uncharacteristically tight-lipped about her shared experiences with David and she intended to stay that way. Some sort of romantic superstition made her think she'd jinx their budding relationship if she blabbed about it.

"But that's not what I was wondering!" Holly protested. "Juicy tidbits--jeez, you must think that's all I ever have on my mind," she muttered.

Lauren felt herself blushing; at least the colorful soft lighting in the room would make it difficult to notice. Still, she didn't follow up to find out what Holly did, in fact, want to know. She just wished the girls would leave this subject alone--entirely.

Of course, that wasn't going to happen.

"We didn't mean to impugn your integrity." Glenna patted Holly on the back as she went to put on another CD of Christmas carols.

"What I meant," Holly said to everyone in the room, "was, like, is this David a real stick-in-the-mud or does he know how to have fun?"

Unfortunately for Lauren, everyone in the room was silent, awaiting her response.

She had no choice but to relent. Refusing to give out *any* information would have generated more ribbing and wild speculation than discretion was worth. "Oh, he knows how to have fun," she said. It was an offhanded assertion, made as neutrally as she could manage. "He's just very focused and very professional. He takes the job seriously."

"God, it still blows my mind that he's the same guy who kicked you out of his house," Darlene said.

All the women were gathered around the tree now, hanging ornaments, arranging lights, delicately rummaging through Lauren's collection of vintage and antique holiday decorations...and patiently waiting for her to dispense some dirt. At the very least, they likely wanted to be tossed a few intriguing tidbits.

"He didn't exactly kick me out of his house," Lauren said. She wondered why, now, she felt compelled to soft-pedal the incident, not to mention David's culpability. Right after it had happened, she'd had no qualms about relating the story with expansive, melodramatic relish and portraying him as a jackass. "He'd just been taken by surprise, that's all. And he was fed up with his son trying to set him up with dates. And..." *Why am I running off at the mouth?* "...if you met his ex-wife, you'd understand why he's skittish about trusting women."

"Hm. That was quite a vigorous defense, counselor," Janet murmured, smiling and squeezing Lauren's arm as she walked by.

Glenna was smiling too. "I find it rather...thought-provoking that Hank and David are the same man. Don't you think it's auspicious, Laurie? That, and the fact your latest Mister Wonderful so quickly and maybe conveniently fell by the wayside?"

Lauren slid her sister the kind of look only a sister would be able to decipher. To others it would have been unreadable...and probably a bit intimidating.

Holly bounded up from the floor where she'd been unfolding the tree skirt. "I'm hungry. I want to try those cookies you baked."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Glenna softly sang, and another round of laughter began.

* * * *

David felt more and more guilty the closer he got to the house on Pearl Lake. Not only hadn't he been invited, but he was also violating one of the Hendricks Commandments: Thou shalt not see each other outside of the working environment. Still, he peered through the winter darkness at yet another fire number posted beside yet another gravel drive overhung with trees.

Almost there.

He took a belly-deep breath that fogged his windshield when he let it out. On his car radio, Nat King Cole sang enticingly about chestnuts roasting on an open fire. David smiled. He had a sudden inexplicable conviction that the song perfectly suited Lauren's house.

In his headlights, the reflective number 111--white on red, printed vertically on an aluminum rectangle affixed to a post--poked up from a small drift of snow. David turned his steering wheel to the right and eased up a driveway that disappeared into the clotted darkness between the trees.

Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? The crunch of his tires rolling over the snow-grouted gravel seemed to underscore the question. But he knew damned well why he was doing it--or, at least, was well aware of the reasons he'd been hawking to himself for the past thirty-six hours or so. He just couldn't believe he was actually going through with it.

He'd almost asked his son to accompany him. But not only was Ben heavily involved in a new computer game, David didn't want to generate any false expectations in the boy. And not only that, he worried how Lauren might interpret such a ruse: *Oh, sure, bring your kid so I have no choice but to let you in and be nice to you;* or *Oh, sure, bring your kid to prove you're an upstanding joe with honorable intentions;* or *Oh, sure, bring your kid so you'll have an excuse to leave if I make you squirm.*

Any one of the interpretations would have been valid, and they all would have branded David a coward.

His pulse accelerated and his car slowed as he pulled within parking distance of the house. It radiated light like a multi-paned lantern. Worse yet, there were several other vehicles splayed out before the rustic structure.

Lauren obviously had company. It didn't surprise him.

David sat in his car with the engine idling, wondering how to handle this unexpected kink in a plan that was probably flawed from the start. Maybe he *should* have brought Ben. The kid, he had to admit, was a great icebreaker.

* * * *

"They have...an unusual texture," Holly said, her face squinching ominously as she chewed. "And a...unique flavor."

Lauren watched with fading hope. The other women backed away by subtle inches, obviously expecting a hurl. Valiantly, Holly swallowed.

"You look like a contestant on Fear Factor," Janet said.

"What's in them?" Darlene asked.

Everybody was gathered in the kitchen, staring at Holly and waiting for Lauren's rundown of ingredients.

"Uh, let's see...." Lauren scratched her head. "Sugar...oh, wait, maybe I didn't have any--"

"Don't tell me you improvised," Glenna said despairingly, as if she'd experienced her sister's improvisations.

"Well...."

Janet shrieked and dropped her head between her hands, which were flattened on a counter top. "Oh no, you sound like Lucy Ricardo!" She broke into titters.

Corliss the Brave stepped up to the pedestal table and grabbed a cookie. "*I can tell you what's in them.*" Reprovingly, she looked around the room at her friends. "God, it's not like Laurie laced them with strychnine." She took a bite. Her jaw moved slowly as she analyzed the cookie's components.

Dar grabbed the remaining chunk of cookie out of Corly's hand and let her taste buds have a go at it. With an expectant smile, Glenna watched them. Holly still looked stricken. Janet, eyebrows arched and lips poised for laughter, stared without blinking.

Lauren made a cut-to-the-chase motion with her hand.

Corly's eyes started watering as she pursed her lips. Dar, with an obvious lump in one cheek, was struggling not to swallow or laugh--maybe both. Sensing defeat, Lauren sighed. Holly came over and hugged her. Glenna, giggling, ambled back into the living room.

"Uh...silage and slugs?" Corly guessed.

"I don't think so," Dar mumbled. "*They* wouldn't make me break a tooth."

Cracking up, Janet wilted down the face of the cupboards and nearly crumpled to the floor. Darlene lurched to the kitchen sink and spat out what was in her mouth. Gasping and laughing, she hung her head between her arms.

"I guess I wouldn't take them to the mall if I were you," Holly offered with genuine pity.

In the ultimate act of resignation, Lauren scooped up the ironstone platter and marched to the mudroom adjacent to the kitchen.

* * * *

David decided to get out of his car and go to the door. As he approached it, he decided what he would say: *I'm really sorry to disturb you, but I just wanted to let you know--*

He was still formulating his apology when two, maybe three, unidentified flying objects--hard ones--pelted his chest and shoulders. He yelped in shock and nearly fell over, then heard a muffled cry of alarm. *What the hell...?* he wondered, instinctively falling to his hands and knees.

A shrill voice cut through the darkness. "Who's there?" Then, more stridently, "*Who's there?*"

Awkwardly David rose, still prepared like a cocked trigger to react to the slightest stimulus.

"Lauren?" he called out uncertainly.

He heard several hesitant, crunching footsteps.

"It's me. David," he said as reassuringly as possible.

A female voice came back, lacquered with doubt. "David?" Two more footsteps. "Santa?"

He couldn't help but smile. "Yes...Dear."

A single airy laugh of disbelief, and she stepped into a patch of moonlight just a few yards away. At that moment, she looked so beautiful she took David's breath away.

He brushed off his knees and walked toward her. "Hi," he said sheepishly. "I'm really sorry if I scared you. I just--"

"Are you all right?" Lauren's eyes scoured his half-shadowy form. She could

hardly believe he was standing there, in her yard. "How did you find my house?"

"One question at a time, please," he said. "And the first one should be mine. Did you throw something at me?"

"Of course not!" Lauren's hands flicked over his jacket, trying to brush away stray crumbs. "Well, I mean, I threw something in what turned out to be your general direction, not knowing you were there. Are you okay?" she repeated, touching his face, his head, testing for sore spots.

David liked it. He liked the feel of her warm hands on his cold skin. "No, I'm not okay," he muttered. Her touch was kindling too much warmth.

"Did I hit you in the eye?" Lauren asked in genuine alarm. She skimmed the fingers of both hands very lightly over his forehead while her thumbs glided across his cheekbones.

"No, no," David said with a soft chuckle. Gently he grasped her arms and lowered them to her sides. "I'm not okay because...I'm nervous as hell about being here. I really feel bad about intruding. Hey, you must be freezing." He began removing his jacket to put it over her shoulders.

Lauren stopped him, although she had to admit she would've loved slipping into the garment, feeling the heat and inhaling the scent it had absorbed from his body. Again she felt giddy as an adolescent. "Come on," she said, grabbing his arm. "We can go into the mudroom. It's heated."

"But you have guests. I should just leave."

Lauren stopped dead. "No!" Cringing at her frantic protest, she hastened to add, "That's, uh, not necessary. My guests aren't really guests." She led him to the side door and into the mudroom.

It was lit by two oil lamps, one nestled in a wrought-iron bracket attached to the wall and one sitting atop a tall painted wooden stool. The utilitarian room was outfitted for gardening and other outdoor activities, but everything in it was so artfully arranged it seemed ready for a photo shoot: the workbench with its worn green paint; the weathered step-ladder, two risers draped with neckerchiefs; the variety of old tools and implements with colorful wood handles, hanging on one wall around an old calendar that was centered within the frame of a farmhouse screen door; the colorful collection of flowerpots and vases, urns and planters; even the boots and shoes on floor mats and the straw hats and denim jackets hanging from whatever odd bits and discarded pieces Lauren had affixed to the walls.

There were surprising little touches everywhere, some quite whimsical, like a white crow perched on a lone black fencepost and wearing an Indian bead necklace...and a papier mâché raccoon mask...and a cement garden gnome standing in a gathering basket with a whittled wood snake crawling out of it.

"Wow," David whispered, still looking around as Lauren removed the lamp from the stool.

"Please, sit down," she said.

"Why is the crow white?" David asked, perching on the stool. "Is it a crow?"

"Yes, it is." Lauren pulled up a large terra cotta pot, turned it upside down, and took a seat near him. "I once heard or read a quote somewhere: It only takes one white crow to prove not all crows are black."

David studied her upturned face in the lamplight as the statement sank and settled

deep within him. *Maybe we'll turn out to be each other's white crow....*

"Well." Lauren turned up her hands. "Why are you here? Oh, I'm sorry, would you like something to drink?" He had his feet hooked on the crossbars of the stool and she fought not to look where the devil wanted her to look.

"No, thanks." David put his forearms on his thighs and clasped his hands.

"Lauren, I've been wanting to apologize for...anything and everything I've said that might have offended you." He was pretty sure that was the opening he had planned. "Believe me, I'm actually a pretty nice guy."

Her eyes glimmered in the lamplight. "I believe you."

"Yeah?" he asked hopefully. "Well, I don't know why we keep sniping at each other."

"Because it's fun?"

Silently, David laughed and hung his head. "Yeah, I suppose it is...in a perverse sort of way." He looked at her again, more somberly. "But you know, it isn't because I don't like you. I think it's because--"

Something caught his eye, some phantom movement at one of the curtains of the mudroom's inside windows. Frowning, David peered at the door leading into the house.

"Even though we're the only people in here," he said, "I get the distinct feeling we're not alone."

Lauren followed the line of his gaze. Sighing, she stood up. "It's all the perfume and estrogen in the air. Excuse me for a minute, please."

She heard muffled, scurrying sounds as she padded to the door. "I think I need to keep a gun around here," she muttered. "Too many varmints." Opening the door as narrowly as possible and wishing she could lock and load, she slipped into the kitchen just as Darlene, Corliss and Holly scuttled into the living room.

Lauren leaned against the breakfast bar, one hand on her hip, and surveyed the reddened, twitching faces of her three friends, who stood in a cluster in the middle of the living room. Glenna was sauntering toward the entertainment center, coughing to conceal her snickers. Janet sat placidly on the couch, smiling.

"Is that him? Is that David?" Holly asked excitedly.

Lauren's answer was a brusque, "Yes."

"Why don't you invite him in?" Janet said archly.

"What, are you *crazy*?" Lauren motioned toward the mudroom. "That poor man has already suffered trauma at the hands of a female. If he had to face *this*," she said, waving her arms in big inclusive circles, "it might send him off the deep end!"

"At least he didn't have to taste your cookies," Dar said.

Corliss feigned indifference. "Well, we don't want him in here anyway if he didn't bring his Santa suit." She ambled over to the couch and dropped onto it, jouncing Janet.

"Was that your holiday spirit speaking, or are you getting kinky in your old age?" Glenna asked over her shoulder.

"He looks like he'd be easy to get kinky *with*," Holly offered. She leaned to her left, obviously trying to sneak another peek through the curtains. "I think he's a great-looking guy. That shaved head is so--"

Lauren threw up her arms. "Okay. That's it." Her voice was straining as she tried to be quiet as well as emphatic. "You'd all better damn well stay in here and mind your own business. Keep your faces out of the windows and keep your pie holes shut." *Jeez*, she

thought, *all I need is Ralphie to complete this picture.*

"How are we supposed to entertain ourselves?" Dar asked, heading toward the kitchen.

Lauren blocked her way. "I said stay out of here."

"Well then, wheel the damn fridge into the living room!" Dar snapped.

"You've never had trouble entertaining yourselves before." Lauren turned toward the mudroom door. "Sing carols or something. Roast some chestnuts; there's a basket of them on the hearth." She put a hand to her forehead and muttered, "God, I feel like I'm talking to a bunch of preschoolers."

"We can't sing if we have to keep our pie holes shut," Janet pointed out.

As her hand approached the door latch, Lauren heard Holly say to the other women, "Hey, maybe he'll be our next Dilly Bean!" And she heard Glenna grate, "If you don't quite calling him that, Hol, I swear I'll personally pickle you." And she heard Holly respond, "I'm already pickled." Groaning, Lauren fled back to the immeasurably saner world of David's presence.

He was ambling around the room, hands in pockets, studying the peculiar elements of the decor. When he heard Lauren come back in, closing the door softly but firmly at her back, he turned. She merely stood there looking at him.

David's mind went blank, or nearly so. All the apologies and explanations he'd so carefully rehearsed over the past day and a half suddenly seemed meaningless. *Let me be your white crow*, he wanted to say. *Let me be the one man who proves that not all men are jerks.*

Without thinking, Lauren moved toward him. David watched her with large and darkly lustrous eyes. When their toes were almost touching, she stopped and gazed up into his face.

"I'm sorry, too," she whispered. Then, "Who *are* you?"

David understood the question, but not rationally. He couldn't have put words to his understanding. And he understood what shaped the sound of her voice--confusion, fear, fascination, wariness, resentment. David understood, because he shared her reactions.

He could have said it then. The answer to her question was right there, the uppermost thing in his mind, and he could have spoken it. Except he couldn't speak.

His hands simply cradled Lauren's face and her hands came up to his face and they kissed...warmly and deeply and with all the feeling language was inadequate to express. And hope seemed to be the driving force.

Then, from behind the curtains that had just fallen back into place, they heard five female voices rise in an exultant albeit ragged rendition of the Hallelujah Chorus.

Giggling, their mouths still together, David and Lauren folded against each other.

"My sister, at least, should've known better than to sing Easter music."

"When can I help you pick out that gun?" David asked.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Glen, I actually had night sweats!"

It was Sunday, Lauren's only day off, and she was stretched out on her couch enjoying the radiance and fragrance of her Christmas tree and preparing to watch *Miracle on 34th Street* yet again. She'd decided to wrap gifts as she did so. But first, she had to call her sister.

"I heard," Glenna said, "that when menopausal women are around men they find attractive, hot flashes can be triggered."

"But I'm nowhere near menopause!"

"Perimenopausal, then."

Lauren thought about this. She was forty-three; it was possible. It was also monumentally depressing. "You think David is responsible?" she asked quietly, as if he were in the next room.

Glenna laughed. "You make him sound like a criminal. Sure, being close to him may have led to it. You're attracted to him, aren't you?"

Lauren threw an arm over her eyes. "Is a hummingbird attracted to a hummingbird feeder? I hate it. Now I have even more reason to hate it."

"Maybe you should just quit tying yourself in knots over this. Maybe *that's* what gave you night sweats."

Lauren thought about this too. It was another possibility. No matter how she looked at it, though, David Henry Dawson--aka Hank, aka Santa Claus--was making this the most unsettling holiday season she'd ever experienced.

And the most exhilarating.

* * * *

"Well, aren't you gonna talk about it?" Ben asked.

"I just have to figure out where to start," David answered.

Ben gave him a sidelong glance. "Sounds serious."

David lightly rubbed his back. "Don't jump to any conclusions. It's just that this is a weird situation, that's all. You'll know what I mean after I explain it."

"You got goop on your glasses," Ben pointed out.

David ran the tip of his forefinger over one of Ben's lenses. "So do you," he said, grinning as Ben flinched.

Father and son were making lunch together, slapping together a feast of tuna salad with lettuce and gobs of mayo on toast. One after another, they rinsed and dried their eyeglasses at the sink, then together carried their sandwiches and tumblers of milk to the kitchen table.

Arms braced on either side of his plate, David looked across the table. Chewing, Ben expectantly watched him. David took a bite of his sandwich.

"Don't take all day," Ben said. "The movie's on in a little while and Mom'll be here to pick me up not too long after."

David nodded. He was well aware of the schedule, although Chris, depending on her social calendar, often departed from it. "Okay. You know I went to see a lady named

Lauren last night."

"Yup." Ben took a drink. "The one you're working with. Missus Claus."

"And I told you I kind of like her but I need to straighten some things out with her."

"So tell me something I *don't* know," Ben said. "You didn't stay very long, that's for sure."

"She had company." David wondered for the hundredth time since last night what might have happened if Lauren *hadn't* had company. Just the thought of it made him perspire. "But here's the part that's really gonna grab you. Remember Liz, the woman you found for me on the Internet?"

Ben brightened, bouncing in his chair and pointing a finger at his father in lieu of speaking. With some effort, he swallowed a chunk of sandwich, then pushed his eyeglasses back in place. "Yeah, the one with the rainbow hair, the one who said you were the king of plastic! That one, right?"

David had begun to smile. "Mm-hm. Well, kiddo, it turns out 'Liz' was using her middle name, too."

Ben was chewing more slowly. He'd begun to look baffled. "What does she have to do with the lady you saw last night?"

David merely kept watching him and smiling.

Ben's eyes bugged behind his glasses. He slapped the table. "No. Get out. You're kidding me! They're the same person?"

David pursed his lips and answered with two slow nods.

Ben flung himself backwards and almost toppled over in the chair. "Holy crap! That is *so wild*! I really liked her, too. See, Dad, I *did* do you a favor."

David put up his hands. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Just hold off on the favor part. This story is a long way from over. Nothing may happen."

"Hey," Ben said, tapping the table with his finger, "I have a feeling that's a lady who can *make* things happen...whether you want them to or not."

David's shoulders drooped. "Now why did you have to go and say that?"

"Why? What's wrong?" Ben asked.

"What's wrong is that you might be right."

* * * *

Lauren muted every phone in the house. She plugged in the Christmas tree lights. Without forcing thought, letting her mind drift empty, she turned on the television and began the simple and strangely satisfying task of wrapping presents.

Lauren took both pride and pleasure in making each package different from the rest and giving each one special touches. There weren't many gifts to wrap--just one per person and only for those people she truly cherished--and each was carefully chosen or made. What was the point of passing out impersonal gifts? Or extravagant ones? It was the statement made through the giving that mattered to her.

So there was a scrapbook for her sister, a project Lauren had been working on for much of the year; a glimmering crystal sprig of holly for Holly; a lovely antique bisque doll head for Corliss, who made and collected dolls; and a hand-worked leather briefcase for Dar. And finally, there was an ankle bracelet set with an andularia moonstone, made

by a local silversmith, for Janet, because she seemed to need something to make her feel sexy and feminine again.

Occasionally Lauren's hands stilled as *Miracle on 34th Street* caught her attention. It was a movie she'd loved since childhood. She would become absorbed in it for a while; then, when a commercial came on, she'd return to her work. It was impossible not to wonder if David was watching the movie too. It was also impossible, Lauren uneasily discovered, not to wish they were curled up on the couch watching the movie together.

When it was over, Lauren rose from the floor to get a mug of coffee. She saw large white flakes drifting past the windows like whispered words. Standing still, she listened.

Sleigh bells sounded in the distance. Their jangle was muffled by the falling snow, as if it were enforcing quietude. Smiling wistfully, Lauren sipped her milky coffee. For a moment she thought she was imagining the sound of the bells, it was that delicate. Then, teasing her, the glassy tinkling receded, returned, receded and returned. Lauren began to fancy that the sound was produced by a wintry woodland sprite, striking tiny icicles against the snowflakes.

She didn't want to remember that the Camerons, about a half-mile away, had a handsome team of draft horses. She wanted to believe in Christmas magic. Like the mother in *Miracle on 34th Street* finally believed in it. Like David had always believed in it.

The sleigh bells jingled merrily past her house. Although she wasn't chilled, Lauren pulled her oversized sweater more snugly around her ribs. After one more glance at the fleecy trees beyond her windows, she turned off the tv then went to the fireplace to set more logs: two oak for heat, one white birch for sheer prettiness. Legs tucked beneath her, Lauren lifted her coffee mug from the stone hearth and stared into the flames.

* * * *

"Why are you so quiet?" Ben asked.

His voice broke David's reverie. "Hm? Oh, I've just been getting into the movie." He stretched his arms and legs as he looked at his son. "You know how I hate chatter during movies."

"Yeah, I know. But this is different. And the movie's been over for ten, fifteen minutes."

David's hand came to rest on Ben's shoulder. "Hey, got your stuff ready to go?"

"It's in the foyer. You don't wanna talk about it, do you."

David got up from the couch. "About what? Your stuff?" He picked up the soda cans and the near-empty bowl of homemade caramel corn.

"You know what I mean. You don't wanna talk about Lauren, about how much you want to be with her."

David stared into Ben's clear tawny-colored eyes. How did he get so old so fast? "You're right. I don't want to talk about it." David headed for the kitchen. "Could you put on some music?" he called out.

"Dad?"

David stopped, turned. Apprehension drizzled through him.

"Do you love her?"

He didn't answer. He wasn't going to answer.
"Well, do you?" Ben repeated quite calmly.
"What if I said no?"
"Then I'd say please don't make me call my father a liar."
David set the cans and bowl on a sideboard. He walked up to Ben and gathered the boy in his arms. After a moment he said, "You won't have to."

* * * *

"Hi. This is Lauren...um, Bill Snyder's ex-wife, at one-eleven Ember. Yes.... Well, I heard your team go by a while ago--I mean, I heard the bells--and I was wondering if you can be hired to give sleigh rides."

Mrs. Cameron, who'd at first greeted Lauren quite cordially, took a while to answer. "That couldn't have been *our* team," she said. "They've been in the barn since this morning. And we haven't worked them yet this winter."

The answer startled Lauren. She'd been so sure. "Do you know of anyone else around here with a sleigh?"

"I don't even know anyone else around here with horses. Local zoning laws prohibit livestock on property because of the lake. The only reason we have Claude and Hopper is because we're on the other side of the road and the farm's been in the Cameron family for over a hundred years."

Lauren thanked Mrs. Cameron but her mind was no longer on the conversation. Something was happening here. All day--all month, actually--something had been happening. She had taken time to be alone: with her Christmas tree and favorite holiday movie, with her warm coffee and hot crackling fire and the frosty geometry of snowflakes altering the world beyond her windows.

And she was finally beginning to see herself from the inside out. Her soul wore many colors indeed. She had to intensify the ones she wore most naturally, the ones that would best embellish her life.

And, toward this end, she wanted to spend the rest of the day with David.

* * * *

David tried calling Lauren shortly after Ben had given him the third degree. It was as if his son's interest and approval had validated his feelings, which he'd been having difficulty trusting since getting involved with Christine fifteen years earlier. She was a trust killer if ever there was one...and a romance killer.

It wasn't that Ben's reactions dictated his father's decisions. David had been gravitating to Lauren, almost helplessly, since he'd seen her kick Tiny Tim in his front yard. Any woman who could amuse, anger, and intrigue him--virtually simultaneously--was not someone he could easily ignore. He'd never followed up with "Liz" because, one, old prejudices stood in the way and, two, he was convinced she hated him.

But the serendipity of her reappearance as Lauren was even harder to ignore than she was.

And now this: *Do you love her?*

Damn, but he'd thrown a lot of energy into avoiding that pestering question.

Leave it to a fourteen-year-old to shove it in his path, then not allow it to budge before David confronted it.

Lauren, however, didn't answer her phone.

And then Chris showed up to fetch Ben.

She reeked of men's cologne. It was pointless to wonder why, since the explanation was fairly self-evident. She greeted Ben in her usual stagy manner--swooping down on him with arms outspread like some gaudy bird of prey--and he accepted the engulfing embrace with his usual stoicism.

David got the impression that their son had a pretty good grasp of what his mother was all about. Unsavory as that image was, Ben nevertheless treated Chris with a unique combination of grudging respect, wry humor, and fondness. But it was clear he felt closer to his dad.

As Ben went back up to his room to look for a CD he'd forgotten to pack, Chris said something genuinely astonishing: "David, do you think we should get back together?"

His eyebrows drew together; open-mouthed, he gaped at her. "You can't be serious."

"Why not?" Chris asked. She was being remarkably lackadaisical, given the outrageousness of her question.

The phone rang, giving David a start. But this conversation was much too engrossing to interrupt. Whoever was calling didn't bother to leave a message, so the call couldn't have been too important.

"*Why not?*" David echoed incredulously. "What are you doing for the rest of the day?"

Chris didn't seem to know whether to be suspicious of or encouraged by the question. "Why do you want to know?" she asked warily.

"Because that's how long it would take me to run down all the reasons why not."

Impatiently, Chris tapped a foot and crossed her arms over her chest. "Don't you think a person can change?"

Ben came bounding back down the stairs, signaling an end to this bizarre exchange. He stuffed the CD in his backpack. After a brief, manly hug, father and son said their standard good-bye.

"You behave," David said. "I'll call you."

And Ben responded, "I will. I'll call you, too." As Ben lifted his backpack and opened the door, they tossed each other a "Love you."

As soon as he was out of the house, Christine strode up to David, thrust her face at him, and tried kissing him.

His spontaneous response to this shocking move was to push her away. "What the hell are you *doing?*"

"Just trying to give you a kiss," she said, pouting, acting hurt...and being unmistakably coy.

David could only stare at her in disbelief.

Her mirror-gloss lips glided toward a cunning smile. "I'll be in touch," she said suggestively, then readjusted the strap of her shoulder bag and sashayed out the door.

Impulsively, David locked it behind her. It was an absurd thing to do, but he felt as if he'd just been visited by a succubus.

What in God's name was she up to?

The phone rang again. Troubled and queasy, he still couldn't bring himself to answer it.

He was grateful there were no more calls for the rest of the day.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

David was no longer simply following standard operating procedure when he waited for Lauren outside her dressing room. Now he couldn't wait to see her.

She emerged from her dressing room looking...different somehow. David couldn't put his finger on the difference. The costume itself certainly hadn't changed, and her wacky fingernail decals were still in place. But the expression on the face behind the makeup had added a new and bewitching dimension to her loveliness.

Lauren smiled, immediately and affectionately, as soon as she saw him. David's heart throbbed as he smiled back.

"Hi," she said softly. Her disappointment over not being able to get in touch with him yesterday was both eased and sharpened by seeing him again. Kissing the ball of her forefinger, she walked up to him and touched the finger to his nearly concealed lips.

David's eyes caressed her face. "Hi." She looked serene, that was it. Although he didn't doubt she still had the capacity to raise hell or act loopy, there was an underlying placidity that suggested--

He wouldn't let himself analyze it. He wouldn't let himself jump to conclusions.

Lauren linked her arm through his as they strolled down the corridor. Should she tell him about yesterday, about the strange and simple uneventfulness, so packed with meaning, that had informed her hours alone? Should she tell him she'd wanted desperately to be with him and had tried calling him?

No. Why talk about what could have or might have been? Besides, she didn't want to give David the impression she was groveling for his attention. She didn't want to put that kind of pressure on either of them.

"How was your day off?" Lauren asked as they paused behind the North Pole Workshop, waiting for its opening time. "Silver Bells" played sweetly over the sound system.

"Pleasant, for the most part," David answered. "Ben and I just hung out together. But then his mother came by to pick him up and dropped a bombshell on me."

Lauren's immediate reaction was one of alarm, but she quickly reassured herself that "bombshells" came in many shapes and sizes. "Why? What happened?" she asked with restrained curiosity, trying to keep urgency out of her voice.

Maybe good ol' Christine finally got herself engaged. Maybe some sucker had gotten her pregnant. Maybe she was moving away--far, far away. Yippee!

"Boy, this is *so* weird," David said. His unease was obvious. "I still don't know what to make of it."

Abruptly, Lauren shifted position to face him. Her concern grew. "David, *what happened?*"

He suddenly found it difficult to look at her. "Chris hinted at a...reconciliation. Then she tried kissing me. It was like a bolt out of the blue."

An erratic tinkling heralded the arrival of Ralphie, who tilted around a corner of the set. "Hey, get your butts out here! The natives are getting restless. You're lucky Berenger's gonna be gone for a couple of days or your white heads would roll."

Lauren felt as if her heart had plummeted to her stomach and both had dropped to her feet and she was dragging them behind her as she walked onto the set. Like a

runaway toboggan, the day sped downhill from there.

Befogged and sickened, Lauren did her job with a mechanical numbness. Even the small-talk, at which she usually excelled, came out in forced monosyllables obviously burdened by distraction. When she smiled at the arriving children, she felt each smile was besotted with sadness.

Reconciliation--the word kept tormenting her. The concept behind it was both ludicrous and chilling. David and Christine were never genuine partners. But how many incompatible couples either stayed together or got back together for the sake of their kids? How many actually bought into the illusion that it was for the best?

And how many men, in particular, had allowed sex to keep the illusion alive?

Then, about halfway through her shift, Lauren's bleary gaze alit on a sight she simply couldn't deal with. Not today. Standing just beyond the snaking line of people waiting to see Santa was Bill Snyder, *her* former non-partner. He must've come up from Florida to be with his parents over the holidays.

Only he wasn't with his septuagenarian parents. He was with a blond sylph in her early twenties, and he was holding a baby.

Lauren swallowed hard. Of course he didn't recognize her. How could he? Bill and wife number two were simply standing there, taking a break from shopping by watching the festive goings-on at the North Pole Workshop.

When Ralphie was close enough, Lauren grabbed his waistcoat. Tears were already beginning to rise in her eyes. "Cover for me, will you?" she asked him, trying to hold together her fragmenting composure. "I have to go to the bathroom." Without waiting for his response, she hurried away from the diorama and fled down the rear hallway.

David did a small double-take when he saw her leave her chair. He anxiously waited for Ralphie to approach his throne, then leaned over one arm and asked, "What's--"

But Ralphie didn't let him finish the question. "Take your break now," he said in a low voice. Slipping back into character, Ralphie raised both arms and waved to the people in line before he set up the SANTA WILL RETURN sign. He came back to David, who was already beginning to rise. "Go find Lauren. Something's upset her. And I ain't just whistling Dixie."

Raising a hand to the crowd, David left the dais as quickly as his bulk allowed and turned toward the private corridor. As he jogged down the length of it, he looked into their lunch room and saw that it was empty. Without breaking stride he proceeded to Lauren's dressing room. He knocked once and opened the door.

She was hunched over in the chair, sobbing into her hands. David rushed to her side and knelt on the floor. "Lauren...?" He reached up and held her by the shoulders. She wilted against him.

"What's wrong? Sweetheart, what's wrong?" David stroked her back.

She sniffled, let out a breath, lifted her head. "You didn't have to come after me. I would've been out in a minute."

David gently swiped his thumbs beneath her eyes. "Talk to me." His distressed eyes scoured her face.

"I'm sorry. It's just that...my ex-husband is here with his new young wife and...new baby."

"Oh, God," David groaned. As he wrapped his arms around her, he remembered what Herb Hendricks had told him that evening over beer. All at once, David had an overwhelming sense of what Lauren had been through and--worse--of his own complicity.

After all those years of marriage, of building what she no doubt assumed was a solid foundation of mutual trust and respect, her husband had summarily dumped her for some chickie, maybe one young enough to be their daughter. What could shred a woman's self-image more than that?

The last thing she needed, David shamefully realized, was a man--any man--criticizing and poking fun at her. Lauren's sharp comebacks were a defense mechanism, like the sting of a wasp. And sometimes, like an insect's sting, they were preemptive strikes, designed to keep an attacker at bay.

The pain David felt over his own insensitivity was keen and deep. Just thinking about the probable effect of his comments was like a razor slash. And then implying that she was like Christine--exactly the kind of female who *would* slither between a husband and wife--damn, how that must have rankled! Even when his barbs were blunted by humor--and, later, affection--Lauren surely still felt them.

And David felt like a royal ass.

"Hey, I know it must've been a shock," he said close to her ear, "but you'll get over this. Soon. You're a spunky--"

Lauren's head snapped up. "Oh, shit, don't call me that! I *hate* spunk," she said with disgust, copping Lou Grant's classic line from "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and drawing a smile from David. "I hate spunky women and perky women and vampy little seductresses who are just too cool for school. I also hate perfection...which is why I cultivate my flaws."

"How do you define perfection?" David wanted to know, more captivated by the minute. His half-smile was still in place.

Lauren grabbed a tissue and blew her nose quite vigorously. "Oh, you know," she said, waving the hand that was still clutching the tissue. David was tempted to dodge it. "People who are endlessly capable and accomplished as well as gorgeous. It's unnatural."

"Okay, I get your point. So you'd rather be seen as a crusty harridan with eyes like flint and a heart to match."

"Something like that," Lauren murmured. She blew her nose again and began touching up her Mrs. Claus face. "Actually, I think Ralphie's more my type than all the other buttheads put together."

David's eyebrows shot up. "Really. So why don't you tell him that? It would probably make his day."

Lauren slid a glance in his direction. "Ralphie's married, David."

"I didn't know that. How did *you* know that?"

"By seeing the ring on the third finger of his left hand," Lauren said, her voice garbled by the face-stretching she was doing to get the makeup applied.

Abruptly, her hand froze as her eyelids pinched together, obviously shutting in more tears. She took a long, snuffling breath and let it out through her mouth. Blinking, she opened her eyes again and tried to dry them without drawing attention to the act.

"Lauren," David said, still crouched beside her and staring up at her, "your ex-husband doesn't matter anymore. Nothing about him or his life matters in relation to you

and your life. So the hell what if he left you for a twit. Does that mean she's better than you, more worthy or desirable than you? *No*. It means he's a superficial, faithless s.o.b. with low standards whose attitudes aren't worth rat droppings. *That's* what it means."

Lauren laid down her powder brush and turned in her chair to face him. "I think, David," she said in a mildly quavering voice, "that description could apply to more men than Bill." As David, frowning, tried to digest her implication, Lauren said, "I'd appreciate it if you'd go now. Please."

Befuddled, he rose, then stared at her for a moment. She no longer acknowledged his presence but simply went about her business. After giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze, he left the room.

Ralphie guiltily jerked to attention just outside Lauren's door. "Yo," he said, saluting David.

"What the hell are you doing?" David hissed. "Have you been eavesdropping?" He guided Ralphie toward the break room.

"Who, me?"

"No, of course not you. Some nosy little evil-doer in an elf suit."

David all but shoved him into the room and closed the door.

"I'm not an evil-doer," Ralphie huffed, pulling down his waistcoat. "Just a concerned citizen."

"Concerned," David repeated sardonically.

"Hey, listen to me," Ralphie said more boldly, poking a finger toward David's face. "Why didn't you tell Lauren what she needed to hear most, you idiot? I know you feel it. Why didn't you say it?"

David was starting to get the eerie feeling that Ralphie was his conscience personified. And that's probably why, instead of snapping *Mind your own business*, he mumbled, "I don't know."

"Well, you'd better get your act together, big guy."

"Herb and Harriet would be furious," David said, trying to divert Ralphie's attention from the other subject. He was still preoccupied, though, by Lauren's final acidic comment.

"Believe me," Ralphie said with authority, "no matter what professional line they hand you, those two old romantics would be thrilled to the dentures if one of their Claus pairs *really* became mister and missus."

"Ralphie, go eat some Rumblestix," David said to his conscience.

* * * *

Lauren felt less vulnerable when she returned to her post after their early lunch break. She was rebuilding her carapace. No matter what Bill or David or Tim or anybody did or said, she would have a wonderful life--her *own* life--lived on her own terms and full of a magic she herself would discover and mine for all it was worth.

But her determination didn't stop that toboggan's swift plunge.

Shortly before the end of their shift, a man who hadn't been standing in line barged over to Lauren from somewhere off to the side and demanded to know if she was the Mrs. Claus who was working last Friday.

"Yes, I was," she said curtly, annoyed by his rudeness.

Warily, Lauren kept an eye on him through peripheral vision. He had neat, close-cropped hair and a broad face whose blandness was distorted by a bad attitude. As soon as she admitted the next child in line, he leaned toward her.

"Listen, you goofy broad, I should have you arrested for nearly poisoning my kid!"

David's head jerked in her direction. Ralphie was already on his way over.

"I beg your pardon?" Lauren said frigidly. She heard thumping off to her left.

The man muscled his way into the front of the line and loomed over her chair. Before he could dislodge whatever was stuck in his craw--and by now Lauren guessed he was the sire of Austin the Brat--all six feet three inches' worth of Santa Claus bellied up to him.

"What did you call her?" David said in a low and menacing tone.

Scowling, the intruder looked up at him. "Who the hell are you?"

David gaped at the pugnacious florid face in stark disbelief. He spread his arms, showing himself in all his red-white-and-hairy glory. "How many clues do you need? Ho ho freakin' *ho!* There. Need another one, dumb-ass?"

The next person in line, a Joe Sixpack kind of guy with a son and daughter, whistled and clapped.

"Want me to call Security?" Ralphie asked David.

Santa's eyes didn't leave the man's face. "No."

"Want me to bite his ankles?"

A chain of snickers worked its way down the short waiting line.

"Go for it!" someone called out.

Ralphie dropped to his knees. The angry man did a hopping little dance, apparently expecting the elf's canines and incisors to sink into his socks.

"You'd better back off," David said evenly. "Now."

Lauren didn't think she'd ever admired any man as much as she admired David at that moment. Great balls of fire, he was actually *defending* her! "I'll be happy to speak with you," she said quite civilly to the stranger, "after Santa's and my work here is finished."

"Forget it," the guy said sullenly. "But I will tell you one thing." His eyes flickered over the people in line as his voice rose. "I'm never bringing my family near this mall at Christmastime again!"

"Is that a promise?" Ralphie asked brightly.

"Damn right. You're all nutcases."

Lauren beamed at him. "Oh, thank you, kind sir!"

The fans of Santa and Mrs. Claus cheered.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Early the next morning, David got a call from Ben before he left for school-- something that had never before happened. At least the boy was responsible enough to assure his groggy dad, as soon as he answered the phone, that nothing was wrong.

"So what's up?" David asked, yawning. Still nude, he walked downstairs to pour himself some coffee. "Where's your mother?" He wanted to make sure Chris was at least spending her nights at home while Ben was there.

"Still sleeping," the boy answered. "Dad, I gotta talk to you about something."

David sat at the kitchen table and rubbed his eyes. "Go ahead, shoot."

"Well, I feel kinda bad about doing this." Ben hesitated. "Mom told me she's gonna try to get back together with you."

Instantly, David was wide awake. "Yeah, she laid that on me when she picked you up Sunday." With sickening dread, he wondered if Ben was calling to champion this cause. It would tear him apart if his son wanted something David himself couldn't tolerate.

"Dad, I think you need all the facts before you make a decision."

David smiled. Maybe Ben would be a lawyer someday. "And do you have those facts?" he asked, undeniably intrigued. Little did the boy know there was no decision-making involved; it was a foregone conclusion that David wanted nothing more to do with Christine, but he was nonetheless interested in what Ben found it so important to tell him.

"I think I got *enough* facts. Sometimes Mom talks a lot...except to you. I don't know how you'd find this stuff out if I didn't tell you." Ben seemed to be justifying what he perhaps felt was his duplicity.

"Ben, hey," David said gently, "if you feel bad about doing this, then don't do it."

"I have to, Dad. It would be different if, like, y'know, Mom really loved you and missed you and that was why she wanted to do this."

Hmm. So Ben realized there was no love between them--a "fact" that wasn't too difficult to pick up on. David couldn't really get into a discussion about the roles chemistry and compatibility played in a relationship, so he merely said, "And what you're leading up to is--"

"She's afraid of not having enough money to live like she wants to. I guess Wyatt broke up with her 'cuz of some guy named Tim, but *that* dude hasn't been paying enough attention to her. She says at least you're dependable. I'm sorry, Dad, but I just don't think she's really into you. You're kinda like her last resort."

David uttered a single laugh and held his forehead. *No shit, Sherlock*, he would've said had his son been older. "Thanks for the heads-up, Ben. Don't feel bad about how your mother feels or doesn't feel. A tiger can't change its stripes."

"I know," the boy said a bit regretfully. "I don't wanna see you two together just 'cuz it's, y'know, like, convenient for Mom. I know she wasn't the greatest wife."

Wow. Some kid. David was proud of him. What Ben just did required a large dose of courage, regard, and maturity of insight--more than many adults had.

"Well, maybe she just isn't wife material," David replied gently and generously.

"Hey, what's going on with Lauren?" Ben asked.

The question startled David. Lauren.... What *was* going on with Lauren? Again, he tried to remember what it was she'd said yesterday after spotting her ex. There was some key piece of information embedded in that statement. He had a feeling there were *many* pieces of information he needed to ferret out, fit together, and process to understand her sudden aloofness.

"There should be something going on soon," David told his son. "I hope."

After he got off the phone, David's mind continued to race. Chris--what a bad joke. She simply wanted to re-board the gravy train. He chided himself for not realizing that the very second she started playing her game. Her various boyfriends were all abandoning her, for a multitude of obvious reasons, and she figured she'd just schmooze, seduce, and manipulate her way back into David's good graces. Then, after her position was secure, she'd start running around again.

He found the whole scenario repulsive.

Once dressed, David came back downstairs and sat in his recliner beside the Christmas tree. The sight of it and the house's silence helped him concentrate.

Why was Lauren pulling away from him? Why the emotional distance right after the surrender to closeness?

Meticulously, David reran the events of the previous day. If necessary, he would comb his memory for every last word that was spoken. He had to come up with some answers.

And, after he did, he had to make Lauren understand how much he wanted her.

* * * *

David was late. It wasn't like him. Lauren was unbearably antsy as she sat in her dressing room with the door open. She was angry at herself for caring and kept trying to convince herself, as she had been since yesterday, that she should cultivate indifference. But why was it so hard?

She needed to stave off the "Why am I not good enough?" question that had raised its ugly head twenty-four hours ago. She needed to protect herself against the feelings of worthlessness that so severely undermined her self-esteem. Yesterday she'd been reminded that her position as a wife had been usurped by a gold-digging twenty-three-year-old and her position as a lover was on the verge of being usurped by a slut. Two punches--POW! POW!--within hours of each other. And, damn, they had hurt.

It was ironic that David, who'd delivered one of the blows, clarified the attitude she needed to adopt: Men who allowed such things to happen were not men of quality and, therefore, were not worth bothering about.

Lauren didn't need them. She didn't need any of them. A man of *true* quality was worth waiting for. And, if one never did come along, she'd still get by.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps, determined footsteps, coming down the hall. Lauren rose and went to the doorway.

David bore down on her. "Get in there," he ordered, pointing at her dressing room. Too stunned either to question him or object, Lauren stepped backwards into the room. He followed her and closed the door.

"Now you listen to me," he said sternly. "When our shift is over, we're going to talk. Do you understand?"

Dumbly, Lauren nodded.

"I have to hurry and get dressed now, but don't forget what I said." He wheeled out of her room and across the hall into his own.

Lauren stared at the door. It wasn't often that someone was able to quash her thoughts *and* deprive her of her voice.

She was impressed.

* * * *

Lauren could not quite figure out how her next on-the-job mishap occurred. All she recalled was a short brunette woman with a curly perm, crouching beside the gift basket to help her little girl pick out a candy sack. As she started to get up, the woman teetered, nearly losing her balance, and Lauren tried to help steady her and keep them both from toppling to the floor.

So far, so good.

The little girl's visit with Santa went smoothly. Her mother smiled happily. She seemed like an ordinary, nice woman. But as Mom and daughter walked away from the North Pole Workshop, Lauren saw David crane his neck and stare. His fake white caterpillar eyebrows angled toward the bridge of his nose. He dipped over the arm of his throne and whispered something to Ralphie, who immediately looked at Lauren with a broad, amused grin.

Then Ralphie came capering over to her. "Look at your hands," he said in her ear. "What?"

"Look at your hands...Mrs. Claws. See anything different?"

Lauren spread her hands on her aproned lap. "Oh, shit," she mouthed.

One of her decorated plastic fingernails was missing--the one from her left middle finger. Ralphie inclined his head toward a candle store across the mall from the diorama. Apprehensively, Lauren's eyes followed the direction of his nod.

There, window-shopping, was the latest visitor and her child. Either hanging or wedged between the woman's curls and the collar of her jacket was a red tab with OH printed on it in white.

"Want it back?" Ralphie asked.

"Do you think you can get it? Without her noticing?" Lauren asked hopefully.

Ralphie nudged her to redirect her attention. Lauren lapsed back into character long enough to admit a pair of carrot-topped twins. She was thinking how she had no more of the larger red nails and no more of the decals. She was also thinking what could happen if and when the woman found the nail. This, combined with the Rumblestix incident....

Lauren had a vision of her Mrs. Claus costume and wig laid out perfectly on the floor of the diorama and Ted Berenger standing over it playing "Taps."

She turned to Ralphie while simultaneously trying to keep the curly-haired woman in her view. "Well?"

"Of course I can get it," he said confidently. "But it'll cost ya."

Lauren grabbed him by the collar and yanked him close to her face. "Ralphie, I swear, if you say something smarmy--"

"If I get it," he said evenly and distinctly, "you have to ask David out on a date."

Releasing him, Lauren said, "Get it."

David, she'd been able to see, had been continually sneaking glances at them. As Ralphie bounded into the milling mass of shoppers, she as well as David tried keeping their eyes trained on him.

The elf scampered up to the woman and stopped directly in front of her. After removing his cap and sweeping into a courtly bow, his mouth started working. Nothing he said was audible from where Lauren sat, but she could make out his facial expressions and gestures. He curled his forefinger in a beckoning motion. The woman leaned forward at the waist. Ralphie's hand curled behind her right ear and around the back of her head...

Lauren held her breath.

...and produced what appeared to be a coin.

A coin?

Awaiting Ralphie's return, Lauren admitted a Korean boy and his American parents. The elf took his time returning to the Workshop, no doubt for dramatic effect. He strolled, swinging his arms and whistling, looking everywhere except at Lauren.

Well, did he do it or didn't he?

David kept looking at her, but Lauren didn't want to meet his eyes.

Ralphie finally made it back to the Workshop area and nonchalantly approached Lauren's chair. Hands clasped behind his back, he tilted toward her and said, "You'd better make good on this deal or I'll never help you out of a tight spot again." He swung one arm from behind his back. His fingers forced something into Lauren's hand.

He'd retrieved the dislocated fingernail! She looked at him. "How--?"

"I have many tricks up these abbreviated sleeves." With a wink, he went back to Santa's throne.

Lauren ventured a glance at David. Despairingly, he merely shook his head.

When the time came for their midshift break, Ralphie made a point of sticking close to David as he descended from the dais. Together, they approached Lauren.

David said dryly to her, "I think you need stronger glue."

Blushing, Lauren checked her apron pocket for the fingernail. Thank goodness it was still there. "I think you're right," she murmured. She'd begun to fear leaving a trail of plastic fingernails or perhaps losing one as she stuck her hand into the basket of gift sacks.

As if he'd read her mind, Ralphie said with wicked delight, "Imagine if a kid like the one we had last Friday jammed one of *those* in his mouth!"

"Imagine if I jammed a sock in *your* mouth," Lauren said to him.

David's white mustache hitched up as he smiled.

Lauren was about to turn into the break room when David paused and said, "I have to make some calls. See you later." He proceeded toward his dressing room.

"Damn it!" Ralphie muttered, stamping his foot.

Lauren inclined toward him. She put the tip of her thumb to her nose and wiggled her fingers. "*Nya, nya.*"

"Hey, you're not off the hook yet," Ralphie said. "One way or another I'm gonna get my payment." He followed Lauren into the break room.

She closed the door. "Why are you so intent on throwing us together?"

Ralphie grabbed an apple and a granola bar from the little refrigerator in the corner. "Because you're crazy about each other, that's why." He boosted himself onto the

table and sat on its edge, legs dangling. Contentedly, he began munching.

After pouring herself some coffee, Lauren pulled out a chair and sat down. She pondered Ralphie's assertion. Crazy about each other.... Was it possible? And could things really work out?

Not if Christine applied serious, strategic pressure and David caved in.

Lauren's insides twisted with apprehension. She'd struck out so many times before.

Ralphie turned to regard her. "Don't be afraid," he said quietly. "I was afraid, too, when I first met my wife."

The statement, both its subject and tone, struck Lauren. "Were you?" she asked, her eyes softening as she regarded him.

"Of course. Marianne is beautiful. Well, to me she is. And she's also five-foot-five. Don't you think that struck terror into my heart? But, you know, sometimes people see things in us that we don't see in ourselves. That's what makes a risk worth taking."

For some reason, Lauren wanted to cry. "Ralphie, I think I love you," she said.

He smiled. "Sorry, I'm taken. Now if you'd just say that to the right guy...."

* * * *

About an hour later, a freckled girl of perhaps five or six peered over the velvet rope at Lauren. "Excuse me," she said.

Lauren was immediately charmed by her. "What, honey?" she asked with a smile.

"Is it okay if I *don't* ask Santa for presents?"

The question made Lauren's eyes widen in surprise. She saw a pair of hands on the girl's shoulders and followed them up to the face of an older woman with graying hair. Her grandmother? The woman smiled back at Lauren. She had the kind of face that inspires instant liking and trust.

"What's your name?" Lauren asked the girl.

"Lydia."

"Well, Lydia, you can ask Santa for anything you want. That's why he's here. And he'll do his best to help you out."

"Okay." The answer must have pleased the girl. Her shy smile seemed less tentative.

"Would you like a bag of candy?"

"No, thank you. We just had ice cream."

Lauren glanced at the Santa throne. A boy and his father were walking away from it. She got up and unhooked the velvet rope, then gently put a hand on Lydia's back to indicate it was her turn. The woman who'd been standing behind her stepped out of line, apparently not intending to accompany the girl.

"Would you like me to take you to Santa?" Lauren asked her.

Lydia nodded. Lauren took her hand and led her up the ramp. The girl giggled as Ralphie fell into step beside her and did an exaggerated march. When they reached the throne, Lauren said, "Santa, this is Lydia. I believe she has a special request."

David's eyes sparkled. Lauren could see he was completely immersed in his character. For the first time, she lingered on the dais.

"Hello, Lydia. Welcome." David's voice was like warm scented oil. When he

stretched out his arms, the girl immediately stepped into them and allowed herself to be lifted onto his lap. He inclined his head toward hers. "Now, what did you want to tell me?"

Lydia's large brown eyes met his. "I'd like to hear a song, please."

For the briefest moment David seemed taken aback by the request, but the small ripple in his composure immediately smoothed. "You'd like me to sing a song for you?"

Lydia nodded.

"I'll do my best. Which one do you want to hear?"

"I don't know the name of it. It's from a movie. One of your cousins sang it in a movie."

Lauren could almost hear David's mental gears meshing as he tried to put together these clues. Then, suddenly, Lauren understood.

She bent toward Lydia. "Do you mean Santa's cousin Kris Kringle?"

The small face turned up to her. "Mm-hm. That's the one."

David glanced at Lauren. "Was the movie called *Miracle on Thirty-fourth Street*?" he asked Lydia.

"I think so. He sang it to a little Dutch girl."

Oh no, Lauren thought. How's he going to pull *this* one off? She really wanted this sweet child not to be disappointed.

But David said with a smile, "I know the song well." He adjusted Lydia's position on his lap and softly sang,

*"Sinterklaas kapoentje,
Ry wat in myn shoentje,
Ry wat in myn laarsje,
Dank u Sinter Klaase."*

Ralphie, sitting cross-legged on the floor, grinned and spontaneously broke into applause.

Beaming like a lighthouse beacon, Lydia threw her arms around David's neck. "Thank you," she said, then jumped off his lap. Before she headed down the exit ramp, she turned and called out, "Merry Christmas, Santa!"

David and Lauren waved and answered in unison, "Merry Christmas, Lydia!"

Lauren squeezed David's shoulder before she returned to her chair. A bit dazed, she stared at the man on the throne as she let a mother and father through with their toddler. The dad helped position and hold his child on Santa's lap, and David laughed as its tiny hand immediately grabbed at his beard.

Lauren's breath became shallow. One thought finally surfaced through the haze in her mind: *I think I love you, Santa.*

She was scared stiff.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lauren seemed to sleepwalk through the remaining hour of her shift. What did David want to talk to her about? If he felt compelled to explain his impending reconciliation with Christine--especially if he did it defensively, expecting Lauren to lambaste him for his decision--she would lose it.

She already felt as if she were disintegrating, atom by spinning atom. Is this what it felt like to fall in love? She couldn't remember--it had been so long since the last time. But whatever she was feeling, it sucked. And it probably presaged another bout of night sweats.

As their shift ended, David dawdled for a while on the dais, talking with Ralphie. Lauren debated whether to wait for him or go straight to her dressing room. If she did wait, she might give the impression of being fawningly acquiescent; if she walked away, she might give the impression of disregarding his wishes.

Her bladder finally settled the issue. An hour's worth of fretting made it imperative that she get to a bathroom. Now.

David was still engaged in conversation, so Lauren simply left the North Pole Workshop to take care of business. By the time she made her way to her dressing room, he was nowhere in sight. Maybe he'd had a change of heart. Maybe *he* was the one dodging *her*.

Half relieved, half heartsick, and thoroughly confused, Lauren changed and went out into the corridor. It was empty. No sound came from David's dressing room. She walked to the exit at the end of the hall, prepared to walk straight to her car and drive away.

As she opened the door, David appeared on the other side of it and grabbed her by the arms. "Where are you going?"

Trying to catch her breath after the shock of seeing him and the rush of cold air from outside, Lauren was speechless for a moment. David was in his street clothes. The sight of him--sharpened immeasurably by the sound of his voice and the smell of his skin and the feel of his hands on her arms--so sapped Lauren of strength she didn't think she could stand up much longer.

"Home," she said feebly.

David nudged her back into the corridor. "No, you're not." He closed the door at his back. "We have plans, remember?"

"You disappeared."

"No I didn't. *You* disappeared."

"I had to go to the bathroom."

David eyed her skeptically.

The look helped bring Lauren to her senses. "I've embarrassed myself enough around here. The last thing I needed to do was pee on the damn floor."

She could see that David was trying not to smile. "I guess I can't argue with that," he said. "Come on." Now he was nudging her back *toward* the door.

"Where are we going?"

"Never mind. Just behave and do as I say."

Scowling, Lauren pulled up short like a mule. "What was that?" she asked icily.

David sagged. "I'm sorry. That was absolutely the wrong way to put it." Bowing slightly, he stretched an arm toward the parking lot. "Would you kindly do me the honor of accompanying me?"

Lauren rolled her eyes. "Now you're *overcompensating*."

Exasperated, David snapped, "Damn it, just shut up and come with me."

Lauren shrugged and smiled up at him. "All right."

He lightly curled an arm around her waist as they made their way through the rear parking lot used primarily by delivery trucks. It seemed they walked forever. Snow-covered farm fields and winding rural roads spread out behind the mall.

Getting impatient, Lauren stopped again. "My car is way back there," she said, gesturing behind them. Tired from her hectic day, she was starting to feel put-out and grouchy.

"Well, my vehicle is right there," David said. From behind, he put his hands on either side of Lauren's head and turned it to the right. He pointed to help direct her attention.

At the very edge of the lot, still carpeted with snow, she saw--at least she thought she saw--a gorgeous old sleigh, lacquered in maroon and trimmed in gilt, hitched behind two black Percherons. Its runners were elaborately curled, front and back. A top-hatted driver with a thick muffler around his neck sat on a raised seat at the front.

Lauren turned to David with an expression of full-blown amazement. "That's for us?"

Smiling, he nodded.

Lauren heard bells tinkle as the horses tossed their heads. A shiver crawled up her back. She looked at the sleigh, then at David again. Her amazement mingled with awe.

"Don't let your feet stop moving now, Cinderella" he said. "We only have this coach for an hour or so."

They walked up to the sleigh and David helped Lauren climb into it. She ran her hand over the soft black leather of the tufted seat. David went around to the other side and got in next to her. Reaching beneath the seat, he pulled out a heavy blanket and spread it over their laps.

"Ready?" the driver asked over his shoulder.

"Yes, we are. Thank you," David answered.

With a snap of the reins and a small jerk, the sleigh began slowly gliding forward as the driver headed for the backroads.

Lauren was entranced. Unconsciously, she leaned closer to David, almost expecting him to take her hand beneath the blanket or put his arm around her. When he didn't, she felt disappointed.

"Um, I meant to ask you," Lauren said, just to have something to say, "how did you learn the words to that Dutch Christmas song?"

"I work with a guy who was born and raised in Holland. I asked him to teach it to me."

"It sounded lovely," Lauren said sincerely.

"I'm glad you liked it." Eyes closed, David briefly rested his head against the back of the seat, trying to get his tension to dissipate. "This is beautiful, isn't it?" he murmured.

Lauren looked at the thick stands of trees in their crystalline bunting, at the white-blanketed fields, at the occasional houses with gaily decorated yards. She, too, closed her

eyes for a moment and let her other senses be delighted by the feel of the frosty air, the smell of leather and horses, the sound of the sleigh bells and the runners sliding like lightning over the packed snow.

"Yes," she said finally. "I feel like I'm in another world."

But she wasn't. Not really. David wanted to talk to her about something very much a part of her everyday world, and that thought kept intruding on her enchanted sleigh ride.

Might as well get this over with.

"Well?" she said, opening her eyes and turning to him.

David immediately took the hint. His gaze moved to Lauren's face and lingered there. How pretty she looked, her cheeks and the tip of her nose rouged by the cold, her gray eyes bright as glass. But he also saw anxiety, and he wanted to erase it.

"I need to clear something up with you," he said. "It has to do with the conversation we had yesterday, before our shift started. Do you remember it?"

Lauren's stomach fluttered. "Yes, I think so," she said, trying to sound impassive.

"I realize I said too much. I also realize I didn't say enough."

"That sounds like a riddle, David."

"It'll make sense in a minute." He turned toward her, resting his left leg on the seat and putting his arm on the backrest. "I want you to think about what I said yesterday."

"There really isn't much to think about." *Oh, yeah, like hell...*

"Well, how do you remember it?" David asked. "I mean, what did you hear?"

Lauren sighed. Why was he putting her through this? "You said something about reconciling with your ex. You said she...kissed you." Her stomach seemed to bunch into a fist.

"A-ha!"

Lauren jumped.

"I *knew* it," David said forcefully.

The look in his eyes made Lauren feel she'd been caught in some wrongdoing. She pulled away from him fractionally but kept staring at his suddenly animated face.

"You completely misinterpreted what I said. You heard two words and two words only: *reconciliation* and *kiss*."

Was he insane? "Of course I heard them! They came out of your mouth!"

"But you ran the wrong way with them!" His hand found hers under the blanket. "I've been wracking my brain to remember exactly what I said. I told you--and this may not be an exact quote, but it's close enough--*Chris* brought up the subject of reconciliation and she *tried* kissing me. *That's* how I put it."

Lauren blinked and looked down. Maybe he was right. "Well, you didn't elaborate."

"I know. I was at fault there. I was probably at fault in bringing it up at all. But I didn't elaborate because the whole incident was completely insignificant to me. In fact, it was totally absurd."

David was now quite firmly holding her hand, as if establishing a connection. He looked directly into her eyes.

"Lauren, how can you possibly think I'd be foolish enough to get back together with that woman? Hell, I practically pushed her away when she came at me."

Little by little, Lauren was leaning toward him. "But...do you think she really

wants a reconciliation...really wants *you*?"

David tossed his head back. "Oh, *God*, no," he said with a laugh in his voice. "Even my son realizes what she's up to."

"What *is* she up to?"

David's fingers began lightly caressing the nape of Lauren's neck. "Predictable stuff--for her. Apparently Chris has been striking out with men. Surprise, surprise. No man worth a crap is going to put up with a woman who's both dense *and* unfaithful. And she's not exactly a spring chicken anymore, so she can't even attract the shallow hounds."

Lauren was returning his touches. The sleigh ride was becoming enchanted again. "So you're saying she's getting desperate and you're the go-to guy in times of desperation."

"Exactly. Or, as Ben said, her last resort. She just wants to use me again, that's all. Ben knows it, and *he* doesn't want it to happen either." Impulsively, David leaned forward and gave Lauren a quick, teasing kiss. "Actually, *you're* the one he wants to see me with."

"Really?" Lauren breathed. Feeling lightheaded, she vaguely wondered what kind of look was on her face. Whatever it was, she had no control over it.

"Yes, really. Well...depending, I guess, on how you feel about *me*."

Lauren's free hand came out from under the blanket and touched his handsome face. "I...I can't put it into words. Not yet."

"Okay, I understand. Then *I'll* start. You're the only woman I've been able to think about since 'Liz' showed up at my house. You're so far under my skin I couldn't dig you out with a roto-tiller."

With tears in her eyes, Lauren laughed weakly. "David, that's the most ridiculous thing any man has ever said to me." Her expression softened. "And the most romantic."

David knew a blush was adding redness to his face, but he didn't care. He was on a sleigh ride, with Christmas approaching, and smiling into the eyes of an incomparable woman. Now if he could just keep his foot out of his mouth, maybe they had a chance of getting somewhere.

"Can I still hire you to redecorate my house?"

"Only if you let me do the yard, too." Lauren's eyes dreamily roamed his face.

David laughed. "Okay. As long as I'm allowed *some* input."

"We'll work out the details later."

"Want to start tonight?"

Lauren closed the now small space between them. Tentatively, she touched her lips to his. The light delicious contact set off a deep delicious throbbing and, driven by it, she kissed him with a passion he not only met but exceeded.

Breathing heavily, David forced himself to pull away from her. "I think we'd better sit at opposite ends of this seat," he said, "or we're going to end up finishing what we started at that party."

Lauren had to agree. She tried subtly to tug at the legs of her jeans. David's hand had done some maddening exploration beneath the blanket, and her clothes suddenly felt way too snug for comfort.

"Don't take this the wrong way," she said, "but isn't your head cold?"

"Only because all the blood in my body is...migrating south."

Lauren had to find out for herself. She couldn't help it. Her hand crept around under the blanket.

Oh, yeah.

"Your place or mine?" she gasped, dimly aware she'd just fulfilled her agreement with Ralphie.

David tilted toward her again, like steel drawn to a magnet, and nuzzled her neck. "I don't care. Let's just get there."

* * * *

It hadn't changed a bit.

David's front yard looked the same as it did when Liz vented her wrath on Tiny Tim. Lauren was glad. It was now part of an increasing stock of precious memories--sore toe and all. And it was an extension of David, the sexy, sentimental, honorable El Dorko Supremo who was unlike any man she had ever known.

When she pulled up behind David in his driveway, he immediately came up to her car and opened the door. He put a supporting arm around her waist as they walked to the front door. Lauren stuck her tongue out at Tiny Tim as she passed him; he took it like a man.

The inside of the Cape Cod was a comfortable, lived-in but neat "guy space" devoid of most things that weren't strictly utilitarian. For the most part, David had let his amusingly misshapen Christmas tree suffice for indoor holiday decoration. There were a few--but only a few--other traditional touches: a wreath over the fireplace, two stockings printed in glitter with DAD and BEN hanging from the mantel, scattered candles, a hand-carved German incense burner. But the interior of the house indicated a restraint Lauren would never have believed if she hadn't seen it for herself.

David took her coat and hung it in a small closet off the foyer. "Make yourself at home," he said, motioning toward a large corduroy couch in the living room. "Would you like something warm to drink?"

"Sounds great." Lauren briskly rubbed her hands together as David went to the kitchen. She knew she wouldn't be able to sit still, not even if she were paid to, so she walked over to the tree.

It was decorated with a pleasing hodgepodge of recently handmade and heirloom ornaments, including a blizzard of meticulously crocheted snowflakes. Popcorn-and-cranberry garland twined through the branches; bubble lights freighted them. The tree's sequined skirt, too, looked handmade. A little stained and shabby in places, it was still charming and still infused with somebody's love.

David Dawson was clearly a man of deep sentiment who cherished tradition. Moment by moment, Lauren Rose was becoming a woman of deep sentiment who cherished David Dawson.

"Do you like our Charlie Brown tree?" David asked, entering the living room with two steaming mugs.

Lauren smelled cocoa. David handed her a mug that bore a mountainous peak of real whipped cream. As she thanked him, she couldn't help wondering just how big her behind really was and whether this luscious-smelling brew would aggravate the problem.

She glanced up at David and felt an anticipatory flutter. "I love your tree. It looks

like three or four generations of family members contributed to it."

"That's about right," David said, affectionately touching one of the snowflakes. "There's only one family member, or rather *former* family member, who didn't contribute."

There was no need to be more specific.

David set his cocoa on the coffee table and went to the fireplace. Carefully, like a Boy Scout, he began placing kindling and logs. He actually did feel like a fumbling adolescent again--not when it came to building the fire, which was as much second-nature to him as crane operation and cooking, but when it came to picking up where he and Lauren had left off.

How strange, David thought. They could plunge into intimacy when and where it was totally unexpected, but now that it was being orchestrated....

He had to get over this tongue-tied, paralyzing diffidence that stemmed from too much expectation and too little courtship expertise. As contradictory as it seemed, he had to figure out how to set up a situation that could spark spontaneity.

Maybe Lauren was feeling the same way. Because when David blurted out, "Let's bake Christmas cookies," she leapt at the chance.

"But you'll have to kind of...guide me," she cautioned, thinking of the hockey pucks she'd unwittingly flung at him outside her house. Lauren indulged in a private smile. Assault and battery by cookie--imagine explaining *that* to the police.

"Deal," David said, enthusiastically grabbing up his cocoa mug as well as Lauren's hand.

So, for the next two-plus hours as carols played on a satellite network channel, they measured and stirred, chattered and laughed, dropped dough and pressed dough. They made snickerdoodles, and almond crescents coated with powdered sugar. They used a multitude of figural cutters to make sugar cookies that Lauren artistically decorated with silver beads and multicolored icing.

David was impressed. "You're the missing link in our operation!" he said exultantly. "You're hired!"

Lauren was immensely pleased with herself. "Finally...I've found my kitchen niche."

"A kitchen witch with her own niche," David said with a grin. Then he sang "Hallelujah!"

They cracked up. Looser now, they got silly. Lauren smeared icing on David's upper lip. He dumped sprinkles down the low neck of her jersey. From there, as they'd both secretly hoped, the situation progressed rather nicely.

They started cleaning up the mess they made in the kitchen and on each other. Of course Lauren, as a matter of common courtesy, had to lick and kiss the icing off David's lips. Of course he, to return the favor, had to exert a gentle pressure on the outer curves of her breasts to lift them, so he could better access the pool of sprinkles that lay in the valley they formed within her bra. His tongue snaked between the soft mounds of flesh, darting and lapping to retrieve the bits of candy.

Soon they were shedding their encumbering clothing and dashing around the house like nudists playing tag. More sweet ingredients made their way from shelves to skin. David became the Cookie Monster and Lauren the cookie. Finally, she pushed him over the arm of the couch. As soon as his back hit the cushions, she straddled him.

Their roles reversed.

Lauren ran her hands over his body. "M'lord," she said, mimicking an innocent Scottish lass she could never, even in her dreams, be. "Shouldn't I slice this cookie roll before I bake and eat it?"

"No, no, no" he replied, wagging a finger at her. "This cookie must be taken as it...stands."

Lauren's first response was an exaggerated pout. "But, m'lord, 'tis a powerful large cookie as it stands!"

"Aye, and a powerful *strange* cookie, too," David said, giving her a mysterious squint.

"How so, m'lord?"

He shifted his eyes from side to side, curled a hand around his mouth, and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "The longer you eat it, the bigger it grows."

Naturally, the lass had to put this incredible claim to the test. "M'lord," she gasped after a few minutes, "you do not lie!"

David managed to eke out a "Never."

"But I fear this strange cookie is about to explode!"

"Your fear is well founded," he said, his voice pathetically strained.

To prevent such a catastrophic event, they fluidly rearranged themselves, rolling and crawling, grasping and fondling and kissing and probing until, beneath the lowermost boughs of the shining tree, their playtime ended in an urgent raw rush of nerve-galvanizing, bone-melting passion.

"Thank you, Santa," Lauren whispered into David's damp ear.

"Thank *you*, Missus Claws."

Still clinging to one another and giggling, they rolled onto their sides. The trilling of the telephone startled but did not part them. David immediately recognized the voice that sounded on the answering machine. It was Mrs. Witteringer, the 83-year-old widow who lived directly across the street.

"Mister Dawson," she said politely, "would you mind terribly *closing your drapes?*"

* * * *

After refreshing themselves with cold cider and warm cookies--which was after David had slunk across the carpeting on his stomach to pull the drapery cord--they finally made it up to the master bedroom. Blissful and exhausted, they lay entwined beneath a goose down comforter as thick and weightless as a cloud.

Lauren waited for David's breathing to assume the deep, regular respiration of sleep. Carefully, she disengaged herself from his muscular arms, crept downstairs, and pulled her cell phone from her purse.

"I'm sorry, Glenna, but I have to tell *someone*," Lauren whispered excitedly when her sister picked up. "I'm in love. I'm in love with Santa Claus!"

"Isn't it a wonderful life?" her half-awake sister muttered. "Now go enjoy it." She unceremoniously hung up.

After re-stashing her cell, Lauren walked to the foot of the stairs, paused, and sat on the second riser. The house was absolutely still. Hugging herself, she gazed at the still-

lit tree. It seemed like something alive--a silent, heavenly sentinel, effulgent in the darkness. She inhaled the lingering aromas of cocoa, freshly baked cookies, and apple cider. They seemed to be more fragile now, fading, as the pungency of burning wood and pine sap asserted supremacy.

Above her, Lauren heard the muffled creak of footsteps on floorboards. The sound took on weight as it descended the stairs. Lauren could feel a light vibration beneath her body. Her mouth moved into a small smile.

David sat on the riser above Lauren, his thighs bracketing her body. She felt his large, warm hands cup her cool, bare shoulders like a tender but impenetrable armor. She felt the solidity of his broad chest against her back. She could even feel the silky, dark hair that fanned out from his sternum, and in her mind's eye she could see the serpentine paths it took.

Lauren leaned into him, her head resting against the arc of his throat. David's delicious scent overwhelmed the others in the house. His arms came around her body, crossing in front and enfolding her.

"You scared me," he murmured against her hair. "I thought you might've left. I must be having flashbacks or something."

Lauren's smile broadened. She rubbed his stubbly chin with the top of her head. "I'll never leave again--not *really* leave--unless you want me to."

"You mean that?"

Lauren squeezed his forearms. "I've never meant anything more in my life."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next brilliantly bright morning, David arose with more energy than he'd had since he was in his twenties. He bounded downstairs--after making sure to don his velour bathrobe--and immediately started cooking breakfast.

It was quite astonishing, he thought, considering how little sleep he'd gotten. He and Lauren had awakened simultaneously in the middle of the night and made love again--a languorous yet intensely focused and sensual coupling that must have gone on for an hour or more. Just the memory of it made him want to fly back upstairs, tear off his robe, and press her naked body to his again.

David tried redirecting his attention to the French toast he was making. The lower half of his robe was beginning to tent out in front of him. Now he felt like he was in his teens, totally at the mercy of hair-trigger hormones.

He glanced below his waist, then groaned. *I'll settle down*, he assured himself. *I just have to get used to this.*

Showered and dressed, Lauren came into the kitchen a short time later.

"Hey," David said, a slight tone of disappointment tingeing his voice, "I was going to bring you breakfast in bed."

She walked up to him and flattened her hands on his partially exposed chest. Their morning kiss was no different from their nighttime kisses, and Lauren half hoped David would fly into a clothes-ripping frenzy--designer labels be damned.

"Hungry?" he asked, his cheek still sliding across her cheek, his hands roaming the contours of her body.

"What a stupid question."

Reluctantly they broke their embrace. "Quit being so damned provocative," David grouched. "Haven't you heard that being in a state of constant arousal can be dangerous for a man?" He pulled out a chair for Lauren at the kitchen table and began setting out their meal.

"I'll quit being provocative when you quit being responsive." Lauren watched him with such a potent combination of love and lust that she wasn't sure she could walk out the door and leave him behind.

"I think we're caught in a vicious circle," David said as he sat down. His dark eyes glimmered at her. "But I could go around and around in it forever."

Lauren's jaw was too busy to allow for an answer. She was already gorging herself on French toast slathered in locally produced maple syrup. Vaguely she wondered if she was substituting food for sex, trying to satisfy her craving for David by repeatedly shoving a loaded fork into her mouth.

In any case, her appetite surprised her; she tried to slow down. David might enjoy her being a glutton for sex, but he could have a different reaction if he thought she was just a glutton, period.

"Why are you up and dressed already?" he asked. "I thought we'd be driving to work together."

Shaking her head, Lauren took a swallow of coffee and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. "Not today. I have to stop somewhere before I go to the mall."

"Leaving me with the dishes, huh?"

Lauren got up from the table. She stood over David, running her hands over his smooth head and kissing it. "You know you're a more domestic creature than I am," she teased. When he started to turn in his chair, she said, "Stay right where you are. If you touch me I'll never get out of here." Bending over, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed his neck, drinking in the uniquely just-got-out-of-bed fragrance of his skin. "Thank you for breakfast. That was the most scrumptious French toast I've ever eaten."

"You're welcome." David lifted her hand and kissed it. "With you around, I won't have to get a dog to lick the plates before I wash them."

Laughing, he tried ducking her pinch to his armpit but just wasn't nimble enough.

* * * *

Nostalgia washed through Lauren as she approached the Santa School. She had been there not long ago, but time, she reminded herself, isn't only measured in days. It seemed half a life had passed since her first visit.

On this occasion, she went to the door of the residence. It had a different knocker, in the shape of a lion's head...like the one on Scrooge's door that morphs eerily into the face of Jacob Marley.

Bright-eyed and a little breathless, Harriet answered the knock. "Lauren!" she cried in surprise, then held out her arms for a hug.

Lauren stepped into them. "Hi. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No, of course not. Please, come in." Harriet moved aside to admit her student. "Herb's not here. He's out running errands. Will I do?"

"You'll do just fine," Lauren said, peeling off her gloves.

"Good. Just go into the sitting room and find a spot you like. I'll get us some tea."

With that vague directive, Harriet disappeared.

Lauren wandered into a room to the right of the central hallway. Filled with antiques, the house had a museum-like attention to authenticity and detail, but without being imposing. In fact, like the Hendricks's quaint school and the couple themselves, it was welcoming.

She sat in a wide-armed Morris chair and waited.

Harriet came bustling back carrying a tray. Setting it on a table beside Lauren's chair, she poured tea from a bone china pot with a chintz pattern into matching cups. Lauren asked for cream and sugar. Harriet happily obliged, then handed Lauren the cup on its saucer.

Earl Grey, Lauren silently noted as she took a sip. And real cream. She felt like a lady...a feeling she didn't often have.

Harriet sat in a nearby chair. She watched her visitor. "Is something wrong?" she gently prompted--not because, it seemed, she was becoming impatient, but because she wanted to provide a track for Lauren's thoughts to roll on.

Lauren uncrossed and recrossed her legs. "Kind of. Well, no, actually everything's perfect. Or nearly perfect. But I...we've maybe *done* something wrong. In your eyes."

"Hon, I have *no* idea what you're talking about."

So Lauren just blurted it out. "David and I are seeing each other."

"As in...?" Harriet raised her eyebrows but delicately refrained from filling in the

blank.

"Yes," Lauren said with a pale blush. "We've grown very close." She didn't quite know what or how much to say. She just felt impelled to come clean.

Harriet sipped tea at regular intervals and, waiting, continued to watch her.

Lauren drank too, as if the tea could inspire her. "Harriet, I know it violates the rules you laid down for us. I know it must seem we're utterly lacking in professionalism and discipline and control, but I honestly just love him so much--" She stopped, her face falling in bewilderment.

Harriet had set her teacup down and linked her hands over her stomach. She was smiling with such satisfaction she almost looked...smug. "My husband owes me tickets to a Packers game," she said. Smugly.

"Huh?"

"I made a bet with him that you two would follow in our footsteps. I won."

"Follow in...?"

"That's how *we* met--playing Santa and Missus Claus. After your and David's training session, I told Herb, I'll bet they get together, just like we did. He said, nah, they're not enough alike. So we bet on it. And the old fart lost. Herb's a dear, but sometimes he can't see the forest for the trees. So now I get to tailgate at Lambeau Field."

Lauren started giggling. She set her teacup on the table so it wouldn't spill its contents. "No kidding!"

"I wouldn't kid about something as serious as football. Would you and David like to come along?"

"That sounds wonderful. My friends and I have tailgated a couple of times and we had a blast. I'm sure David will be thrilled."

"Well, I'll keep in touch, then." Harriet rose from her chair and Lauren followed suit. She laid a hand on Lauren's arm. "I'm sorry if our guidelines made you and David feel like criminals. *Naturally* we make an exception for two students who fall in love." Harriet smiled; she seemed boundlessly pleased. "Oh, and one more thing. I don't mean to be presumptuous or to pressure you in any way, but...if you and David ever *do* decide to take the next step--you know, get married--we'd be proud and honored if you had the ceremony in our school building."

Lauren felt a minor onslaught of vertigo. Married...and in this beautiful place where she and David first officially met. Ben would be the best man, Glenna would be the matron of honor, Ralphie would be....

Whoa, no-no-no. Lauren wanted to slap herself back to reality.

Granted, it was extremely easy to get swept up in this fantasy, but she and David, given what they'd been through in the past, needed to take things one baby-step at a time. They needed to get to know and accept each other thoroughly. They had issues to resolve that were both practical and emotional.

Was Lauren ready to be a stepmom? Would Ben *like* her as a stepmom? Where would they live? Could David tolerate her friends? Would Chris keep hovering on the fringes of their lives like some vampire? And would she *bite*?

Whoa, hold on again. Lauren reminded herself that she didn't even know if David loved her. Neither of them had made any declaration to the other. Although propelled right now by a powerful tailwind of desire, it seemed they were forcing their feelings to maintain a holding pattern.

Suddenly, her mind back-pedaled to an alarming possibility. What if Herb turned out to be right after all? What if she and David *weren't* "enough alike" to make a real go of it? Maybe it was just too soon for them to have discovered just how different they were. And when they did, the whole dream would just...crumble.

"If we take that step," Lauren said to Harriet, "I can't imagine any other place where we'd take it. Thank you." She gave her mentor a quick, final hug. "For everything."

"You don't have to thank me. If anything, thank Christmas."

Deflated and distracted, Lauren thought, *I think I'll wait a while before I do that....*

* * * *

Lauren decided she'd better swing by her own house to change clothes. As a result, she almost didn't make it to work on time and had to rush to transform herself into Mrs. Claus. Being pressed for time had one advantage: At least she couldn't fret too intensively over Herb's remark. But it was still there, gnawing at her peace of mind, and she knew something must be done either to prove him wrong or prove him right. If she and David were to survive as a couple, they had to be put to the test.

Lauren realized it had little to do with accepting a challenge. Instead, it had everything to do with guaranteeing, for her sake as well as David's, that neither of them would proceed blindly with this relationship and ultimately have to face the same crushing disillusionment that resulted from their first marriages.

Before her shift started, Lauren did have the opportunity to tell Ralphie, who was buzzing around the back corridor, that she'd fulfilled her agreement with him.

He merely stared up at her with his shrewd, twinkling eyes and said, "You didn't need to inform me, sister. As soon as I saw David, I knew." He winked and gave her a poke with his elbow. It should have been one of those playful jabs to the ribs, but, because of his size, he had no choice but to deliver it to her thigh. "It's a guy thing," he said in a lowered voice.

Speaking of David...where was he? Not in his dressing room. But he was obviously here, somewhere, because Ralphie had seen him. Lauren wondered if she should wait for him; they were always supposed to walk out together.

Within a minute of their starting time, he appeared. Lauren had been lost in thought and didn't notice which direction he came from. A little breathlessly, he strode up to her, smiling, and put a hand on her back.

"Hi," he said in a husky voice, packing that single syllable with meaning. It was the kind of greeting that implied shared secrets, the kind of greeting lovers often give each other.

"Hi." Lauren was already beginning to flow into him, starting at the spot where his hand lay.

They didn't have a chance to say anything else. The first bars of "Here Comes Santa Claus" issued from the sound system. Today, instead of walking out arm-in-arm--a quaint but formal entrance--they walked out hand-in-hand.

Mr. and Mrs. Claus really did look like a couple.

As soon as she approached her chair, Lauren knew what had held up David. On the table beside it stood a cased-glass vase, white on the inside and ruby on the outside, that held six red and white roses. She wanted to cry.

David glanced at her, his smile broadening for an instant, and squeezed her hand before he approached the dais.

A concentrated burst of whistling and clapping diverted Lauren's attention. As she arranged her skirts on the chair, she looked into the waiting crowd, which was growing by the minute. "Oh, no," she groaned under her breath.

They were here, all five of them, grinning like lunatics: her sister Glenna, Janet, Darlene, Corliss, and Holly. And they were *in the line*.

Lauren didn't acknowledge them. Not only would she have been breaking character by doing so, she just wanted them to go away. *Damn it, why did I make that phone call to Glenna last night?*

Trying to maintain her Mrs. Claus persona, she admitted a brother and sister who were the first kids in line. As soon as Ralphie got them situated on Santa's lap, he made a beeline for the group of women. Some things in life were just so predictable....

Lauren couldn't help sneaking glances at the bizarre conclave. Every once in a while, one of her friends jumped in a startled way or swatted a hand at waist-level. Every once in a while she caught a glimpse of a little man in an elf suit weaving between them. Holly dipped down, then popped up. Dar seemed to be teary-eyed from laughing. Glenna put a hand on Janet's shoulder and lowered her head, shaking it. Then she convulsed and twisted around. Corliss suddenly broke away from the group--heading, no doubt, for the ladies' room. The people around them were smiling and chortling.

Ralphie was evidently darting like a busy little bee among these flowers. Choking down giggles, Lauren thought his wife must be a very loving and tolerant woman indeed. She was married to a miniature Harpo Marx.

Soon, business-as-usual resumed. The elf couldn't abandon his post for *too* long. In another fifteen minutes the girls, no worse for Ralphie's wear, stood at the head of the line.

"Why are you here?" Lauren asked through clenched teeth. Her persona felt thin and brittle as the first ice of winter, but she had to maintain it.

"We came to see Santa," Darlene pleasantly replied. "Of course."

"Of course," Janet repeated with emphasis.

"I should go freshen up," Holly said. "I don't know *what* that little guy did to me." She dashed away.

Lauren skewered her sister with a glare that belied her smile. "I can't believe you did this."

"Of course you can," Glenna said in a matter-of-fact way. She brushed at her skirt. "You know we can't let you fall head-over-heels for someone until we give him the once-over."

"What good is it going to do to give him the once-over while he's playing Santa Claus?"

Corliss stood serenely, clutching her handbag in front of her. "You underestimate us."

"Besides," Darlene pointed out, "we *tried* doing it the night he came to your house, but you kept running interference." She peered into the gift basket. "Hey, do we get any freebies?"

Lauren's demeanor instantly changed. She became generous and accommodating. It showed on her face. "Sure." Rummaging through the basket, she found the last of the

polka-dotted sacks. She distributed them to her friends, making sure to say, "And here's one for Holly, too."

Even more springy than usual, Ralphie came gamboling over to the red velvet rope. "It's tiiiime!" he trilled. He looked up at the group of women. "Lucky for you Santa has a spacious lap."

Lauren shoved him aside as she rose from her chair. "I'll take them up there. I think Santa needs a more...extensive introduction to these particular children."

Ignoring Ralphie's sulk, Lauren unhooked the rope and walked up the ramp with the women following her. David looked both inquisitive and edgy.

"Santa," Lauren said, leaning toward his ear, "I reluctantly introduce you to the ladies who serenaded us one unforgettable evening." She looked over her shoulder at them, and the look was like a shower of volcanic ash. "They *used* to be my friends." One by one, Lauren led the women up to the throne. "This is my ex-sister, Glenna. This is Janet. This is Darlene, and this is Corliss. Only Holly is missing...for the moment. I'm sure she'll be along soon."

David graciously shook hands with them. "Welcome, and Merry Christmas." His tone became laced with innuendo. "I suppose you wanted to see how Missus Claus and I are doing."

"You got it," Darlene said bluntly.

"We're very particular about our Santas," Janet added.

Corliss nodded. "We don't like just *any* Santas."

Glenna, who was wearing a crafty smile, discreetly remained silent.

Before David could respond, and much to Lauren's chagrin, the women seated themselves two by two on David's thighs. Hesitantly, his arms braced their backs.

He cleared his throat. "Dare I ask what you want for Christmas?"

"A man as nice as you," Janet immediately answered.

"*Are* you a nice man?" Glenna asked quite pointedly.

Lauren, still standing off to one side, withered.

Suddenly, Holly came bounding up the entrance ramp. There was clearly no room for her on Santa's legs, so, with a dainty leap, she bounced up onto his false belly.

Bad move. Lauren covered her eyes, then peeked through her fingers. David grunted in surprise as the mound beneath his jacket skated down to his groin like a landslide, dumping Holly onto the floor. His legs buckled inward. The other four women, losing their balance, scrambled to get to their feet before they met the same fate as Holly.

The crowd in front of the Workshop area was howling with laughter. Mrs. Claus rushed to Santa's aid.

"Are you all right?" she asked, scanning his face for signs of distress.

Sure enough, she found them. David had wrapped his arms around the heap between his legs and was trying to hoist it back up into place. He looked like he had a gigantic hernia.

"Dear," he said in a tight voice, "if we expect to have--" He *oomphed*, struggling. "--a full, healthy, adult relationship--" He twisted his shoulders, shifting and lifting. "--then I have to get this dome back where it belongs."

Lauren's eyes sprang open as the message hit home. The dome had collapsed onto the Claus family jewels.

With the same explosion of strength that allows desperate people to lift cars, she

fell to her knees between Santa's legs and began pushing upward on the dislodged belly. Some quipmeister in the crowd called out, "Hey, I thought this show was suitable for family viewing!" This elicited a couple of whistles and another round of zestful laughter.

Finally, working in concert, she and David managed to muscle the artificial belly into a rough approximation of a belly's proper position. Still, it would have to be re-secured.

Ralphie the experienced elf must have inferred this, because he'd already put the SANTA WILL RETURN signs in place. Lauren stood up and swiped the back of her hand over her forehead. She could feel her wig sitting lopsided on her head. When she looked around, she saw to her astonishment that Holly was lounging quite contentedly on the floor, arms stretched behind her and legs stretched before her, lazily crossed at the ankles. She was munching candy from her treat sack.

Lauren bent over her and snapped, "Get up. What do you think you're doing, watching a sit-com? You almost ruined my sex life!"

Still chewing, Holly looked more bewildered than embarrassed by this scolding. It was a typical reaction. Like a guileless child lacking in both fore- and hindsight, she had difficulty grasping why her behavior sometimes drove her friends to distraction. She jacked up her eyebrows and shrugged. "Hey, no harm, no foul." Then she reached for her shoulder bag...but not before grabbing one more piece of candy from the polka-dotted sack.

Lauren's anger instantly waned when she remembered *which* treat bags she'd handed out to her pesky friends. A sly, private smile gradually replaced her scowl. Holly's fingers went to her mouth one last time...slipping in a tiny stick of dynamite.

The other women, who'd been standing off to the side and tittering nonstop, moved in to scoop Holly up. Every last one of them had streaked and smudged makeup from too many tears of laughter. And some of them were also munching candy from the treat bags.

"Santa's got nice hard thighs," Janet said, leaning toward Lauren.

Holly's jaw began to slow.

"Smells good, too," Corliss added.

Holly's face began to pucker.

"Oh, why don't you go to the bathroom or something?" Lauren shot back, still irked by their onslaught and still watching Holly out of the corner of her eye.

Glenna studied her sister. "What are you looking at?" she asked suspiciously.

Eyes bugging, Holly let out a guttural *aack* and slapped a hand over her mouth.

"That," Lauren said.

Eyes bugging further and now watering, too, Holly mutely extended her hand, palm up, toward her semicircle of friends. A glistening crimson blob lay in the middle of her palm.

"That came out of *you*?" Dar cried in alarm, and Corliss added, "Omigod, she coughed up a blood clot!"

Trying to convey both an explanation and a warning, Holly was pointing with her unslimed hand at the candy sack Glenna, out of all the women, hadn't yet sampled. Glenna held it up and glanced at it with an uncomprehending expression darkened by lingering shreds of horror. The other women suddenly began to clutch their throats and make gagging sounds.

Glenna was the only one who turned her eyes elsewhere, the only one who smiled. She looked at Lauren and quietly asked, "Are they going to be all right?"

"Of course," Lauren replied with a small shrug. "It's just candy. No harm, no foul."

Glenna surreptitiously dropped her small bag of candy into a litter bin.

Lauren winked at her sister, then hurried off the North Pole set.

Once in the rear hallway, she decided to see if David needed any help. It appeared he and Ralphie had everything under control. Since they were both standing, she sat in David's chair to repositioned her wig.

"Thank you for the flowers, by the way," Lauren said, reaching out to touch David's arm.

He smiled, totally unruffled now. "You're welcome. You've got quite a lively bunch of friends, by the way."

"Yeah, baby," Ralphie agreed as he fiddled with David's belt.

Lauren's sigh turned into a soft chuckle and she wagged her head. She was finally able to start seeing the humor in this. "I'm really sorry. Their showing up here was totally unexpected."

"I'm sure it was," David said. "I don't suppose the boyfriend police ever give advance warning before they stage a raid. So tell me about them."

"Well, let's see.... Glenna, my sister, is an English professor. She's still pretty much a newlywed who's so blissfully married it almost makes me sick sometimes. Her husband used to be an exotic dancer. The girls are all in lust with him."

"No kidding!" David said. "A female professor married to a male stripper? *That's* a turnaround."

"Well, he's sort of retired now," Lauren said. "But in any case, Glenna's is an enviable situation. Corliss designs and makes beautiful one-of-a-kind dolls. She's a true domestic goddess, married forever to a big bull of a guy. They've more or less successfully raised three kids together. Holly, who's younger than the rest of us and can be a real ditz, has a thriving website-design business."

"Holly...she's the one who nearly castrated me, right?" David asked.

"Yeah, that's the one, but try not to hold it against her," Lauren laughed.

"Darlene's a widowed and remarried administrative assistant at Northwestern Mutual Life, and Janet's a divorced paralegal who can't seem to get her groove back. Holly is kind of the newcomer to the group. She did Corly's website--maybe five, six years ago--and Corly referred me to her."

"Mmm. So...are *you* in lust with your brother-in-law? Like the others?" David's follow-up question was strenuously casual.

Ralphie gave Lauren an amused, knowing glance.

She smiled. "Not really. In fact, I helped get them together. I mean, he *is* a gorgeous guy--and talented and intelligent--but the operative phrase here is *brother-in-law*. There must be some psychological filtering process or something that makes it impossible for me to feel attracted to my friends' and relatives' partners."

Was she imagining it, or did David's body seem to relax a little?

"I think it's called *having morals*," he said.

It seemed sophomoric, but Lauren found this hint of jealousy gratifying. She wondered how green he'd turn once he met Glenna's husband...

The little man slapped the small of David's back. "Okay, boss, you're good to go."
"Thanks a lot."

Lauren, too, was tidied up. She turned to Ralphie. "Do you suppose we'll still be allowed our standard break?"

"I should think so," he said. "This wasn't really a break. It was an emergency."

"Good," Lauren said, mostly to herself.

She needed to have a rather important talk with David.

* * * *

Thank goodness the next couple of hours held no surprises. Lauren already felt wrung out, and she suspected David did too. But maybe her exhaustion stemmed as much from her own nagging concerns as from the antics of her friends.

They're not enough alike...

She and David walked to the break room together, holding hands. Lauren looked and felt a bit wan. Even David noticed it. She assured him she was all right.

He grabbed a couple of jerky sticks and an apple and sat down. She pulled a small can of V-8 from the fridge and sat across from him.

"David, do you think we're alike?" she asked without preface.

His answer was immediate and unqualified. "No. Next question." Chewing, he watched Lauren. His jaw slowed. *Oops*. He could tell by the expression on her face that was *not* the right answer.

"David, we have to stop having sex. At least for a while."

Stunned, he gaped at her. That had *really* not been the right answer. "Wh...what?" Hell, he'd barely been able to get his jeans on this morning. And now, enforced abstinence? Was she crazy? He'd drown in his own juices!

"We need to concentrate on each other, as multifaceted people," Lauren pronounced.

David's expression shaded toward incredulity. "Excuse me, but...did I miss something over the past twenty-four hours?" How much more concentrated could their attention be, for crying out loud?

"Don't be flip," she said wearily.

"I'm *not* being!"

Lauren realized it was true. He was just overwhelmed by confusion. "I'm sorry. That was unfair. This isn't easy for me, either, you know. David--" She reached across the table to touch his hand, then decided against it. "We need to get to know each other. Better. A *lot* better. Too much hot and sweaty sex could very easily muddy the waters."

Lauren scrunched her face when she realized how strange that metaphor sounded.

David stared at her. He was still hung up on the phrase *hot and sweaty sex*. It alone was arousing him. *Can't you see you've awakened a sleeping giant?* he wanted to cry. But that sounded so self-serving and brutish. David tried to ignore what was going on below his waist and consider what Lauren had said. By God, he'd do whatever it took to hang on to her, even if it meant--

Oh shit, he thought dismally, not back to *that* routine again.... But he also had to do whatever was necessary to keep Santa Claus from, well, shaming his jolly, horny old self.

With a mighty sigh, he dropped his head to his hands. "Okay," he mumbled into his hot and sweaty palms. "If you think we'll benefit from it, I won't touch you."

Lauren could feel her look of consternation. "Well...um...I didn't suggest we can't ever *touch* each other. Once in a while would be okay. In a...friendly sort of way."

David's head snapped up. "Hey, don't start stretching the rules. Don't tell me I can *maybe* touch you in a *limited* way under *certain* circumstances. Because if I start, I might not be able to stop." He dropped his head again. Oh, God, why was she doing this?

Relenting, Lauren did put her fingertips on his hand.

"Don't touch me," David muttered.

Lauren smiled sympathetically. "It won't be that bad. We'll still keep seeing each other. We can still have fun. How do you think people made it through their courtships a hundred, two hundred years ago, when sex was absolutely taboo outside of marriage?"

David couldn't let *that* question pass. "Have you seen those tintype and Daguerreotype and cabinet photos of men and women in the eighteen hundreds? Have you actually *looked* at their faces?"

Lauren blinked at him. "Yes, so...?"

David tossed up a hand. "Well, there's the answer to your question. Those were some *mad* people. That's what sexual repression did to them. It made them ornery mad and drove them stark, raving mad!"

David knew damned well that the subjects in old photos looked the way they did because *a.*, it wasn't fashionable or practicable to smile while having one's picture taken and *b.*, cosmetic enhancement, which hadn't evolved very far anyway, was largely unfamiliar to them and an unnecessary expense. But David liked the way those dour faces made his point for him, so he let the specious argument stand.

Watching him with a half-smile and letting him rant, Lauren didn't refute the ridiculous assertion. David just needed to vent. Besides, it was entertaining.

He was finally calming down. Maybe this wasn't a thoroughly bad idea. But.... "I'll sure miss kissing you," he said ruefully.

Lauren was touched. "Ditto. But it shouldn't take too long to discover if our souls wear matching colors."

"I beg your pardon?" David asked. He obviously hadn't understood her comment.

"Never mind. I just think we'll know real soon."

He groaned. "I sure hope so. I mean...if you only knew how much I want you...*soon* isn't soon enough."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As the days of December marched inevitably toward Christmas, David and Lauren embarked on the new, chaste phase of their relationship. They continued to spend time together, both at work and outside the mall. They went out to dinner, to movies, to a Christmas concert at a large church. They went sledding and ice-skating.

And they talked. More than anything, they talked. But they didn't speak of love. As if by some unstated agreement, they proceeded with caution.

Once Lauren had settled into her Mrs. Claus role, her workdays passed more or less smoothly. And David had virtually become Santa. They were happy. Lauren had even hung out with the two Dawson boys one Sunday. Much to David's delight, she and Ben were thrilled to see each other again and got along as if she were his favorite aunt. Ben would be spending Christmas Eve with his mother, which would allow Lauren and David to spend it with each other, but on Christmas Day they would all three celebrate together.

The only event that rocked them back on their heels took place on the twenty-third of December--"Black Friday," as Lauren later thought of it.

Christine showed up at the mall.

She hadn't really been pressing her case with David--it would've been difficult, considering how much time he'd been spending with Lauren--but she hadn't really abandoned it, either. Occasionally she'd call, wanting to discuss some manufactured issue relating to Ben. She even suggested the three of them spend Christmas Eve *and* Christmas Day together, a proposal David soundly rejected.

Without going into detail, he told her he was involved with someone else--a fact she may have already either known or inferred, depending on how much Ben had yakked about it. But Christine, given her degree of myopic self-involvement, refused to accept the possibility that any other woman could be as captivating as she. Besides, it just wasn't *fair*--her behavior seemed to suggest--that some pretender could usurp the queen's throne.

David realized he couldn't stand her.

But there she was, on the day before Christmas Eve, mincing around in front of the North Pole Workshop, trying to catch Santa's eye. David made sure she didn't get the chance. Actually, he wouldn't have put it past her to approach one of the adults in line and ask if she could "borrow your kid" just so she'd have a reason to approach the dais and hover around him. Or, worse yet, sit on his lap.

Of course, Lauren spotted her too. Christine was as hard to miss as a blob of mustard on a white uniform. She clearly liked drawing attention to herself. She just as clearly was trying to draw David's attention to herself.

Lauren's face blanched beneath her makeup as a terrifying thought struck. David's churning hormones had been running at high tide--or so he'd led Lauren to believe--ever since they'd make love and she'd started them churning. Then, abruptly, she'd cut him off, denying him an outlet.

Now, if that unscrupulous sleaze parading around in her miniskirt and spike-heeled boots were to engineer just a minute alone with David--*just one minute*--she'd surely use the opportunity to slap her hands on whatever part of his sensitized anatomy she could reach.

Would David...*could* David be weak and shallow enough to give in?

Lauren saw him glance at her, as if he'd been tracking her thoughts. If nothing else, they'd become almost preternaturally adept at reading each other over the past six weeks or so. She thought she saw him roll up his eyes.

Doesn't mean a damn thing. Could just be a diversionary tactic. Still, directed by her bitter experience with weak and shallow Bill, Lauren's inner voice was telling her to be on her guard.

A short time later, during a lull, Ralphie strolled over to her. "I need you to try getting something off my suit," he said.

"What is it?" Lauren ran her eyes over the elf costume but didn't see anything unusual.

"I don't know," Ralphie said. "Maybe a glob of candy. I'm sure it came off of some kid's hand. I can feel it through the fabric. It's scratching me and driving me nuts, but I can't reach it." He turned around.

Lauren saw an electric-pink blot stuck onto the jacket, roughly over Ralphie's left shoulder blade. She tried grabbing it to yank it off, but it was too flat against the fabric and adhered tenaciously. She started scraping at it with her right thumbnail. She scraped at it from all sides, trying to get the nail at least marginally wedged beneath the blob so it would pop off.

Instead, the fingernail popped off. Lauren cursed as Ralphie scooped it up from the floor.

"Thanks for trying," he said. "But we have to get back to work now."

A few more sets of parents and children had approached the red velvet rope. Lauren wanted to remind Ralphie to give her the plastic fingernail, but he'd already gone back to Santa's throne. She turned to the business at hand, trying to keep her unadorned thumb concealed from view.

Christine the stalker, she noticed, was now sitting on one of the benches encircling a fountain. She was starting to look bored. *Good.*

Her hair was the color of coal, so she must've recently had a dye job. What with the black hair, black mascara, black skirt, and black boots, interrupted by the blood-red blouse, she looked like a strip of tar on the road at an accident scene.

Hideous, Lauren thought with a shudder. Morticia Addams without the classy hauteur. No matter how hungry David might be, it simply wasn't conceivable that he could go after that kind of bait.

As she handed out another bag of treats, Lauren saw Ralphie walking in Chris's direction. *Now* what's the little man up to, she wondered. Does he know that's David's ex? And just as she was wondering, Ralphie turned and looked toward the dais...somewhat furtively, Lauren thought. Santa's eyes flickered up to him, then down again. Was David smirking?

Puzzled and intrigued, she stared at the unfolding drama. Chris was indeed Ralphie's target. He hopped up onto the bench beside her. Lauren saw his mouth working. Watching him with a mixture of scorn and supercilious amusement, Christine listened. Ralphie extended his flattened hands, palms up; he turned them down. Ralphie talked some more, and Chris's head lowered a bit. Then Ralphie's left hand rose, moved past her right ear, and produced...

...a coin. Of course.

Now Lauren *knew* what the little man was up to. A wide, gleeful smile spread across her face. She saw David look at her. She saw that his smile mirrored her own.

A few minutes later, probably tiring of her vigil, Chris got up from the bench. Maybe she was going to the bathroom. Maybe she was going to do some shopping. Maybe she was going to leave. It suddenly didn't matter to Lauren *what* she did.

Because sticking up from her fried and unnaturally black hair, like a diminutive Indian-brave feather, was a glittering red oval proclaiming HO in stark white. And it was there for all the mall to see.

Lauren thought it was a strange way for David to pledge his troth to her, but it sure as hell was effective.

* * * *

That evening, as Lauren took more time to be alone, important answers came to her and crucial issues were resolved.

A soul's colors can mutate--the secondary ones, anyway--and that could be either good or bad. In her case, the changes had been small...and good. But it was the primary color or colors that remained constant and always proved the most significant.

Why hadn't she seen this truth earlier? Because, Lauren realized, her relationship with David had to run a course it was *meant* to run, and everything that had happened was ultimately for the best.

She also recalled something Harriet had said about Herb, an observation that should have quelled her compatibility anxieties then and there: *Sometimes he can't see the forest for the trees.*

Now, she would wrap her present for David, the man she adored, the man she knew was completely right for her...beyond any shadow of a doubt.

She couldn't wait for tomorrow to come. She couldn't wait for Christmas Eve.

* * * *

Black Friday became Blue Saturday as more snow fell, its glaze imparting a moody gleam, like abalone shell, in the subsequent moonlight. There wasn't much Lauren needed to do before David arrived for their private Christmas Eve get-together. He claimed he'd catch something to eat before coming over, probably in deference to Lauren's aversion to cooking, but she nevertheless picked up a freshly smoked Lake Michigan salmon, bakery-made dark rye bread, and a sinfully rich cheesecake.

She'd thought about getting oysters. She had a vague notion they were appropriate for the holidays and rugged men liked them. Plus, they may have served a good purpose at this stage of her and David's relationship--a stage he wasn't yet aware of. But each one of her senses abhorred oysters, and she didn't know if David even liked the slimy, tongue-like things. Worse yet, they could be tainted. Why drop money on gag-button food, Lauren reasoned, when there's cheesecake?

She and David only had to work two hours that day, and those hours marked the end of their tenure as Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus. Lauren was both relieved and saddened. David had the same mixed reaction. What spared them a weepy conclusion to the experience was, ironically, an extension of the experience: the prospect of going to Green

Bay with Herb and Harriet; an invitation from Ralphie to join him and his wife Marianne for New Year's Eve; and, most important, their own togetherness.

As she showered and dressed in preparation for David's arrival, Lauren had a feeling she'd soon be starting her *own* scrapbook.

Every part of her house seemed as right as it could be. Lauren drifted from room to room making sure. Yes, all was clean and subtly scented and atmospherically lit. Soft Christmas music lilted through the air.

Lauren didn't want David to enter through the mudroom. Thinking he might just do that, since it was the only part of her house he was familiar with, she stationed herself at the front door to watch for him. He was a special, a *very* special first-time guest. Befitting his status, he should be greeted at the main entrance.

When Lauren saw cones of light swing into and creep up the driveway, she stepped onto the porch. Her heart was pattering. Lord, how she loved the man. Tonight she would tell him so. She must. To be true to herself, she must tell him. Her gift, she hoped, would pave the way.

David caught the dearest of deer in his headlight beams as he approached her rustic hideaway. He didn't even chide himself for his hokey pun-slash-metaphor. She was so pretty and he was so moonstruck even the mushiest poetry would've seemed Shakespearean.

Lauren's clothing was surprisingly casual. David didn't know what exactly he'd expected her to be wearing, but it wasn't this oddly appealing Saturday-chores outfit. The more he looked at it--the pale, boot-cut jeans; the tailored green-and-gray checked shirt--the more he liked it. Her hair looked luminescent in the moonlight. He suspected her eyes did, too.

He swung his car to the left and parked in front of a garage any man would envy. Walking around to the trunk, he opened it and hoisted out a foil-covered pan on top of which Lauren's gift rested. Slamming the trunk shut, he turned toward the house.

Lauren still stood there, in a pool of porch light, waiting to greet him. She lifted her hand in a dainty wave and called out, "Hi."

"Hi."

David paused as his mind took a short detour into fantasyland. There he found an irresistible image of Lizzie the lonely ranch wife on the broad, weathered porch of the Ponderosa--*or Double-Shot Bar or whatever the hell those places were called*. She is wringing her handkerchief as she gazes anxiously into the dusty vistas surrounding her Wisconsin--*no, wait, this isn't a dairy-farm fantasy--her Oklahoma homestead*. With a heart full of longing and tight, faded, butt-hugging jeans frayed at the knees from praying and high heels--*no, very impractical--sturdy work boots worn from pacing*, she is awaiting the return of her man, Hank, from a long and grueling cattle drive.

Then--*could it be?*--she sees him approaching, saddle slung over one shoulder, parting the dust with his wide--*ah, go for it--his massive chest*. A glistening tear of relief like a perfect pear-shaped diamond forms at the corner of each of her eyes. Hank swaggers closer, closer--*step by step, inch by inch--until he can see her breasts heaving beneath the threadbare--very threadbare; hell, almost transparent--fabric of her homespun shirt--no, that's not going to work; he should notice the heaving breasts first and then see the tears*.

"David...?" Lauren took a tentative step to the edge of the porch.

In any case, she's about to bound into the scrubby yard and throw herself in ecstasy into his dusty, massive arms and let herself be swung--*wait, he's still got that damn saddle over his shoulder!*--limp and pulsing with desire, in lazy circles in the sky--*no, dummy, they're on the ground.*

"David, what are you doing standing out there?"

The End.

"Oh, I guess I'm just a bit awestruck by your house." He readjusted the weight in his arms--massive as they were, they were being heckled by a dull ache--and began walking toward the porch. It *was* rather broad but not very weatherworn.

Lauren grasped the rail and kept an eye on her footing as she descended to meet him. "Can I help you with any of that?"

"No, no. Go back up." David motioned with his head. "It's a little slippery out here." He did enjoy the echoing crunch of his shoes on the walkway, a woodsy mélange of shredded bark and ice crystals.

Lauren backed up the stairs. As David stepped up to join her, she reached toward him to take one of the things he was carrying. She hesitated. A gift box was on top. The bow looked more detonated than made--a huge explosion of wide, looping red ribbon--and Lauren reacted with a new burst of love for him. But it just wouldn't be seemly for her to snatch it out of the giver's arms. Instead, she opened the door for him and let him pass through.

"Here, lay your burden down," she said, motioning toward a high-backed bench against one wall, "and I'll take your jacket."

David stamped his non-boot-shod feet on the sisal doormat before setting the pan and box on the bench. He slipped off the suede jacket and handed it to her. As Lauren turned toward the coat rack to hang it, she swiped it against her face and inhaled. Oh, she most definitely wanted to wear it. With nothing on underneath.

"What's in the pan?" she asked, turning to face him. "It's still warm. Smells wonderful, too."

He walked up to her, grasped her fingers and gave her a kiss on the cheek. The hands-off rule had relaxed somewhat over the weeks but they still hadn't ventured much beyond platonic touching. It frustrated David no end, but he respected her wishes.

"I baked apple strudel for breakfast," he said. Immediately he realized how presumptuous that sounded. "Well, *your* breakfast." Modestly, he shrugged. "Just a little something special for Christmas Day."

Lauren gave him a gracious-hostess smile. "You don't have to drive home tonight. I have plenty of room." She caught the fingers of his left hand with the fingers of her right. "Come on. Let's sit by the tree."

David grabbed her present and let himself be led. His eyes made an appreciative sweep of the house's exposed-log interior. Most of the rooms, he knew, were not visible from where he was. But he did have a full view of the soaring living area and a partial glimpse of the loft overhanging it--Lauren's workspace, judging by the computer. As they moved closer to the mammoth and resplendent Christmas tree, he saw a spacious and well-appointed kitchen.

Tim the Treacherous had been right. The house was incredible. David felt pleasantly engulfed by it, the same way he felt when he took a walk in the woods or dove into a clean lake.

"Lauren, gosh...I don't know what to say about this place. And that tree...that ain't no Charlie Brown Christmas tree."

They stopped beside it, and David put his present beneath it.

"I almost like yours better," Lauren said humbly. She touched his forearms with both hands. "Are you hungry?"

David hesitated just for a second. "You didn't cook, did you? I mean...no, actually, I'm not hungry at the moment."

She grinned. "I have smoked salmon and fresh-baked rye bread. From the deli. If you're hungry."

David raised his eyebrows. "Now I *am* getting a little hungry. But maybe later."

"Would you like some *vin chaud*?"

"Some what?"

"It's sugared red wine that's been heated on the stove and flavored with cinnamon sticks and orange and lemon slices. Very French."

David inhaled. There did seem to be spicy filaments of flavored steam coming from the kitchen. "Is that what I've been smelling?"

"That and the candles."

David was tempted... "A little later," he finally said.

"Okay." Lauren dropped to a cross-legged sit. "It *is* good. Once you taste it, you'll want more."

David grinned but held his tongue.

Lauren's cheeks flamed. "If that was a double entendre," she murmured, "it wasn't intentional."

"But it was a good one nonetheless," David pointed out.

Getting impatient, Lauren looked up at him again. "You're stalling. Is anything wrong?"

David hesitated before sitting on the floor beside her. "You're not, um...expecting any more company, are you?"

Lauren smiled at him as if he were a child who should know better. "David, you're here because I like you, not because I want to torture you." She tugged on his sleeve, urging him to lower himself to her level...so to speak.

He sank to his knees, facing her. "So, you don't think anyone will just...drop in?"

"Believe me, a warning was broadcast some time ago." Lauren swiveled toward the tree and lifted his gift from behind the white picket tree-fence. She set it in front of him. The candle flames wavered for an instant, like molten spearheads, then stood upright once more.

David glanced around the room. He had a sense of impending...what? Lauren watched him serenely, her hands resting on the edges of the box.

"Here." She put the box on his lap. "For you."

David looked down at it and wondered dimly why his heart was sprinting. "The box is so beautiful, seems a shame to open it."

The wrapping *was* a work of art, he thought. Like the mudroom, like the whole house, and like the lady of the house. The silhouettes of various birds had been stenciled in black and white on handmade paper of sea-foam green. They were all birds that wintered over, David noticed: chickadees, cardinals, blue jays, nut-hatches, and crows, which were, of course, larger than the rest. The box's binding looked like thin strips of

birch bark. In lieu of a bow, the top was ornamented with berry-laden twigs inserted at odd angles beneath the strips. A real nest sat among them, but not in the center.

David smiled. *Of course not in the center.*

"But you'll have to open it to see what's inside," Lauren said. Her unblinking eyes were fathomless, like the clear, gray-green lakes that were reputed to have no bottoms.

"I wish I could take a picture of it," David murmured.

Lauren bounced up from the floor and jogged to the stairway that led to the loft. Within a minute she was coming back down. As she resumed her position, she handed David an expensive digital camera.

"Just get the present *opened*," she said almost pleadingly.

Feeling a little foolish, David snapped a photo of the box. The camera's memory would be full before the evening was over.

It was like desecrating a sacred place, David thought guiltily as he began disassembling the wrapping. He saw a white cardboard box covered with blue lettering and black bar codes. In this humble commercial container that had been consecrated by Lauren's hands, a food distributor had once delivered chicken tenders.

David looked up at her and smiled. Lauren smiled back. She lifted the camera from the floor and took a picture of him. He lifted the box flaps. The camera whirred and clicked. He carefully unfolded layers of tissue paper. And he froze.

Whirr-click.

"Don't," he whispered, because there were tears in his eyes.

Nestled within and almost blending with the tissue paper was Lauren's white crow.

"It isn't just *for* you," she said. "It *is* you."

After sniffing once and dragging his knuckles across his eyes, David almost frenetically wheeled to the side and snatched up his present for Lauren. He thrust it at her.

She took one picture then tore at the wrapping. A shoebox, this one. The tissue paper was red. She dug through it, then looked at David in disbelief.

"I made it," he said in a thick voice. "Ben painted it."

Reverentially, she lifted the hand-carved white crow from its nest of red.

"It isn't just *for* you, it *is* you."

"I think," Lauren said tentatively, "that we might be trying to tell each other something."

Slowly, David nodded. "I think we've been trying to tell each other something for the past month."

They fell silent, but their eyes would not release each other.

"Dear?" he said quietly.

"Yes, Santa?"

"Have I told you lately that I love you?"

Lauren briefly held her breath. "No," she said as she exhaled.

"Well, I'm telling you now."

Lauren's eyes were brimming. "You upstaged me," she said on a crippled laugh, then reached out to touch his face. "I love you, too. Very, very much."

David closed his hand over hers where it rested on his cheek. He slid it to his mouth and kissed the palm. Lauren boosted herself into the dish made by his crossed legs and crossed her legs behind him. They wrapped their arms around each other. Lauren

buried her face between his jaw and shoulder. She felt David's lips touch her ear. It was as if they were sealed together, and she had never in all her life felt so thoroughly grounded and centered and at peace.

"Seems to me," he murmured, "that two white crows are meant to be together."

"Seems that way to me, too," Lauren said into his neck, then kissed it.

"It must be nature's way."

"Mm-hm." Lauren shifted a bit to make better contact with him. "So I guess if they're together, they have to spend the night together, too. Roost, so to speak."

David was doing some shifting of his own. "Yes, I think that's how it goes. And then they drink *vin chaud* and feast on apple strudel in the morning. And then they live happily ever after, hidden by the falling snow."

They moved their heads until their mouths found each other. In the distance, sleigh bells jingled. Or so it seemed.

"Merry Christmas, dear lady," David whispered.

"Merry Christmas, sweet Santa."

~ THE END ~

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* * *

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