

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE

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Holiday Voices

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TREASURES OF THE HEART – AN ANTHOLOGY
THE SHERIFF TAKES A WIFE

One Magical Night

**By
Nancy Pirri**

‘Give All to Love
Obey thy Heart’
-Ralph Waldo Emerson

*November, 1892
A Summit Hill Mansion
St. Paul, Minnesota*

The sound of breaking glass tore Anne Preston out of her boredom from where she sat upon a velvet divan, beside her Aunt Mildred at the Calhoun family residence.

“What in the world...” her aunt began, staring toward the banquet table where several servants had been working.

Shards of glass glistened where they lay scattered across the ballroom floor, the servants working quickly to sweep them up. In the midst of the pandemonium a man stood, head and shoulders above the other guests.

Anne’s eyes widened and her heart raced when she saw the reason for the accident; it appeared the Calhouns’ only son, Marcus Hall Calhoun III, had come home, after a three-year long absence.

The servants finished cleaning up the mess and now stood stock-still and silent, as did the musicians and the guests.

Marcus was still darkly handsome, still unorthodox in appearance with his hair falling to his shoulders. Yet, he was dressed appropriately for the occasion, his massive shoulders clad in austere black. Sparkling

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white accents in his shirt and cravat made a stark contrast against his attire and coloring.

Anne smiled when she saw the low-heeled shoes on his feet instead of fashionably tall-heeled boots most men of the day wore to increase their height. His head, covered in dark hair, was just a fraction below the archway. Contrarily, Marcus had tried unsuccessfully, since adolescence, to conceal his impressive height due to most people's reactions upon meeting him; awe, mixed with fear.

She had never feared her gentle giant. He'd always been her savior; had always protected her, until three years ago, when he married Priscilla Ames, of the prestigious banking family of New York City and moved away. It had been considered a perfect match; the banking family marrying into the Calhoun railroad dynasty.

Up until this moment, Anne had been sitting, tense and miserable, her gloved hands clutched into fists. Oh, how she hated these soirees! For the third season since her coming out at eighteen years, she had been forced to sit beside her maiden aunt at social events, a false, but brilliant smile pasted on her lips, waiting for gentlemen to sign her dance card.

She couldn't dance as the other girls did for she had been born with a limp that hindered such enjoyment, though her aunt had insisted she at least try— if she were asked. But no man ever approached her. Truth be told, she'd been left on the shelf. Anne was inclined to believe she would forever remain a spinster. Her aunt had other ideas, though, and had insisted she have one final season before going into 'seclusion'. Lord, one would think she was on death's door rather than just a wallflower!

Though the 'coming out' season had been interrupted because of the impending holiday season, Anne had still been obliged to attend this ball with her aunt. She was utterly thankful for the six-week reprieve, but cringed at the thought of the season resuming after Christmas. She'd been trying to find a way to avoid any more such events, but had yet to arrive at an excuse.

Beneath her sapphire taffeta skirt, her slight deformity wasn't noticeable, one limb being shorter than the other. She had felt utterly wretched and self-conscious moments ago as she watched other young ladies, accompanied by handsome young men, dancing across the shiny wood floor. Fortunately, her melancholy had fled upon seeing Marcus.

"Pray, don't look at him." Her aunt fluttered her fan across her bosom. "And smile, girl."

Anne looked away from Marcus and aimed a smile at the dance

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floor.

“Now pretend you are enjoying yourself.”

“I’m not, but I’ve no doubt I shall be soon, now that Marcus has arrived,” Anne replied, gritting her teeth in a parody of a smile. “Auntie, please, pause your fanning a moment. I’m freezing.”

“Poppycock,” her aunt said huffily. “Lord but it’s hot. The Calhouns should open a window or two.”

Anne kept the smile on her face even as she rose from the divan. She took one small step, but stopped when she felt a tugging on her skirts. She looked back and found Aunt Mildred’s hand clutching it.

“Where do you think you’re off to?” her aunt inquired.

“To find out about those windows, of course.”

“Why, you can’t do that. It would be impolite!” her aunt protested.

“But you said—”

“Never mind what I said and sit down.”

“I’m going to greet Marcus.”

Her aunt tugged fiercely at Anne’s skirts, forcing her to sit.

“I won’t allow you to chase after that rakehell. Our family name will be besmirched if you do.”

Anne arched one eyebrow. “Why? Because he divorced Priscilla?”

“That is only one reason.”

“Or, perhaps because he made a fuss when he learned the babe Priscilla birthed was not his child?”

“Good grief, girl, stop it!”

“Or, perhaps it was the duel with Priscilla’s lover,” Anne said.

When her aunt’s face turned a mottled red Anne decided she had better not say another word—or face the consequences if she did. Her aunt had always been quick to anger and never spared the rod on her niece.

Her aunt snapped, “Heavens, he injured the man, and a duke from England no less! Marcus is very lucky the man hadn’t died.”

“All you have heard are rumors, Aunt Mildred. Let us give the poor man the benefit of the doubt before we judge him,” Anne said, rising to her feet once more. “Marcus and I have been friends since childhood. He’s always treated me kindly when others have not.”

Her aunt stumbled to her feet. “I won’t allow you to speak to him, I said.”

Anne narrowed her eyes. “Oh, but the choice is mine, not yours. Besides, I’ve yet to dance this evening. And I plan on enjoying myself

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for the remainder of it—immensely.”

Anne looked away from her aunt, noting the expressions on the faces of the guests; some filled with curiosity, others with disdain, all still staring at Marcus.

Silence filled the ballroom.

Anne stood straight as she could in an effort to minimize Marcus’s height advantage over her small stature. Tilting up her chin she plucked up her skirts and carefully made her way across the expanse of ballroom toward Marcus, her aunt’s protestations fading as she crossed the room, trying to minimize her limp.

Her heart gladdened when his eyes lit up at the sight of her and he took two halting steps to meet her.

* * * *

Marcus smiled at the sweet vision moving toward him, her sapphire gown simple and unadorned, yet tasteful. Long white gloves to her elbows lovingly encasing her pretty arms. Sweeping this charming friend of his younger sister into his arms and whisking her around the dance floor appealed to him and would serve a two-fold desire on his part; he loved socializing with Miss Anne Preston and, she would most definitely cheer him up. Her wry sense of humor always managed to help him see the lighter side of things.

He took in the auburn curls on her head, the glittering blue eyes and her perfectly bow-shaped mouth. Anne had changed he decided, sweeping an intent look over her body. The baby fat had disappeared and now a beautiful woman with pretty, gentle curves stood before him.

Anne was like a sister to him, and had always been a good friend. But suddenly he wondered what it would be like to want more from her. *Impossible*, he chastised himself. He shook away his wayward thoughts and took her small, delicate hands in his large ones, careful not to crush them.

“Dance with me,” she said, her sweet voice washing over him.

His smile widened. He couldn’t help it, he truly couldn’t. The woman had always had the ability to make the sun come out for him, even on the gloomiest of days. Laughing aloud he drew her into his arms and proceeded to dance with her, careful of her frailty. He didn’t notice the lack of music at first, but when he did, a moment later, the musicians started playing again and other guests joined in the dancing.

“You look marvelous,” he murmured.

“So do you,” she said bluntly, giving him a saucy smile.

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They danced, his eyes on her face which had turned a rosy-pink color, causing her freckles to come to the surface. God, how she had hated them while he'd always thought them adorable.

"So, sweet Anne, have you been staying out of trouble?" he inquired.

She raised her brow. "Now, who's calling the kettle black?"

"Tell me you don't believe all of those ridiculous stories you've heard about me."

"Tell me not a one of them isn't true."

He sighed. "I'm afraid I can't do that. I've changed, Anne. I'm not the same man you've known and idolized for years," he said dryly.

"Of course you are," she snapped. "Stop speaking nonsense."

His smile slid away. Unconsciously, he tightened his hand around her waist.

Anne gasped, dropped her skirt and placed her hand against his, fingers curved as she tried prying loose his harsh grasp. Her lips trembled and then her body. "Stop, Marcus. You're hurting me."

He immediately released the pressure and drew her close against him, but gently. She plucked up her skirts once more and moved carefully across the floor in his arms.

His lips brushed the top of her ear. "Sorry, sweet, I didn't mean that. It's just that—"

Anne pulled back and stared into his eyes. "What?"

"*She* always told me I was ridiculous."

"You are speaking of..."

"My wife, yes."

"Oh!" She groaned, "I'm sorry, Marcus."

"Don't worry. I'll live on without her."

The dance ended too soon for Marcus's taste, but it didn't matter. He would just dance another with her, but first he required a glass of something that would help him forget his troubles. He took her hand again and walked with her across the ballroom, to the refreshment tables.

"Champagne?"

Anne covertly looked around and gave a quick nod.

Marcus laughed as he handed a glass of pale gold champagne to her, then plucked one up for himself. "Don't worry. Your aunt is being entertained, as we speak, by my sisters."

"Thank heavens." Anne took a quick sip, then a longer one.

"Easy now," Marcus warned. "I've a feeling you aren't used to

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imbibing in spirits.”

Anne just laughed and took another healthy sip. “I should have known Emily and Beth would have intervened.”

“Really? Now why do you think they did that, do you suppose?” He looked with interest at Anne’s sudden, discomfited expression.

“Bluntly put, your sisters have always wanted us to—”

“Wanted us to what?”

“Oh, don’t be so wretchedly oblique! You know what.”

“Ah, but I don’t,” he drawled, bending close to her ear, “But I believe I can make a near guess. Shall I?”

Anne grabbed his hand and pulled him along with her, drawing him out to the veranda.

“There are too many eavesdroppers, I’m afraid.”

Marcus laughed aloud when she sat upon a wicker divan. He joined her and a jolt of pleasure shot through him when his thigh touched hers. She immediately moved away from him, to the opposite end of the divan. He wanted to pursue her, why, he had no idea. Perhaps it was because she no longer resembled a young girl.

She smoothed her skirts, then folded her hands in her lap. “Now you may speak.”

He inclined his head, keeping his laughter at bay. She was a sly little thing and cheeky. He’d always liked that about Anne. “I was about to say my sisters are playing matchmaker, aren’t they?”

Anne nodded miserably. “Yes, they have always wanted us to be together, which is an utterly ridiculous idea.”

Ridiculous. There was that word again. He thought over the idea of the two of them together and didn’t think it all that ridiculous.

“Why?” His eyes traveled lower as he gazed upon her slim, delicate throat and the gentle curves of her shoulders; the smooth, creamy skin of her breasts revealed by her décolletage.

She blustered, “Because, because, well, we grew up same as siblings, that’s why!”

“Not quite,” he said dryly.

He sank against the back of the divan and heard it creak. With a sigh he came to his feet, not wanting to break his mother’s furnishings. He moved to the railing and stared out across his family’s lawn. He knew he had been blessed to have been born into a loving family, able to provide well for him and his sisters.

The stab of guilt hit him hard then as he thought about his father’s

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sad expression upon hearing about the duel and his failed marriage. Perhaps he should have tried harder to make his wife love him. And perhaps he should have kept hold of his temper, too, but then he couldn't decline the Duke's challenge. And, in the end, he'd only injured the man. Ironically, Marcus found himself feeling sympathetic toward the Duke of Eddington since he would now be the unlucky man to have to deal with Priscilla's nagging and temper.

"Marcus?"

He whirled around to see Anne rising.

"I'm chilly. We should go back inside."

"Soon. We have a conversation to finish first."

He pulled off his coat and draped it around Anne's shoulders, smiling down at her wide-eyed expression. Then he lounged back against the railing. Casually, he said, "Would you do me the great honor of—"

"Yes?" Anne said breathlessly, interrupting him.

"—allowing me to call on you?"

"Oh, why...why of course you may. Good heavens, Marcus, you do not even have to ask. We are friends, after all. Call away!"

He laughed, but had heard the disappointment in her voice with the first sentence she had uttered. What had she expected him to say?

"Wonderful. We will renew our friendship and have great fun together."

"Fun, hmm?" she said. "Why do I get the feeling you are asking me to fill much of your time so that no other woman will tempt you?"

He stared at her until she looked away, and he wondered what Anne's true feelings were for him.

"Would that please you?" he asked.

Her winsome smile caused his heart to skip a beat.

"Yes, it would please me very much."

He cleared his thought and said, "Come inside before you freeze to death."

She removed his jacket and handed it to him, then plucked up her skirts.

He pulled her hand through his arm and guided her back inside.

With a bow, he left her, making his way to the library, where he knew he would find his father.

Aunt Mildred grabbed Anne's hand and dragged her behind a pillar. "I can't believe you accompanied that man outside, and alone!"

"Oh, Auntie, we were just catching up on old times, that's all."

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Slap!

Anne gasped, reached up and rubbed her cheek, wary, but not at all surprised by her aunt's attack. She'd struck her before.

"Do not ever disobey me again, young lady. Do you understand? Never!" her aunt blustered.

Anne stood rigid, slowly lowered her hand to her side and lifted her chin. "That was unwarranted, Auntie. I shall call for our carriage."

"I am not ready to leave. You shall stay here until I am," Aunt Mildred ordered.

"Not bloody likely, ma'am," Anne snapped in a blazing tone completely uncharacteristic of her. She turned away and limped awkwardly from the ballroom. She heard her aunt shouting behind her, but she ignored her, vowing to never return to her aunt's home. She was through with the bitter old crone's abuse and would find another place to stay.

* * * *

Marcus stood across from his father, the large mahogany desk between them.

"Your mother is ecstatic about your return, Marcus, though I have to confess I have my reservations."

Narrowing his eyes on his father, who sat upright in his chair, hands folded in front of him on the desk, Marcus knew precisely where this conversation was headed. He did not like it.

"Say it, Father. Say it and get it off your chest," Marcus stated.

Marcus Calhoun II rose to his feet, came around the desk and leaned against it, directly across from his son.

The men were similar in height and breadth, but where Marcus III had been born with the same dark hair and eyes of his mother, his father possessed wavy white hair, once blonde, and brilliant blue eyes. But the facial features were nearly identical, so much that even a stranger would have no doubt they were, indeed, related.

"I think you should have stayed in New York. I believe you should have tried harder to mend your marriage."

Marcus protested, "Damn, Father, you have no idea what havoc Priscilla created in our marriage. Perhaps I should have stayed to continue managing the office there, but I had no choice once the Duke of Eddington called me out. And, afterwards, I couldn't stay! What in the hell was I supposed to do?"

"Found another way—a gentlemanly way to solve the problem," his

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father snapped. Then he sighed. "What, I have no idea, yet I wonder if you truly gave the problem much thought before reacting to the situation. I have tried for years drumming into your head that acting and not reacting is the appropriate way to handle a situation."

"I ran the New York office successfully," Marcus said defensively. "You can't deny it."

"Yes, with your efforts there I can find no fault, except for the fact that I now must find another competent manager to handle the office."

"Jonathon Cambridge would be perfect. He'd been my second in command for three years, after all."

"Yes, I have thought about him, but I am of the mind, upon investigating him, that he is too much like you. I can't afford to have reactionary men working for me."

"So, are you saying you have no place for me here?"

His father took a step toward him and extended his hand. Marcus clasped it gratefully and they shook hands.

"No, not at all. Welcome to the St. Paul office, son. I believe you've learned your lesson."

* * * *

Anne limped through the snow, cursing inside as dampness seeped into her fine leather shoes. The dainty shoes were not meant for such wet conditions, but she was adamant about not returning to her aunt's home. No more would she take such abuse from the nasty old woman. How could this woman be her mother's sister? she mused, having often pondered this question over the past ten years, since her mother's demise.

The streets were quiet, as one would expect so late in the evening.

She couldn't trudge on any longer, she decided, especially since she had no idea of where she was headed. She had reached a park, and she sank gratefully down on the wooden bench. She shivered and scowled up at the sky. Snow was falling heavily now, blanketing the brownish icy banks and walkways from the first snow two weeks past.

As she sat, she pondered her predicament, sorrow overwhelming her. Here she was, on a wet snowy night, very near to her favorite holiday with no home to call her own.

She was still in the Calhouns' neighborhood for she had not walked but a few long blocks. But, she truthfully had no where to go. Her few girlhood friends, including Marcus's sisters, were married with homes of their own. She knew they would welcome her, but she would never think

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to impose upon them.

Anne hadn't been allowed to finish school, but had been taught to be a perfect homemaker from one of her aunt's friends. She supposed she could keep house for a family or be a nanny. She smiled, thinking how much she adored children, but knew her life would likely never include any.

Who would want to marry an imperfect woman like her?

She was an excellent seamstress and decided she could possibly secure a sewing position in any one of the warehouse textile factories along the river, also. But now, she faced the more immediate problem of finding a place to stay.

The sound of horse's hooves caught her attention and she lifted her head and stared toward the street, just as a fine carriage pulled by a dark horse came prancing by. It was Marcus, likely headed for the Calhoun family townhome, his place of residence when he came home to visit located near Central Park. Rising quickly to her feet she cupped her hands around her mouth and called out, "Marcus!"

His head snapped in her direction and he slowed down as he passed her. Anne moved toward the street, stepped down off the curb and came to a stop. She saw him turn the horse around at the corner and sweep back up the street. He stopped directly in front of her and glared down at her from his perch.

"What in bloody hell are you doing out here, Anne?" he growled. "I thought you were at my home with your aunt. And it's after midnight."

She gave him a timid smile, but bristled at his words, guessing she was in for a good, long lecture.

"I required a long walk."

"Without your aunt, a chaperone or companion?" He swept her a cursory look and added, "And you're not dressed for this abysmal weather, either. Come up and I will take you home."

Anne stepped back from the curb and jammed her hands deeper into her cloak's pockets. "I haven't a home any longer."

"What do you mean? Come, Anne."

She took another step back from his cool, irritating demand. "I will not be returning to Aunt Mildred's."

He sank back in his seat and held the reins taut in his hands. "Why not?"

"I've decided I require a place of my own."

"And you will, once you marry. Did you and your aunt have an

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argument?”

Anne felt tears glistening in her eyes. “Yes, about you, if you must know.”

Marcus sighed. “You know your aunt has never appreciated me.”

“True.” She tilted up her chin and bravely said, “May I come home with you?”

* * * *

Marcus started coughing vehemently at her question. His first instinct was to reply, *of course you may*, but then he thought about her reputation, of which he had no desire to ruin.

“Just for tonight,” she begged.

He jumped down from the carriage, landing directly in front of her. He smiled when she backed further away from him. Anne could use a bit of discipline, he decided, and perhaps she saw that very idea lurking deep within him. He’d never lay a harsh hand on her though; she was his sweet Anne and would forever hold a special place in his heart.

He took her arm, guided her to the carriage and assisted her up onto the seat, passing the reins to her. He took his place beside her and took back the reins. He snapped them and they were on their way.

When he turned down the street headed for her aunt’s home she protested, “I told you, Marcus, I can’t return to my aunt. Please, just let me spend the night with you. Then, tomorrow, I will leave and find another place to stay.”

He pulled to the side of the street and stopped the horse, turning to her. “The truth; what happened at the ball this evening between you and your aunt?”

Anne bit her lip hard, but finally said, “She...she struck me.”

Fury burst through Marcus. “She what?”

“You heard me. It is not the first time, but I’ve decided it most definitely is the last.”

“Anne,” he said softly, stroking her cheek. “I had no idea.”

“It’s not something I speak of publicly.”

“Of course you won’t go back there,” he soothed.

He stared at her, but she wouldn’t look him in the eyes, until he lifted her chin with a gloved hand. His heart lurched when he saw the tears pooling, angry that he hadn’t realized how unhappy Anne had been living with her aunt all these years since her mother’s death. Sadly, Anne had never known her father. Still, Marcus found it difficult to believe her aunt would abuse her.

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Within minutes Marcus drove past his townhouse and made his way around the back. He stopped outside the stable and a young groom ran out to secure the horse and carriage.

Marcus escorted Anne inside. He helped her remove her cloak and she gave him a grateful smile. Sudden heat, especially in his nether regions, tore through his body at the sweet, thankful look on her face. Lord, but he could, he knew, take advantage of her at the moment because she was grateful to him, but he wouldn't. She was like a sister to him, for God's sake! *Of course she is. Keep telling yourself that.*

Marcus turned away, walked down a dark hall and into the parlor. There he hung up her damp cloak to dry near the hearth, where a warm, welcoming fire burned. He whirled around when he heard her voice.

"Where are your servants, Marcus?"

"I don't usually have servants about in the evening hours. They have families of their own to go home to," he said.

"Oh, that is most gracious of you to allow that," she replied.

He shrugged. "They're employed by my father and will be returning to my parents' home once I hire a few servants to assist me here now that I've returned."

"So, we are alone then?"

Marcus heard the wobbly tone in her voice and knew now she was likely having second thoughts about being alone with him, but she need not worry; he would never harm her or think to entice her into his bed.

Liar! Once again the voice inside him bellowed.

"Come, warm up by the fire."

She made her way to the oversized divan, built to accommodate his size. It was positioned just across from the hearth and he smiled when she sank down gratefully with a sigh. The plump divan seemed to swallow up her small form and her feet didn't touch the floor. Marcus gulped when she lifted her legs and tucked them up on the seat cushion.

He moved to the opposite end of the divan and sat down, hugging the one arm, not wanting to alarm her. Marcus had no doubt she was, after all, an innocent, untouched woman.

She just smiled at him as she removed her damp felt hat and set it down on the floor at her side. He followed her gaze then when she turned to stare at the golden flames in the hearth, seemingly mesmerized.

He cleared his throat. "A hot toddy will help warm you. I'll prepare us one."

"That would be lovely," she murmured, still gazing into the fire.

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Marcus mixed the toddies, after fetching hot water from the kitchen. He set hers down on the table near her elbow and sat down beside her again. He smiled when she leaned sideways, savoring the aroma with her small nose, then picked up her cup. Tentatively she took a sip and sighed appreciatively before taking another, then setting her cup down.

Anne was quiet, unlike his sisters and other girls he knew; she didn't spoil that worthy trait now. He found himself clearing his throat again, trying to find a way to open the doors to conversation. She couldn't stay here except for this night, but he worried about where she would live if not with her aunt. She had few friends, and the ones she had were all married. No men friends ever seemed to be about, but for the life of him, he couldn't understand why not. She was beautiful in a natural, gentle way, with nothing ostentatious about her. She possessed a wonderful sense of humor and seemed to be, for the most, good-natured. So, why in the hell hadn't some man married her yet? He found it difficult to believe a man would overlook a precious jewel due to a limp, which to his mind was a small imperfection.

"Anne? We do need to discuss what will happen tomorrow with you and your life. Have you any particular plans? Perhaps nursing school would be a good idea? I'm willing to assist you in paying for it since I've a feeling your aunt will be cutting the purse strings. What do you think?"

Nothing.

Marcus frowned when she didn't reply. Leaning forward, he saw that she'd closed her eyes. Listening, he heard the soft cadence of her even breathing.

She'd fallen asleep. Now what was he to do with her?

He should feel insulted for never had he put a woman to sleep—to bed, but not to sleep.

He finished his drink and watched her sleep, the small voice inside him saying he could easily carry her up the stairs and to his bed. *No! What a foolish thought.* But it was also very tempting, too. Erotic thoughts filtered in and out of his brain, making him aware of her femininity more than ever before. He'd fought down those feelings for years, all the while wondering why she'd prized his friendship when he was nothing but a big clumsy lummoX of a man. He'd sowed plenty of wild seeds in his day though he'd always been careful not to father a child from any of those sowings.

He'd had such high hopes of having a happy marriage and raising a brood of children, her desertion and cuckolding him had made him

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furious, then utterly miserable. The fact that, upon their wedding night she wouldn't have a thing to do with him should have been a warning. But he hadn't heeded his doubts, but had decided his wife had been an innocent, fragile woman-child, making love for the first time. How wrong he'd been. And in the end he discovered she'd only married him to save her family's fortune.

Somehow, the thought of fathering a child with Anne was appealing, too much so for his peace of mind. A sick feeling came over him when he thought about how horrid and appalled she'd be to feel him rutting between her legs. Anne was too pure, too good and kind for the likes of him.

But, it was his duty to marry and produce an heir soon.

He sighed and looked at sweet Anne once more, knowing she would never have a thing to do with him romantically. They'd been friends for too long.

He rose, raised her shoulders and jammed a pillow beneath her head. Then he tucked a blanket over her shoulders. He knew she'd be comfortable here for the night.

On his way to his bedroom he snatched up a bottle of fine Irish Whisky and a glass, deciding it would be best for them if he drank himself into oblivion, otherwise he'd remain awake the entire night, tempted to seduce sweet Anne.

* * * *

Anne groaned and punched her pillow. She opened her eyes and saw red velvet. Sitting up with a start she glared at the unfamiliar pillow then darted a quick look around the room. Breathing easier as memory returned, she was relieved she was still in Marcus's townhouse.

She smiled and fingered the soft blanket, thinking how sweet that he'd covered her up against the cold night chill. But then she scowled, thinking he could have installed her in a guestroom, which would have been warm and more comfortable than a divan.

Rising unsteadily to her feet she squinted toward the window, noting it was still dark. Then her gaze moved to the grandfather clock in the corner. Three o'clock? There was much more of the night yet to sleep away, thank heavens!

Settling down on the divan once more she curled up in the blanket, but thoughts of a warm fire ablaze was tempting. She was just too tired to set one. Then the tantalizing thought of Marcus asleep in his warm bed with a small fire still burning in his room made her promptly sit up

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once more.

Why should he be warm and not her?

She scrambled from the divan and made her way through the dark toward the hallway which she knew led to a set of stairs. Thankfully, he'd left a few candles burning in holders on a table so she picked one up and made her way upstairs to find Marcus. He could easily, with little effort set a fire for her in a guestroom, she mused, even though the tiny voice of a vixen inside her told her how he could easily set a fire inside her, as well.

Perhaps her aunt was right. Perhaps she was an evil, naughty girl who required regimented punishment. But no, there was nothing evil in wanting to feel the warmth and strength of Marcus's arms around her; to feel him take her; to feel his cock...

Oh, my Lord, but she was evil!

Still, as she headed up the stairs, she had a purpose in mind—to find warmth and love—to sate her lonely life. For just one night she would have this, if she could entice Marcus to want her. She'd never played the siren before, but would now.

She walked down the hallway, stopping before a door where she heard the soft, deep slumbering noises of a man inside. Slowly, she turned the door knob, swung open the door and closed it softly with nary a sound.

Anne paused at the foot of his bed, saw that he'd kicked off the covers. Heat tore through her body and seeped into her cheeks when she looked upon his naked form; he was everything beautiful, manly and strong, the great protector she knew him to be. He'd protected her and cared for her during childhood and she knew he'd be caring and protective of her now. But, once she slipped in beside him, she prayed he'd want her and not turn her away.

Quickly, she removed every stitch of her clothing then slid into the bed. He didn't waken and, as she lay stiffly beside him, alcohol fumes reached her senses.

She smiled. The man had drunk himself into a stupor.

Why had he done that? To forget about her sleeping on his divan downstairs, perhaps?

Lying on her back, she reached out a searching hand, found the warm skin of his back turned toward her. Lightly, with her fingertips she stroked him from his massive shoulders to his waist, pausing whenever he moved. She didn't want him to waken fully for he may try and stop

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her from her wanderings when he realized her identity.

She stifled a surprised shriek when he suddenly rolled over and pulled her fully into his embrace, then proceeded to nibble on her ear.

The sweet, pungent smell of alcohol made her stomach clench yet she smiled, confirming her suspicions; he desired her! To avoid her he'd drunk himself into a deep slumber. In the past, he may have thought of her as a sister, but buried deep inside, she suspected his feelings for her were quite different.

She sighed when his big hand shoved her head beneath his chin and she tried to make out his murmurings. Then he caught her curls between his fingers and massaged her scalp, which felt heavenly. Her heart lurched when his fingers untwined from her hair and slid down her back then up, his strong hands massaging it. She couldn't help releasing a deep groan of satisfaction. Lord, but his hands worked their magic on her tight muscles, loosening them until she felt weak and pliant in his arms.

He paused then, and his body stiffened.

No! He couldn't waken fully now.

She felt him shift and move slightly away from her. His fingers gently fingered her earlobes, then drifted down her neck until he reached her breasts. She closed her eyes and gasped softly when he cupped each mound in his big hands. Then his thumbs caressed her nipples until they peaked into hard hot pebbles. Unwillingly, she groaned once more in pure delight.

"Do you like that, sweetheart?"

Anne's eyes popped open. In the darkness she couldn't see his eyes, but he sounded awake!

"Tell me you want me," he insisted.

The heat in his voice melted away her hesitancy. "I do."

His growl of male wanting was deep and harsh, and his breathing quickened as his hands continued their exploration over her body. "It's been too long, you know. Don't deny me again, wife, not ever again."

Now Anne knew he was truly drunk for he thought she was his wife. But she wouldn't disillusion him now—she couldn't. Call her selfish, but she'd take this one moment of sweetness and hold this night's joys within her heart for years to come.

One hand left her breast, slid over her side and to her back once more, then slid down her back to end at her buttocks. He cupped and squeezed then pulled her up tight against his body.

"Do you understand?" he asked again, his voice deep, his words

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slurred. "Answer me."

"Yes, yes," Anne whispered, "I will never deny you."

He lit a fire deep inside her virgin body, his hands settling upon every crevice and curve. Oh, God, she wondered how she'd ever live without this, knowing she'd remember this night for all of her long, lonely nights to come.

Soon, his breathing was as ragged as hers and he rose above her and plunged deep inside her.

Anne cried out, unprepared for his sudden attack, for that's what it was; was this how much he hated his wife, that he'd attack her this way in lustful fury?

He'd paused, embedded to the hilt deep inside her as he calmed his ragged breathing. And then she knew he knew, in that precise moment, that she wasn't his wife. He raised his head and she felt him staring down at her in the darkness. Coming to a decision after a long while, he pulled back his sword then plunged forward once more but more gently this time.

"My God," he whispered near her ear. "I can't stop now. Forgive me."

She gasped and shifted her hips, biting her lips to keep silent. Certain now that he'd breached her virginity he moved gently inside her, guessing there'd be a reckoning when he finished. But she didn't care! This joining between them was exquisite and she wouldn't regret it. She hated the idea that he likely would, but it was too late to stop now.

Marcus buried his head in that soft, sensitive place between her jaw and collarbone and released his passion, his body moving over her more quickly now. She felt him growing harder, larger, groaning when a sensation—a growing, welcoming heat—settled in her core. Then he lifted off her slightly, slid his big hand between their bodies and she gasped with pleasure when his fingers strummed that sensitive place between her thighs.

Her world spiraled out of control and she clasped him to her, moaning as she fell into an abyss of sexual pleasure filled with moistness, sweetness, and pure, undiluted ecstasy.

He pressed inside her one final time, finding his own joy, releasing a vivid, low growl. Then he lay upon her. Anne stroked the moistness on his back, smiling to herself. For the first time, in a very long time, she felt content with her life even though her future was unknown.

Sated, they fell asleep in each other's arm.

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The first words he spoke to her upon awakening were not a surprise. He lifted his head from near her shoulder and she felt his lips near her ear.

“Sweetheart?” he said, his voice hot and low, “you are not my wife because if you were I wouldn’t have divorced you.”

Gladness soared through her and tears filled her eyes at his words, yet she felt sorrow that he’d experienced so much sadness in his marriage. He heaved a deep sigh and rolled to his back. “Why didn’t you stay on the divan, Anne?”

“I...I was cold,” she said softly, scrambling to sit up. Reaching down, she searched for the edge of a blanket, but soon found herself flat on her back and staring into Marcus’s eyes. He’d lit a lamp on the bedside table and she viewed his angry expression with trepidation.

“That’s all you have to say?” he snapped. “Why didn’t you stop me.”

Anne sniffed and stared down at her arms which she’d folded protectively against her breasts. “Because I didn’t want you to.”

“But you were a virgin!”

This thought on his part and revelation propelled him from the bed.

She smothered her smile as she watched his huge, perfectly formed body stride back and forth from the head to the foot of the bed in growing agitation. He’d always done that, she knew, that pacing when he was deep in thought. Finally, she decided she had to say something to calm him. She didn’t want him feeling any regrets for she certainly didn’t.

“Yes, I was. Can’t you just accept my gift graciously, Marcus.”

He turned to her and said, “I *am* honored—and *very* grateful.

Anne saw the sincerity in his eyes and smiled. Then her gaze darted down to his groin and she was surprised to see how small he was. Moments ago he’d been huge and had felt hard as a sword’s blade.

Chagrined, he met her eyes. “Yes, it does deflate somewhat, afterwards, but just the thought of what we did together will change that shortly. Talk, Anne. You’ve some explaining to do.

“From the moment you...you joined with me,” she said, feeling heat seep into her cheeks, “you knew I wasn’t your wife.”

“Not at first. You are remarkably similar in size to my wife. But it’s true that Priscilla wasn’t virginal, even upon our wedding night. Yes, I knew then at that moment you weren’t she.” He paced again and raked a shaky hand through his hair. “But now we’ve a two-fold problem; you

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have no home and, there's a possibility you could, in the near future, be carrying my child."

"Oh!" Anne scrambled from the bed and yanked a bed sheet free, wrapping it around her body. She stood across from him on the opposite side of the bed, her eyes wide. "But that can't possibly have happened, after all, we were together just once."

"And that's all it takes, I'm afraid." He moved around the bed and stopped directly in front of her. His gentle eyes stared down at her for the longest time and Anne felt heat seep into her cheeks. He stroked the crown of her head then slid his hand down the smooth column of her neck and the curve of her shoulder.

"I wouldn't be averse to the idea of you blessing me with a babe."

Anne had been staring at the dark fur on his chest, wanting to reach up and stroke the hard, sinewy muscles. He was so extraordinarily handsome she had to mentally hold back from touching him. His words kicked her like a bull.

"But we aren't married!"

"We could find a judge or pastor."

Happiness filled her heart at his words, still she said, "But you just ended an awful marriage, Marcus, why in the world would you want to enter into that state again?"

He shrugged. "You are a known quality, my dear, and you are not Priscilla."

His were not the words Anne wanted to hear. She wanted what every other young, silly woman desires from the man she loves, for love him she did. She wanted to hear words such as 'I can't live without you or 'you are the love of my life, for ever and ever'. But she knew she wouldn't hear them from Marcus. His feelings had been hurt because of his wife's desertion, his feelings too raw with the pain of it. She guessed it would be a long time before he could finally trust his love to a woman again. Yet, to her mind, without love their marriage wouldn't succeed. Oh, she was quite certain she was in love with him and had been for years, but she didn't dare confess her feelings. He'd feel trapped, she guessed, even if he'd gallantly suggested they marry. She knew he didn't mean it.

"True, I'm not a bit like your wife." She sighed. "I suppose it best I return to my aunt."

He frowned. "Didn't I just say we should marry?"

"Yes, you did, but I don't think one night together warrants such a

drastic decision, and I don't believe, deep down inside, you believe so, either."

"But I took your innocence. How do you think that makes me feel?"

Anne gulped. "Guilty?"

"There is that, of course, but I'm making you an offer I wouldn't make lightly to any other woman, innocence taken or not," he snapped.

"Come, Marcus," she chided, even as heat seeped into her cheeks again. "I am not the sort of woman to marry a man such as you."

He stiffened, back ramrod straight. "Granted," he began, "I've lived the life of a rogue, but I can change. I *will* change."

Anne's eyes widened. "No! That's not what I meant."

"Then what?" he asked, relaxing a bit.

"I'm not...perfect," Anne replied, embarrassed beyond words. "I'm not beautiful with this red, curly completely unmanageable hair, not to mention my limp. It was a wonderful, magical night, but the only night we'll ever have together."

She turned away, but he took her hand, kept her with him. Anne looked back at him, saw that his scowl was gone and had been replaced by a smile unlike any he'd ever bestowed on her. Gentle, kind but with no signs of the sympathy she'd expected. He pulled her around to face him then he took her in his arms, his eyes sparkling with humor – and something else.

Her heart soared at the lustful look on his face. Lust she could well live with from her handsome, protective rogue. It would be enough for her. Marcus wasn't offering her love but pure lust, his name and a home, and doubt filled her soul. "You are as perfect as any woman, Anne. Believe it, believe in yourself. You are a beautiful, intelligent woman with much to offer a man. I want to be that man."

"But—"

His hand left her waist and stroked up her back. She shivered. Then he cupped the back of her head, leaned down and brushed her lips with his. The kiss changed, became wicked, leaving her reeling; left her wanting more when he lifted his head and blessed her with eyes filled with desire.

"I took your innocence and I'm not a cad. We must marry, plain and simple."

"I can't marry you, Marcus." Speaking of plain and simple, duty was what he felt toward her. It was his duty to marry her since he'd taken the gift a bride gives to her husband. To her mind this was not enough

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reason to marry.

She stepped out of his arms and moved to the window, staring outside through the tears.

His low voice came to her then, cool and low. "Did you expect me to say that I'm in love with you, Anne?"

* * * *

Abject horror crossed Anne's sweet face at his blunt words. Now he was faced with the prospect of responding to his own question; was he in love with her? Of course, what young woman wouldn't want and rightfully expect the man who'd asked for her hand to love her?

Marcus was honest with himself; he'd always cherished their friendship, but hadn't felt any revelations of love toward Anne. But now, he had to wonder about his judgment regarding women, especially after what great suffering he'd endured with Priscilla, whom he believed he'd loved. It made him realize that he truly didn't know what it meant to love – how it felt to love. He knew how his father felt about his mother; how his father would risk his own life if it meant saving her. That, Marcus told himself, was true love.

"I've come to realize that I don't know how it feels to be in love. Can you understand that, Anne?"

A tear slid down her cheek when she closed her eyes. He groaned, moved to her side and gently stroked the cheek, following the travels of that one tear.

She opened her eyes at the touch of his hand and stepped away from him, turning her back to him once more.

Marcus stood there helplessly, trying to decide what to do or what to say when she chose that moment to speak, and quite sensibly, too, which was so typical of Anne, though he knew how great was her effort when she was hurting inside. But he would never lie to her.

"I didn't expect you to make that sort of declaration to me, Marcus, truly I didn't. But I can't accept your proposal because you feel duty-bound to offer for me. Our marriage would be nothing but one of convenience."

He moved up behind her, yanked the sheet from her body and pulled her back against him. She struggled, brushed his groin. He warned, "Stop it now, unless you plan on me taking you to bed again." She stopped struggling and he held her close, his arms around her waist. Leaning down he nibbled on her earlobe until she went limp in his arms. "Feel me, sweetheart," he murmured. He slid one hand over her taut stomach,

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cupped one breast. “Wouldn’t you enjoy spending night after night making love, our passion igniting each other? You can’t deny you want me.” He slid his hand down her front to end at that place between her legs. “Can you leave all of this then, especially now that you’ve tasted passion?” he finished.

Her breathing grew ragged and then she wrenched her body from his arms. She turned and threw herself against him, winding her arms and legs around him. He kissed her ruthlessly as he carried her to his bed. Marcus’s last thought before entering her heated warmth again was that Anne would be far more than a convenience for him. And he meant to prove to her exactly that, for the rest of the evening—and afterwards—for as long as it took to convince her.

Unfortunately, by the time he wakened late the following morning, she had gone. As he sat morosely at his dining room table, drinking coffee, he decided to pay her a visit that afternoon, knowing she’d returned to her aunt.

He arrived on Aunt Mildred’s doorstep. Her ancient butler answered the door and escorted him, wordlessly, into the parlor. As Marcus sat there, waiting for Aunt Mildred’s appearance, he had a premonition that Anne was not in residence.

Mildred confirmed this upon entering the parlor. “Well, what have you done with the worthless girl?”

Without a word to the ornery woman he strode from her house then proceeded to pay calls on his two sisters, all the while praying she was with one of them. And even though both he and Emily and Beth’s husbands threatened dire punishment if they were concealing information, neither woman confessed to knowing Anne’s whereabouts.

Marcus spent the next month worrying and querying everyone he knew about Anne, even going so far as to hire an investigator to find her, but has no luck. He is deathly worried now that something awful had happened to her. During her month’s absence he contemplated his feelings about Anne, vowing to prove his love for her when he found her for he did, indeed love her.

The day before Christmas Marcus was summoned to his sister Emily’s home. Upon entering the house he was shocked to find a very red-faced Emily standing at the dining room table, eating her supper. Emily’s husband, Brent Hawthorne, sat at the opposite end of the table. He rose upon Marcus’s entrance, moved to his side and took his arm. He guided Marcus out of the dining room and across the hallway to his

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library. But before closing the door he looked over at his wife. “Don’t even think about leaving before I’m finished discussing things with your brother, Emily. Do you understand?”

Emily turned red, tear-filled eyes on him and sniffed, “I won’t leave.”

Marcus was astonished. Never had he seen his strong-willed sister quite so docile. He also wondered why she was standing and eating her supper.

Brent sat behind his desk and waved Marcus into a leather seat. Brent was one of the finest, wealthiest solicitors in St. Paul, and his home and business confirmed it. Brent and Emily had only been married a year and both of them had seemed to be truly in love. This was the first time Marcus had noted any adversity between them.

Pouring them each a snifter of Irish Whisky, Brent said, “I’ve learned of Anne’s whereabouts today. Care to hear where she’s been staying?”

Marcus had been in the middle of taking a drink when he started coughing, then slammed down his glass. “Of course!”

“She’s at your hunting lodge up north.”

“How in the world did she know where to find the place? And it’s nothing but a hovel, for God’s sake,” Marcus growled.

“Emily instructed one of our stable boys to drive her there. I told your sister she was damned lucky she got off as easy as she did. This time of year Anne could have been caught in a snowstorm during her travels.”

“True, as a matter of fact I can smell snow in the air now. What do you mean? Got off easy?” Marcus asked curiously.

Dryly, Brent said, “There’s a reason Emily is standing eating her supper. I had a feeling she knew much more than she’d admitted to us. So, when railing, wheedling and begging didn’t work I spanked her until she told me.”

“You... Why, now that I think of it,” Marcus said, “love taps from my father always seemed to improve Emily’s behavior. He raised his brow. “But how did you know that Emily knew?”

“There was nowhere Anne could have gone—without someone’s help. The woman has few friends, but the ones she does, like Emily, are loyal. I’d already questioned everyone who knew Anne and could tell by their responses they had no idea of her whereabouts. Emily had a tendency to change the topic of conversation whenever I started

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questioning her, in effect, telling me she knew.”

“You are one damned smart man, Brent,” Marcus drawled as he came to his feet. “I’ll go fetch Anne home.”

Brent rose from behind his desk. “But you won’t make it back for the holiday celebration tomorrow.”

Marcus grinned. “You’re right. But I’ve my own plans for the holiday, which should be highly interesting and entertaining. Make my excuses to the family, won’t you?”

Brent grinned in return, then left the library with Marcus. As the men passed through the hallway they both paused to see Emily still standing at the table.

“Happy Christmas, sweet sister.”

Emily snapped, “Just let Anne know I did not divulge her whereabouts willingly, Marcus.”

He laughed and saluted. “I will.”

* * * *

Christmas Eve 1892

Anne laid down her knitting, stood and peered anxiously out the tiny window at the heavy falling snow. Here it was, Christmas Eve, and here she sat, alone and cold. She had told Emily she would stay at Marcus’s hunting lodge just a month or so – until she determined whether or not she carried his child. Sighing, she sank down into her chair again as disappointment set in.

She’d learned yesterday she hadn’t conceived. Oh, how she’d wanted that little joy in her life, though she knew she’d never be able to live with herself since Marcus would have felt obligated to marry her. As a matter of fact, she knew him well enough he’d force her into marriage, not physically, but gentle loving words of which she knew he was capable.

Now she needn’t worry. And she’d come to a decision over the past month; she loved him, it was a fact, and she promised herself she’d make him learn to love her and eventually desire marriage as much as she did.

She’d already packed her few belongings, expecting to see Emily’s stable boy arrive early tomorrow. Due to the timely nature of her woman’s cycle she’d known her flow would have started by this day. She leaned forward, her arms around her middle as a cramp settled deep inside her. Oh, Lord, but she hated being a woman at times like these! She’d been putting off going to bed, dreading the painful hours ahead. By tomorrow, though, she would be feeling better, she knew.

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Then she heard a rumbling sound outside the cabin. She rose to her feet, pulling her woolen shawl close. Then she swiped at the fogged up window, gasping to find a huge carriage and two horses standing outside. The boy was a night early. Fine with her since this place had long ago lost interest for her. Besides, she didn't want to stay in this cold, lonely place any longer, but craved the warmth of a house with decent furniture and a blazing fire. She'd only managed a small fire since her arrival here and her fingertips seemed always to be near-frozen.

Anne gasped when she saw a man alight from the carriage and strode toward the cabin, his long black cape flying in the wind behind like a flag on a sailing ship. No! It couldn't be him!

She stood back, clutching her shawl when Marcus threw open the door, ducked beneath the doorjamb and stood in the doorway, looking huge, healthy and handsome – and furious.

"Marcus!" she gasped, taking a step toward him.

He held up one hand, as though warding her off. "Hold up, woman, I'm nearly frozen to death and don't want you catching your death before I've warmed up." He closed the door and rubbed his gloved hands together briskly.

Anne grinned and moved to his side. "And I have no desire for you to freeze to death, but to help warm you up." She threw her arms around his neck and held on tight. Satisfaction soared through her body when he wound his arms around her and held her against him. She shivered at the cold from his body, but wouldn't let go. She was overjoyed to see him.

He raised her higher then, kissed her lips with cold lips that soon turned hot. Anne found herself grinning against his lips. When he ended the kiss she found herself looking into Marcus's furious expression as he held her against his woolen coat.

Smack! A sharp pain exploded in her buttocks. She gasped, unable to believe that Marcus would lay a hand against her. She looked at him warily.

"Yes," he murmured as he lowered her until her feet touched the floor, "You should be worried, for you've worried me for nearly a month. Do you know what I'd like to do with you?"

His calm tone surprised her, considering how her bottom stung from that one smack. She nodded and bit her lip, held onto his forearms as she stared up at him with wide eyes.

"Kiss you, paddle your rump and make love to you until you never want to leave my bed."

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She tossed back her head and laughed. “Oh, thank heavens you knew precisely the words I wanted to hear.”

He released her, pulled off his wet coat and hat. Then, slowly, he removed his gloves, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Did I, you little minx?”

She gave him a coquettish little smile and nodded.

“Of which shall I oblige you first? The kiss, the beating or the bedding?”

Anne remembered her woman’s time and sighed. “I am sorry, Marcus, for leading you on such a chase, especially in such awful weather. But I needed to think—alone.”

“About—?”

“Us. About your proposal.”

“And?”

“I think you’re absolutely right that we should marry.”

Anne saw a glimmer of hope in his eyes and sighed. “No, I’m not expecting a baby, Marcus.”

His gentle smile widened. “We’ve the rest of our lives to have babies. Now, then, did I hear you say you accept my proposal?”

“You did.”

“And why is that, especially now since you’re not carrying my child?”

“Because I love you,” she said simply.

“What” he shouted.

She nearly laughed at the belligerent look on his face. And now he stood before her, long legs spread wide, fists on his hips.

“You heard me the first time, I’m certain.”

“I want to hear you say it again,” he ordered.

Anne sighed. “I’m so pathetic, but I do love you, and I know it’s all for naught. Do not feel obligated to give me words that will make me feel better. Do not feel guilty that you do not love me in return.”

He took a step closer and Anne gasped at the raw pain in his eyes. Her hand came up and she covered her mouth, stilling her trembling lips, waiting for him to tell her again, once more, that he would never love.

“Don’t say you don’t—” She halted, put a hand up, warding him away but he came closer. And closer. Until he stood directly in front of her again, staring deep into her eyes.

Without a word he swept her up in his arms and carried her to the small bed in the corner. There he laid her down and sat beside her. He

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cupped his hands around her breasts and held them, stroking the nipples through her gown. Anne closed her eyes, enjoying his touch. But when he moved to unbutton her gown she held his hands.

Embarrassed beyond words since she'd never had to confess such a thing to a man before, she whispered, "I can't make love to you now, Marcus."

He looked at her in confusion.

"Oh, I want to," she said hurriedly, "but I have my..." Anne covered her hot cheeks and couldn't meet his eyes.

She heard him chuckle softly as he rose to his feet.

Anne scowled and said, "There is nothing humorous about my...my discomfort."

"Then I shall comfort you this night and every night. Now then, sweet, let me finish what I started to say earlier. "I-have-always-loved-you. From the very beginning, my love," he said softly.

Tears filled Anne's eyes. "How is this possible? And why did you deny your feelings to me earlier?"

"Because I am a great fool. It took you leaving and me worrying about you for the past month to see deep inside my own soul. I cannot live without you, Anne." He pulled his pocketwatch out, checked the time. "'Tis midnight." He met her eyes and held out his hand to her. "Merry Christmas, Sweetheart."

Placing her hand in his, Anne would always remember this holiday, more than any other she guessed. Marcus would always be her lover, husband, friend and protector.

He pulled her from the bed, took a seat himself and sat her down upon his knee.

"Now then," he purred as he nibbled on one of her earlobes. "I believe it's time we welcomed in the holiday, don't you? Where were we?"

"Now Marcus, remember my discomfort?" she said, wondering and thinking about that hard smack he'd delivered earlier.

"Ah, well, there'll be no spanking, and no making love this evening then, I'm afraid. But there's nothing to prevent me from kissing you, is there?"

She gave him a saucy grin. "Not a thing, darling."

"Precisely what I thought. Besides, it's better we leave the best 'til last."

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ebook - available at Amatory Ink and Bondagebookshelf.

Lynne's short stories and poetry can also be found in the following anthologies and websites:

Erotic Tales of the Paranormal and Who's Your Daddy, editor Justus Roux.

Horror Between the Sheets from projectpulp.

Twelve of the Best from Amatory Ink.

Provocative Notes, and Sultry Shades of Christmas, editor Ann Cory.

Cthula sexmagazine.

Hoot Island.

BlueFood.

Ophelia's Muse.

Thermoerotic.com.

Tit-elation.

CHRISTMAS KNIGHT
by Lynne den Hartog

“God, I hate Christmas shopping!” Cindy moaned to herself. “Three hours of over-crowded, over-heated stores just for some lousy socks, hankies and after-shave. Why do I always leave everything to the last minute? My bloody feet are killing me.” Planting her purchases down on the cash-desk, she slipped off her shoe and massaged her foot.

The cashier’s face mirrored her own. Dressed as a Christmas fairy she was obviously not feeling the Christmas spirit. “Would you like these wrapped for you?” she asked, with a strained smile. Cindy looked behind her at the long queue and shook her head.

“No, there’s no need. I don’t want to hold everyone up.”

“Oh, no. That’s not a problem. We have a special wrapping service in the basement.”

“Oh, have you? Well, yes, that would be great.” It would at least save her some time. She was hopeless at it herself. Sticky tape and wrapping paper always turned into mortal enemies under her two left hands.

The young girl beckoned to an assistant, who picked up Cindy’s packages. He didn’t seem to be having a problem with his costume. Surprisingly so. Cindy assumed that most men would be mortally embarrassed to be seen wearing a powdered wig and tights. He was quite good-looking under all that pancake makeup. Actually, more than quite. A regular Prince Charming in fact. She wouldn’t have minded meeting him at a ball. Or even having a ball with him. She giggled.

Realising that he was speaking, she shook herself out of her daydream. “If you’d like to follow me?” Cindy nodded and took a step in his direction. And stopped dead in her tracks. Looking down she saw one foot immaculately encased in a patent leather high-heeled shoe, the other

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completely bare. Desperately scanning the ground, she groaned. The missing shoe was nowhere to be seen.

“Oh—um...I seem to have a slight problem.”

A grin hovered round the assistant’s mouth, but to his credit, he managed to suppress it. “The shoe department is on the next floor. If you fill in these gift tags I’ll make sure your purchases are waiting for you in the basement.”

Cindy sighed in frustration. “I suppose I’ve got no other choice. They were my favorite pair too. But thanks. I appreciate it.”

Twenty minutes later, sporting new shoes she could ill-afford, Cindy was back in Santa’s grotto. Christmas music filled the air and fairy-tale characters were milling around, doing their best to cope with the last minute Christmas rush.

She hoped her packages were ready. She was already running late as she still had Christmas dinner to cook. Idiot that she was she’d invited the whole family over. Not one of her best ideas as even she admitted she was one of the world’s worst cooks. If she didn’t get the turkey in the oven soon it would end up as another failure on her long list of culinary disasters.

Thankfully she spotted the assistant surrounded by her wrapped gifts. He’d done a great job. The multicolored boxes, tied up with red and green ribbon, actually looked quite exciting. You’d never know they contained such humdrum items. Smiling gratefully, Cindy gathered up her purchases, but they were a lot bulkier than she’d expected. “Damn it! I’m never going to be able to carry all these in one go.”

The assistant flashed her a sympathetic smile. “We do have a delivery service. Though it’s a little expensive, I’m afraid.” He quoted her a price that made her wince. With her credit card already dangerously close to the limit there was no way she could afford that. With a red face she shook her head.

“No—there’s nothing else for it. I’ll just have to make two trips.”

“When do you need the presents?”

“Tonight. Why?”

“I could bring them along after I’ve finished work. Where do you live?”

Cindy hesitated. Was it a good idea to give him her address? He didn’t look like a mad axe-murderer, but then what did they look like anyway? She decided to take a chance. “106 West Way, Apartment 13, but there’s no way I can put you to that trouble.”

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“It’s no trouble. That’s quite near where I live actually.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to keep you from your Christmas celebrations.”

“I was just planning on having a quiet night at home in front of the TV.”

“Oh...I see.” she muttered, thinking how sad it must be to spend Christmas alone. “Look, would you like to have Christmas dinner with me and my family?” She’d had no intention of uttering those words when she’d opened her mouth. They’d just popped out. Why on earth would she ask a complete stranger to have dinner with her and her family? Weird. And most unlike her. She could only blame it on her fatigue and the festive music in the air. Christmas carols always made her feel sentimental.

“Won’t your husband mind? I wouldn’t like to intrude.”

“Oh, I’m not married! By family I meant my parents, aunts and uncles and cousins. This is my first Christmas away from home and I wanted to show them I could do it. There are nine of us. One more is not going to make a difference. In fact, it’ll make it a nice even number.” She realized she was babbling and blushed.

“Well...if you’re quite sure? I’d love to.”

“Then that’s a date...um...that is...I don’t actually mean a date...I...” she shut her mouth with a snap.

“No, that’s fine! I know exactly what you mean.” He grinned. “What time do you want me there? I finish work at six.”

“How about seven?”

“Sounds fine to me. I’ll see you then. Now I’d better be getting on with some work!”

“OK. ‘Til this evening then. Bye!”

Cindy walked out of the store like a marionette with some unknown power manipulating her strings. Something very strange had just happened, but she couldn’t for the life of her think what. And now far from dreading the evening, she found herself looking forward to it. Perhaps it was the Christmas spirit working its magic, but Cindy couldn’t help hoping this stranger would turn out to be the man of her dreams, though why someone wearing make-up and tights would fit that role was quite a puzzle.

Four hours later with streams of sweat running down between her shoulder blades and her hair plastered to her forehead Cindy felt a lot less exuberant. The kitchen looked like a battleground and she felt like

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screaming in frustration. This meal appeared to be turning into a complete catastrophe.

The turkey was far too big for her oven and when trying to slice it into pieces, she discovered it was still frozen in the middle. Running her sharpest knife under the hot water tap she managed to dismember the belligerent bird, but not without cutting her finger in the process. The vegetables proved to be an even bigger problem. Her pans were far too small. Cramming in as many as she could she forced down the lids and hoped for the best. Unfortunately, she'd made a fatal error. Too many vegetables equaled too little water and soon the smell of burning sprouts told her that they had boiled dry. Managing to salvage some of them she consoled herself with the fact that nobody liked sprouts anyway.

By then thin tendrils of smoke were seeping from the oven. She'd forgotten to turn the roast potatoes, and they were raw on top and black underneath. Removing the burnt bits she threw them back into the oven tray, and hot fat splattered over her wrist. The air turned even bluer as she swore at the top of her voice. Gritting her teeth she ran her arm under the cold tap. If things continued like this she'd be spending the evening in the A and E department. The water splashed on to her watch and she hoped it was waterproof. Oh my God—it was six-thirty and she still had to get showered and dressed. She would never make it. Suddenly the doorbell rang. Cindy froze.

Peering through the spy hole, Cindy's heart sank. A pile of coloured boxes on legs was standing outside the door.

Ripping off her filthy apron, she threw it behind the couch. Smoothing back her hair she took a deep breath and opened the door. She knew she looked a mess, but to the man's credit there was no sign of dismay on his face. And what a face it was. Without his wig and make-up he was incredibly handsome, jet black hair framing piercing green eyes. He smiled and Cindy's heart began to beat even faster.

"Oh. It seems I'm too early. I'm sorry. Shall I come back later?"

It hardly seemed fair to make the poor man walk up three flights of stairs for a second time. "No, it's fine. Come on in. Find yourself a seat. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I'd love one."

"OK. I won't be a minute." Cindy walked back into the kitchen. Things hadn't improved in her absence. The blue haze, hanging in the air, caught in her throat and she started choking. Throwing open the

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window she shivered as the cold air struck her bare arms. She heard the door opening behind her.

“Having problems?” A rhetorical question, as a single glance at the battleground was enough to answer it.

“Want any help?”

Oh boy—did she need help! But it was hardly the done thing to expect a visitor to help in the kitchen.

As if reading her thoughts he said, “No really, I don’t mind. I like cooking and, be honest, you’re never going to be ready on time if I don’t, are you?”

Shaking her head in resignation she sighed, “I must admit I think I’ve bitten off more than I can chew with this. Maybe I should just dump it all and call a caterer.”

“I doubt if you’d find anyone this late. Anyway, it’s not that bad.”

“Not that bad?” She felt like laughing hysterically. “It’s a disaster!”

“I think I can save it. How long have we got before your guests arrive?”

“About an hour.”

“Look. Why don’t you go and get yourself ready and leave this to me?”

“I can’t do that! You’re my guest.”

“I like a challenge,” he grinned. “Look, give me an apron and show me where everything is.”

Cindy didn’t have the energy to argue. Handing the man a clean apron she gave him a quick guided tour of the kitchen and headed for the bathroom. Turning, she smiled wearily. “Thanks so much. You can’t know how much I appreciate this...” She hesitated. “Um...I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Nick. Nick van Myra.”

“Well thanks, Nick van Myra. My name is Cindy. Cindy Ella Addams.”

“Pleased to be of help Cindy. Now go and get ready, and I’ll try and work some magic here.”

When Cindy emerged from the bathroom Nick had done exactly that. The smoke had disappeared and gorgeous smells were coming from the kitchen. Nick was sitting in an armchair with a glass of wine in his hand. “I hope you don’t mind. I found this laying in the back of a cupboard and took the liberty of opening it.” He was holding a bottle of red wine that Cindy couldn’t remember ever having seen before. Still,

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wherever it had come from, it was very welcome. Accepting a glass she sank down onto the settee. There were a few moments of relaxed silence before Nick spoke, "So, you were going to tell me something about your family before they arrived."

Cindy crumpled her forehead in confusion. Had she actually said that? "Er—yes—OK. Well there's mum and dad, of course. They're great people even though they still seem to think of me as the baby. I was a latecomer, and they still tend to wrap me in cotton wool. When I was living at home it irritated the hell out of me, but it's a lot better since I moved out. Even though mum still has the habit of ringing me at least twice a week to make sure I'm coping. And she never believes me when I say I am. It's their fortieth wedding anniversary tomorrow."

Hesitating, she wondered if she should mention she was worried about their relationship? They'd been having a lot of rows and she knew that something was wrong, but that wasn't really Nick's business, was it?

"And then there's my two sisters. We've never been all that close, I suppose because of the age difference, but they're nice enough as long as you don't get them onto the subject of men. Mel was jilted at the altar when she was about my age and never married and Kate is getting over a messy divorce. Neither of them seems to like the male of the species very much." Cindy stopped. Why was she telling this stranger all this? She felt out of control. Shivering, she took a large gulp of wine. It went down the wrong way and she started to cough.

By the time Nick had patted her on the back and she had reassured him she was fine, the feeling had faded, but she decided she'd go into less personal details about the rest of her family. "Then there's Mum's sister, Esther. We haven't seen her for years—she's been living in Ireland. We lost contact with her, and then she suddenly returned about two months ago with an eighteen-year-old daughter named Tuesday, in tow. It was quite a shock to all of us and she's saying nothing about it. We don't even know who the father is. I'm sure there's some sort of tragic story going on there. Come to think of it, apart from Mum, none of the women in our family seem to have very much luck in love." The thought sobered her. And she could add herself to that list. She hadn't had a steady boyfriend in over a year. It was her own fault. Her ideals were far too high. The kind of man she wanted was one who could read her thoughts and give her all she desired. Someone who completely understood her. She'd never met anyone who could live up to her

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expectations. Perhaps she was looking for something that didn't exist? A knight in shining armour—the perfect man.

Nick was staring at her and she went on hurriedly, "And the last two are my Dad's widowed brother, Lester, and his step-son Dudley." She shuddered. The family had been trying to get her and Dudley together for years, but although they were good friends they would never be more than that. Neither of them were interested in each other, but the family never seemed to give up hope.

"That's the lot. We're a pretty boring bunch, I'm afraid. Hope you're not regretting agreeing to come now!"

"On the contrary. They sound very interesting. I'm looking forward to meeting them."

He didn't have long to wait. Half an hour later the room was full.

She was aware of the curious looks directed at Nick, but no one said anything, until Dudley laughingly asked, "So, Cindy, this the new boyfriend?" He, at least, seemed extremely pleased to meet Nick. A little too pleased. She'd often wondered why Dudley never seemed to have a girlfriend, and she suddenly had a suspicion why.

"No, just a friend." She wondered what the family would say if they knew that, more accurately, he was the delivery boy and the cook. She smiled to herself.

Soon they were sitting down to dinner, and Cindy could hardly believe this was the same food that she had so nearly managed to ruin. Nick had worked a miracle and it was one of the best meals that Cindy had ever eaten. He's even managed to make the sprouts taste good. She felt guilty accepting the compliments and wondered if she should name the real culinary gourmet, but glancing across at Nick, she saw him shake his head and wink. Obviously he didn't mind her taking the credit.

After the meal Cindy put on a Christmas CD and the guests milled around drinking and chatting. She noticed her parents standing in a corner and from the looks on their faces they were having another row. Dudley was hanging around Nick and was drinking in his words. Tuesday was sitting alone, staring into space. Cindy wondered what she was thinking. She was a difficult girl to get to know, very quiet and shy, yet with a wild look in her eyes which hinted at a rebel within.

Uncle Lester had already drunk four glasses of sherry and, to her amusement, Cindy realized that he was trying to chat up Auntie Esther. She reckoned he was on a losing wicket there as Esther's only interest in life was her horses. She'd just bought a stables and it seemed to Cindy as

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if even Tuesday came second to her thoroughbreds—which, come to think of it, might explain Tuesday's attitude toward life.

Kate and Mel were obviously discussing Nick as they kept glancing at him and shaking their heads. They obviously didn't approve. Mind you, that wasn't unusual. Her big sisters seldom approved of her choices in life. She sighed. Nick crossed the room and, to her great surprise, put his arm around her shoulders. Was this a message for Dudley or for her sisters? Or was there another reason behind it?

Her first reaction was to shrug him off, but it felt good and she decided to go along with it. It certainly spurred a response in her sisters. Their conversation had suddenly become a lot more animated and Cindy grinned. Well, why not? Let them think what they wanted. Even if it was a Christmas charade.

"Present time?" Nick whispered in her ear, his soft breath on her neck making her shiver.

"Yeah, why not? At least it might cheer people up." Cindy glanced at her guests. Not the happiest bunch of people she'd ever seen. Only Uncle Lester seemed in the party mood, everybody else looked as though they were at a wake, the Christmas spirit obviously passing them by.

"Come on everybody! Time to open the presents!"

Cindy handed the first package to her mother. "I thought you'd look really good in this. It's your favorite colour." She watched as her mother lifted out her present—and gasped. Instead of the expected blue silk scarf her mother was holding up a transparent satin night-dress, more suited to a nubile young newly-wed than a mature matron of her mother's years. Seeing her blushes Cindy opened her mouth to apologize for the mix-up. Her sedate mother must be feeling completely mortified at being given something so blatantly sexy. But before she could speak she heard her mother saying, "Oh, darling. It's beautiful! Thank you so much. And I know exactly when I'm going to wear it." Cindy noticed a quick glance pass between her parents. It was the first time that evening that they hadn't been frowning at each other.

"I...I'm glad you like it," Cindy stammered and with some trepidation picked up her father's present, sighing with relief as he pulled out a pair of socks, but there was something else in the package. It looked like a small, silver pillbox. Her father opened it, glanced inside, and then quickly clicked it shut again. Cindy just caught a glimpse of the contents, diamond shaped blue pills. She was sure they were Viagra. Her heart sank. What on earth was happening? As she certainly hadn't

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bought these things--the only possible culprit was Nick. Had he got the presents mixed up? But that wouldn't explain the Viagra. No chain store she knew stocked them, so where had they come from? She looked at him, but he studiously avoided her glance. A faint smile played around his lips.

Awaiting her father's reaction Cindy was in for another shock. She didn't know what she expected, but it certainly wasn't for him to say, "Thanks Cindy. I don't know how you knew, but they're just what I need." And he winked at her.

"Y...You're welcome," Cindy stuttered. This was getting seriously weird. She hardly dared hand over the next present. As she gave Kate her gift she felt like closing her eyes. It no longer surprised her when she saw the deodorant set had turned into a bottle of expensive perfume. No—make that expensive, *sexy* perfume. The kind Kate would never use. Or would she? Cindy didn't know her as well as she thought she did. She immediately opened it, dabbing the contents liberally behind her ears.

Well, at least that one hadn't been as bad as the other two, and she handed Mel her package with slightly less apprehension. A set of lace hankies. But what was that taped to the box? They were some sorts of tickets. She saw the look of surprise cross Mel's face as she said, "I'm not sure that that's the kind of thing for me, Cindy. But...I suppose it could be fun." She turned and showed the tickets to Kate who laughed and nodded her head, "It'll certainly make a nice change from our usual bridge evening. And I've always been curious to see them." As Mel put the cards into her purse Cindy saw the picture of scantily dressed men—and realized they were invitations to a Chippendale's show. Good grief! That was the last thing she would expect her sisters to be interested in. This was all getting way too surreal. Still, although the presents were as much a surprise to her as they were to the recipients, she had to admit they all seemed very much appreciated.

Now it was Aunt Esther's turn. A pair of leather gloves—and a riding crop, appeared from the box. Well, at least this extra gift seemed to be appropriate. Cindy might have chosen it herself if she'd had enough money. Yet she was puzzled by her aunt's reaction. She had turned bright red and seemed at a loss for words. Uncle Lester chose that moment to have a coughing fit, and by the time he'd got over it Auntie Esther had managed to compose herself. "Thank you, Cindy. That was very...er...thoughtful of you."

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Only three more gifts to go. Cindy hoped her nerves could take it. She was dreading to think what Uncle Lester's pair of comical boxer shorts had turned into. When she saw the flimsy, black leather thong she gulped. She knew Uncle Lester had a great sense of humour, but this was really over the top. The thought of his substantial figure sporting the scanty briefs was incongruous to say the least. She could hear a few giggles in the room and was mortified that she'd made a fool of him. But Lester was grinning broadly. "Great fun, Cindy! Now all I've got to do is think of the right occasion to wear them!" He leered comically around the room and everyone laughed. Cindy forced herself to smile. The worrying thing was—she had a sneaking suspicion he wasn't really joking. She was learning a lot about her relatives that evening that she wasn't sure she wanted to know. And the next present was for Dudley. Considering her hunch about him earlier, this one could mean fireworks.

Knowing that Dudley was a great fan of Sherlock Holmes she had bought him a video of "The Hound of the Baskervilles." But its title had mysteriously changed. It was now a copy of "The Adventure of the Dancing Men." OK—that was an Arthur Conan Doyle title, but the small words after the title—"The alternative story"—and the text "Holmes and Watson as you never knew them," told another tale. One illustrated by the picture on the box of two men engaged in a wild dance. This was the type of video that usually arrived in a brown paper cover. Luckily no one else seemed to notice, and Dudley flashed her a grin as he hastily put it back into its wrapping. "Thanks Cindy, we'll enjoy watching that!" Cindy wondered who the mysterious other part of the "we" was.

And now to the last present. Cindy heaved a sigh of relief as she gave the final package to Tuesday and saw her lift out a bottle of perfume. But again she was in for a shock as she saw Tuesday reach back into the box. Obviously there was another mystery present in there. Tuesday's eyes widened in surprise and she shot a puzzled look at Cindy before quickly closing the lid. Obviously there was something in there she wanted to keep secret. Cindy wondered what on earth it could be.

The attack on her nerves and her busy day were taking their toll. She was exhausted. Unfortunately, her guests were far from tired. In contrast to half an hour earlier they were all in the party mood, laughing and chattering like kids at a carnival. It was almost midnight before the first of them gave signs of leaving.

As the door shut on the last guest Cindy turned to Nick, "I think you've got some explaining to do."

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“OK. But first, what about your present?”

“My present?”

“That one over there.” Nick pointed to the table, which had been empty only minutes before. It now held a large red box tied with gold ribbons.

“Where did that come from?”

“It’s my present to you,” Nick smiled.

Walking across to the table, she gingerly began to undo the ribbons—and pulled out her lost shoe. She stared at Nick in surprise and blurted out, “So you really are Prince Charming!”

“Amongst other things.” Guiding her to the settee he sat down beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. She found herself staring into his emerald green eyes. Languor engulfed her like a cocoon. The lights around her dimmed, the apartment now lit only by the full moon shining through the open window. She trembled in confusion. What was happening? Nick’s voice, calm and soothing, reassured her. “I am known by many names. I am legend and fairy tale made flesh. A giver. The granter of wishes; slayer of dragons; knight in shining armour. I am whatever you want me to be.”

“So...the presents? You chose all those things?”

“Oh, yes. I look into minds and see the deepest secrets. The mysteries hidden in the depths of dreams. And I make those dreams come true. This is Christmas. That special time of year when magic rules. Come—join me in my world of enchantment. See with my eyes, hear with my mind, on a journey of visions.”

A scent of lavender, thyme, and rosemary filled the room, and the walls slowly began to fade away. Cindy found herself floating in mid-air and gasped in terror. Smiling, Nick took hold of her hand. “Don’t be afraid. Nothing can harm you when you are with me. Trust me. Reach out and gaze into other minds. Let us explore the tapestry of fantasies together.”

Cindy shivered as an icy wind cut through her body. She wished that Nick had at least given her the chance to put on a coat. No sooner had the thought entered her mind than she found herself wearing a long, red velvet cloak, with a white fur-trimmed hood. It seemed that Nick was living up to his word. A wish-giver. A knight in shining armour, indeed, only without the dashing steed. That is...suddenly they were riding a pure white horse, its silver mane flowing in the wind, its hooves flashing across the sky. Cindy grasped Nick around the waist. The cold steel of

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armour met her grip. She decided it would be wise to consider what she wished for in future. Goodness knows what might happen.

Suddenly their mount began to descend. Cindy's stomach lurched and she clutched Nick even tighter. As they alighted on the roof of a house Nick helped her dismount. Her feet sank through the tiled surface, and she looked at Nick in dismay. "Don't worry. You'll get used to it by the end of the night, I promise."

And then they were standing in a darkened bedroom, lit only by the flickering screen of the television. Two men were lying on the bed. And they were completely nude. Cindy blushed. She wanted to look away, but couldn't. She recognized Dudley immediately, but it took her a while to place the other man. Then she remembered. She had met him at Dudley's birthday party two years earlier. Dudley had introduced him as an old school friend and Cindy had been quite taken with him. So much so that, after a few drinks, she started flirting with him. But he hadn't been interested. At the time she had felt rejected, but now she understood.

"So, you say your cousin chose this video for you?"

"Yes. You can imagine how surprised I was."

"I didn't know you'd told her about us."

"I hadn't. It's not the kind of thing you talk about in our family. The idea of my stepfather finding out terrifies me. You know how conservative he is. He'd disown me. I've got no idea how she found out. And it seems she told her boyfriend too. He's a strange one. I'd never met him before, but he seemed to know everything about me. It was like I'd known him for years."

"Oh? I hope I've not got a reason to get jealous here?" Beneath his joking tone Cindy could hear undertones of real concern.

"No...that is..."

"Dudley? I'd like you to be a little more positive about this! Should I be worrying here?"

"No—of course not. It's just...well...I was picking up some pretty mixed signals. I had the feeling that if I wanted him I could have him. Yet I didn't get the impression he was gay. Anyway—it's immaterial. You know I'm a one man guy."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Dudley's hand reached out and rested on the man's thigh. "I must say, John, it's reassuring to hear you can still get jealous after all the time we've been together."

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John clasped Dudley's hand and moved it a few inches upwards until it was resting on his erection. "It's hard not to sometimes. After all, you don't actually share your life with me. Take this evening. It's not easy waiting for you here on my own especially at this time of year."

"Funny you should say that. That's exactly what this guy, Nick, was talking about." As he spoke Dudley began to slide his hand up and down. John gasped and his breathing quickened. "Said it was time to get it out into the open. That people's reactions might be different than I expected."

"Th...that's what I've been saying for the last year." John was finding it difficult to speak. His scrotum was tightening and his body arched off the bed.

"Well, maybe next time you can come with me. Test the waters, so to speak. Speaking of which..." Dudley bent his head and took John into his mouth. His hand slipped round and caressed John's balls. Sliding down, he took John deep into his throat. John could hold on no longer. Clutching Dudley's hair with both hands, he thrust himself even deeper into his mouth. Shuddering, he came with a long strangled moan.

As John's breathing subsided both men kissed, and with a shaky voice he asked, "So—we're agreed—we're going to talk to your family about this?"

"Well, not exactly about this! But, yes—I think it's time to tell my secret to the family. At least I've got Cindy and her boyfriend on my side. But I'm still dreading telling my father, Mr. Heterosexual, Missionary Position, Nothing Abnormal For Me Addams! He'll go crazy."

The room faded and Cindy once again found herself soaring through the star-filled canvas of the midnight sky. Their horse whinnied and Cindy heard answering calls from the darkness. This time their descent was more controlled. Cindy found herself standing outside a stable. Nick took her hand and pulled her straight through a wall. It was like walking through a candy floss curtain. What she saw on the other side made her gasp. Dudley's, oh, so conservative, stepfather was hanging spread-eagled manacled to the ceiling, the leather pouch stretched tautly across a huge erection. Uncle Lester had indeed found the right occasion to wear his leather thong. Esther was standing behind him, clad in black lace underwear, black stockings and suspender belt. Cindy now knew why the riding crop had caused her aunt to blush. She was grasping it firmly in

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her hand and was about to apply it to one of Lester's ample buttocks. As the whip descended with a soft thud the man winced.

"What was that?! You've gotten soft in my absence, Lesty. There was a time when you wouldn't even have noticed a little tap like that. You know I don't like my slave to whine, don't you?"

"Yes, Mistress. I'm sorry Mistress. I promise I'll be silent from now on."

"I very much hope you will. You want to please me, don't you? Not make me angry with you."

"Yes, Mistress. I only want to please you."

Esther circled the hanging figure. She contemplated the large bulge straining against its cramped constraints and tapped it lightly with the riding crop. Lester's lips tightened, but this time no sound emerged. "Good boy." Her face softened as she stared up at the only man she had ever loved. She was still a handsome woman, her large assaying eyes accentuated by her close-cropped grey hair. Her tiny figure, half the size of Lester, filled with a power that few women possessed, yet her love for him had almost destroyed her.

"Tell me why you came here this evening, Lesty. And I want to hear the truth."

"I've never forgotten you, Esther. I've never stopped missing what only you could give me. My wife would have been horrified if I'd told her of my secret hunger so all these years I've been living a lie. When I saw you this evening I felt alive for the first time in eighteen years. I had to find out if you felt the same."

"I think you've discovered I do, Lesty." Reaching out her hand she raked her fingers down his stomach, her nails leaving a scarlet trail. Lester's face contracted into a mask of pain and sexual longing. Laying down the riding crop, she reached up and pinched his nipples. Burying her face between his legs, her teeth nipped through the leather that encased his swollen balls. A slight moan, quickly stifled, escaped from between his clenched lips.

Then in one quick motion, Esther pulled down the leather briefs. Lester's erection, freed from its restraints, sprang to attention. Without hesitation Esther took it in her mouth, her tongue massaging the tip. Lester's breath was rasping in his throat in an enormous effort to keep silent. Esther encircled his balls with her fingers, squeezing them in a way that made it impossible for him to come. Her tongue flicked faster

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and faster, bringing him to the edge and then she stopped. Unable to stop himself, Lester groaned in disappointment.

“Oh? So Lesty’s asking to be punished, is he?”

“No, Mistress, I’m sorry. I’m not...” Breathless and frustrated the man fell silent.

“Oh—I believe you are.” Picking up the riding crop, she took a step forward and raised it above her head. It whistled through the air and landed with a loud thwack on Lester’s naked buttocks. The man’s body trembled. Again the whip descended. And again. With every stroke his cock twitched, but he didn’t make a sound.

“I think you’ve learned your lesson now, haven’t you?”

Lester nodded his head. His face was strained with pain, yet his eyes were brimming with desire.

Esther walked towards the hoist and lowered the man to the ground. His legs gave way beneath him and he fell on his back in the thick straw. Straddling his body, Esther undid his manacles and placed his hands on her breasts. She sighed as his fingers fondled her nipples through the thin lace of her bra. Grasping his buttocks, she forced his body against hers. His hard erection pressed into her thigh and opening her legs she moved aside the skimpy fabric of her panties, guided him into her and proceeded to ride him like a cowboy. As his fingers played with her nipples her own fingers slipped between her legs and she began to rub herself furiously. Lester appeared to be so near the edge now it was almost impossible for him to hold on. Esther flung her head back, her mouth wide open, gasping for air. Her body began to shudder and she screamed as her orgasm hit. Now, at last, Lester could let go. Thrusting himself even harder into her body he exploded deep inside her. Esther collapsed on top of him and he put his arms around her holding her close. They lay together, breathless and exhausted.

When their heartbeats had returned to some kind of normality, Lester spoke. “Why did you go away, Esther?”

“I had my reasons.”

“And would one of those reasons be called Tuesday?”

There was a long silence. Then Esther sighed and said, “Yes. It would be.”

“She’s mine, isn’t she?”

Esther nodded her head. “Yes, she’s yours, Lester.”

“Why an earth didn’t you tell me?!”

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“And what would you have done, Lester? Left your wife and your young son? You know as well as I do that you could never have done that. Not in the circumstances.”

“But if I’d known you were expecting my child, that would have changed things.”

“Would it have done Lester? Would it really have made any difference? It wouldn’t have changed the facts. Your wife was ill. She needed you. I know you, Lester. If you’d abandoned her, Maria would have gone into a home. You couldn’t have lived with the guilt. It would have destroyed our relationship.”

“So you’ve kept it a secret all these years?”

“What other choice did I have? It was harder on Tuesday really. I tried to give her all the love she needed, but I’m afraid I’ve failed. I think she hates me for never telling her who her father was.”

“She doesn’t know?”

“How could I tell her? She would have wanted to contact you, and I couldn’t risk that. When I heard that Maria had passed away I couldn’t make up my mind what to do. Should I stay in Ireland and never return? I couldn’t face that. I think the only thing that kept me going all those years was the thought of seeing you again. When I saw you this evening it was as if all those years had never existed. And when I realized you still had feelings for me it was the best day of my life. I’ve decided to tell Tuesday everything. And I’m dreading it. I don’t know what she’ll do. I’ve hardly got any control over her as it is. Since we’ve moved back home she’s only in the house to eat and sleep. She’s got in with a rough crowd, and she won’t listen to me at all. God knows what this will do to her.”

Nick took Cindy by the hand and led her out of the stables. Her thoughts were in turmoil. How could her family turn out to be such strangers? All these years she’d had an image of them that was so far from the truth that it was frightening. As their mount soared back into the sky she was at a loss for words. What on earth would she see next?

She didn’t have long to wait. They were soon descending in a part of town where badly lit streets and dilapidated housing spoke of the seamier side of life. Cindy was startled by the sound of a motorbike engine roaring up the deserted road. It screeched to a halt behind them and two figures got off. The driver, clad in black leathers, took off his helmet to reveal a good-looking man in his mid twenties, with black hair reaching halfway down his back. His passenger, dressed only in a thin coat, was

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shivering uncontrollably. The man put his arm around her shoulders and drew her towards him. Softly he kissed her hair and whispered in her ear, "It's all right, Tuesday. We'll soon be inside, and then I know something that will warm you up."

The girl smiled weakly. "You are referring to a cup of cocoa, aren't you, Brad?"

"Maybe. Or maybe not. It was your idea to come here, and you made it pretty clear what you wanted. It's your decision."

They entered the house, and Cindy and Nick followed them through the closed door. After climbing four flights of stairs they found themselves in a dingy room with bare floorboards, the only items of furniture a couple of orange boxes and an old mattress in the middle of the floor.

The man took a candle out of one of the boxes and lit it. He then helped Tuesday out of her coat and hung it on a nail above the bed. He began to massage her bare arms. The girl was still shaking, and Cindy suspected that it wasn't only from the cold. The man obviously sensed it, too. "Tuesday, are you sure about this? It's only been two months, and you know I can wait."

"No...no...I'm sure. Come on—let's get under the covers. At least it will be a bit warmer there. I don't think the heating is working."

"No—well, it wouldn't be. The gas was cut off months ago."

"Oh—so no cocoa, then?"

"No—no cocoa. I've got some whiskey, though."

"Yeah—I could do with a drink." The man poured some whiskey into two tumblers and handed one to Tuesday. She drained it in one gulp.

"Hey, steady on! I hope that's not Dutch courage."

"Maybe."

"It's not very flattering that you need a drink before getting into bed with me, you know."

"I'm sorry, Brad. It's just that—well—it's only natural I'm going to be nervous, isn't it? This being my first time."

"I know, sweetie. And this isn't the most romantic of settings either. You know I'd like to wine you and dine you, and treat you to a five star hotel—but..." he gestured helplessly around the room, "I'm afraid this is all I have to offer."

"It doesn't matter, Brad. You're all I want. I don't care much for all that stuff anyway. If I did I would have chosen one of those rich kids that visit my mother's stables. It's not as if they're not keen. Showing off to

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me with their posh cars, and public school accents—with mummy hovering in the background egging them on, putting on airs and graces as if she was some sort of Lady of the Manor. They'd run a mile if they knew our real background. Me, the little bastard girl, and mum working all hours of the day and night to scrimp together the money to buy that place. They make my skin crawl, the lot of them."

"So you decided to rebel?"

"What?"

"I'm not a fool, Tuesday. I know what you're doing. This is your way of getting back at your mother, isn't it? When you met me you knew that I was exactly what your mother didn't want for you. So I became the one man you really wanted to have."

"No—that's not true! I really like you—a lot."

"Oh—I don't doubt that. You're not the kind of girl that would spend the night with someone she didn't like just to spite your mother. But your first time is something special. It shouldn't happen with someone you just *like*. It has to mean more than that."

"Then why are we here? If it's such a bad idea, why did you agree to bring me back to your place?"

"Because I'm only human. And I adore you. I've never felt this way about a woman before. I dream of you at night and can't think about anything else all day. How could I possibly refuse you?" He swallowed convulsively. "But I'm going to have to. I can't take advantage of you. Put your coat back on, I'm taking you home."

"No Brad. I'm not going anywhere. Anyway. If you're right, aren't I the one taking advantage of you?" She took a step towards him and flung her arms around his neck. For a moment he stood rigidly, his arms clasped against his sides. As she pushed her body against him he forced himself to resist. Then her lips were on his, and her tongue forced its way into his mouth. Brad battled with his conscience, but it would take a stronger man than him to withstand this assault. Groaning, he cradled her face in his hands and returned her kiss.

Walking backwards to the mattress she fell onto it, pulling him with her. Rolling on top, her hands were all over him, tearing off his jacket and tugging at the belt of his leather pants. Her long silky hair covered his face and he breathed in the essence of new-mown hay. Completely out of control her hands flew to the buttons of his shirt. Too impatient to undo them she tore at them, ripping the material. Brad had never experienced anything like this before. He tried to calm her down, but she

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ignored him completely. She was like a wild thing. If he hadn't been the willing victim he would almost have believed he was being raped. This wasn't the gentle girl he knew. It was almost as if she were possessed. Perhaps she was. Not by a demon, but by memories of a lonely and unhappy life. He still couldn't ignore the feeling that what they were doing was wrong, but her passion was contagious, and he gave up trying to resist.

Slipping off the remnants of his tattered shirt he helped her undo the belt and zipper of his pants and slid out of them. He gasped as she grasped his briefs and wrenched them off, leaving him completely naked. For a second she froze, staring at what she had just revealed. From the look on her face this was probably the first time she had ever seen a naked man in the flesh, and certainly one in the state of arousal that Brad was now displaying. He felt an incongruous desire to cover himself. And then she pulled her T-shirt up over her head, and it was his turn to stare. He couldn't take his eyes off her small, perfectly formed breasts. Slowly he reached out and caressed their coral pink tips. Her skin felt icy to the touch. "Sweetheart, you're freezing. Get under the covers." Standing up, he threw back the blanket. He watched mesmerized as she wriggled out of her jeans and panties. He caught a glimpse of wispy blond curls before she jumped into bed, pulling the bedding up over her shoulders. He slipped in beside her, wrapping his arms around her. She was trembling again, but her frenzy of a few minutes seemed to have burnt itself out.

Gently he stroked her back and she began to relax. The shivering stopped and as he stared into her eyes, he saw a calmness that unnerved him. "It's more than liking, Brad," he heard her whisper. "It's a lot more. It's true, I did start seeing you because I knew it would infuriate my mother. But I'm not using you. I really want you." And she kissed him softly on the mouth.

"Oh, Tuesday. I want you, too." He still didn't know if he really believed her, but he knew there was no way he could stop now. Her soft body against his was doing things to him that not even a saint could resist. He ran his fingers down her sides, and kissed her neck. He moaned as her hand closed around his aching hardness. Slipping his fingers between her legs, he discovered how wet she was. His lips encircled her nipple and his tongue flickered around it. He heard Tuesday groan and suddenly she was guiding him in to her. He pushed gently, and felt a momentary resistance.

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Cindy was aware of a movement beside her. Nick was shaking his head, and she heard him murmur, "No, Tuesday. This is one wish that I can't grant. At least, not yet." Moving swiftly to the window he thrust out his hands. A roar of thunder and a flash of lightning filled the room and the window flew open. A gust of wind swept through the room extinguishing the candle and plunging everything into darkness.

Brad and Tuesday froze in shock. They'd had no inkling of an approaching storm. Tuesday's coat was caught in the current of air. It twisted and shook like a thing alive. A small box fell out of the pocket onto the mattress. Then the wind was gone as if it had never been. The room was uncannily silent.

Brad jumped shivering out of bed, closed the window and re-lit the candle. Climbing back into bed he saw the small package lying on the mattress. Picking it up, Brad saw what it contained and was filled with guilt. "Tuesday, how can you ever forgive me? I should have thought. I...I suppose I assumed you were on the pill. But that's no excuse. Why didn't you stop me?"

"I didn't want you to stop. We don't need them, Brad."

"But then why did you bring them with you?"

"My aunt gave them to me this evening. Such a strange gift...almost as if she knew ..." her voice trailed off. Shaking herself, she went on. "I can't even remember putting them in my pocket."

"Then you are on the pill?"

Tuesday nodded her head vigorously. But this time Brad knew she was lying. Why? He had no idea. Good grief, she was little more than a child herself. Why would she willingly take the risk of getting pregnant? Whatever her reasons he had no intention of letting it happen. Not that he would hate the idea of having a baby together, but it was much too soon.

His hand reached out and caressed her breast. "Well, seeing as we've got them, I think we should use them. Nothing wrong with being doubly sure, is there?" He attempted a smile, but Tuesday was obviously not amused. Was it his imagination, or did he see a flash of anger in her eyes?

"Are you sure, Brad? I...I've heard that they...um...spoil it for the man."

"Nothing could spoil this, Tuesday. In fact—they'll probably help! You've got me so wound up I was afraid I'd never be able to last!" He reached across and kissed her. At first he thought she was going to push

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him away, but then she sighed and returned his kiss. Opening the box of condoms Brad was surprised to see they were black. He decided he'd like to meet this aunt of Tuesday's, she certainly wasn't typical of any aunt he knew.

Taking a condom from the box he slipped it on. It was unlike anything he'd experienced before. Incredibly soft, like silk, it was gossamer thin and smelt strongly of vanilla. Strange. But he had other things on his mind. He ran his hands over Tuesday's body exploring every inch. As he ran his fingers over her flat stomach, she moaned and pressed herself against him. He began to stroke her, and as his fingers quickened he heard her breathing accelerate. Gently he slipped inside her. He heard her gasp. She felt deliciously tight around him. His body urged him to pound into her, but he knew he had to take it slowly. He meant to make this as special as he possibly could. It wasn't until he sensed that Tuesday was on the very brink that he allowed himself to let go and plunge deep inside her. Her body began to shake as her orgasm hit her. With a last few deep strokes Brad, too, reached his climax.

The room faded and Cindy found herself soaring through the starry sky. "What happened back there?" she asked. "Does Tuesday really want a baby? I tried to do what you said and enter her thoughts, but this time it didn't work. I couldn't find the answer."

"That's probably because she's not really sure what she wants herself. She's young and confused. Looking for revenge and attention. This was one way she thought she could get it. But she also has real feelings for Brad. And after tonight she'll realize that. I take it you couldn't read Brad's mind either?"

"Well—I thought I did. I know he loves her."

"Oh—he does. But he's not been exactly honest with her either. Didn't you wonder how a lad with no money could afford an expensive motor bike and bottles of vintage whiskey?"

"Well—no. I didn't."

"He's no penniless layabout. His father is one of the richest men in the country."

"What!?"

"Oh, yes. And he knew that wasn't what Tuesday was looking for. So he played the down-and-out. Mind you, she means more to him than wealth. If he had to he'd give it all up for her."

"And—will he have to?"

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“Now—that would be telling! Some things have to stay secret. But if it’s any help—remember I’m a specialist in stories with a happy ending.”

By now they had landed in a brightly lit street. Late night revelers were bustling around even at this hour. Bright neon signs proclaimed the appearance of the Chippendales in a nearby bar. Cindy wasn’t surprised when she suddenly found herself sitting amongst an audience of screaming women. The air was filled with the strains of the Full Monty. Cindy saw Mel and Kate at the next table. Despite the noise she could clearly hear their conversation.

“This is fun, isn’t it?!” Mel laughed. She was obviously a little tipsy, but looked happier than Cindy had seen her in years. “Incidentally, did I tell you how much I like that perfume Cindy gave you?”

“Yeah, only about three times! I don’t know what’s in it, but it seems to have an amazing affect on men. The taxi-driver, the doorman and the bartender have all been flirting with me.”

“Lucky you! Hey, do you know that one of those men up on stage looks a lot like my ex. Except he’s a lot better endowed than he was.”

“Mel! How could you?!” Kate grinned. “Mind you, it’s great to hear you joking about him. I’ve been really worried about you.”

“I think it’s about time I got over it. After all he messed up the last few years of my life, why should I let him mess up any more? What is it they say? This is the first day of the rest of your life? I think today’s the start of mine. I’m planning on having fun from now on.”

“Good one! Maybe it’s time I joined you. I’ve wasted a lot more years than you have.”

“I’ll drink to that!” The act on the stage was reaching its crescendo and the two women drank it in open-eyed.

As the lights on the stage faded Mel turned to Kate. “Do you think we could get invited back-stage?”

“I don’t see why not. I’ll ask one of the roadies. The way things are going tonight I’ve got a feeling no man can refuse me anything.”

Cindy followed her sisters as they approached the stage. She watched as Kate grabbed hold of a man carrying one of the loudspeakers. “Any chance of our getting to see these guys in private?”

He opened his mouth to refuse—and nothing came out. The woman’s perfume wafted into his nose. Aware of an uncomfortable feeling in the region of his groin his eyes glazed over and he found himself digging into his pocket to produce two backstage passes. He

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stood like a statue and watched as they walked away, unsure of what had just happened.

“That stuff really does work magic. Here, give me a dab of it.”

Kate handed over the bottle and Cindy watched as Mel poured a pool of it into her hand and applied it lavishly to her wrists and behind her ears. “Hey, easy on! Don’t overdo it,” Kate shrieked. “Goodness knows what will happen.”

“Well, let’s see what does.” Mel knocked on the dressing room door and it swung open to reveal a man clad only in a skimpy thong. “Sorry ladies. I think you’ve got the wrong ...” He stopped in mid-sentence, the bulge in his pants growing noticeably in size. He backed away, his hand flying to his groin in a desperate attempt to restrain it. For a second he thought he was going to come there and then, and the muscles on his neck stood out as he strained to control himself. His discomfort didn’t go unnoticed. The sisters looked at each other in glee, and followed him into the room.

“I hope you’re not going to waste that.” Mel giggled, pointing downwards.

“I think we could help you out here.” Kate grinned. And stretching out her hand, she planted it firmly on his erection. The man screeched. His balls were throbbing and he was so hard he was in danger of splitting the fabric of the thong.

“I think those need to come off,” Mel smiled. And in one quick movement she yanked the tiny garment down. The man sprang to attention like a tin soldier. Kate touched it gently with the tip of her finger and it started to quiver.

“No time to lose I think,” Mel cried. Already she was stripping off her clothes. Kate joined her and soon they were both standing stark naked in front of him. The man gulped convulsively. He’d never wanted to come so much in his life before. It didn’t look as if he had long to wait.

“So Mel. After you.”

“No, Kate. You’ve been waiting a lot longer than I have.”

“That’s so sweet of you, sis. Thank you.” Pausing only long enough to remove something from the pocket of her discarded slacks, she moved slowly forward and grabbed hold of the man. Tearing open the item in her hand with her teeth she proceeded to stretch a large condom over his huge erection.

“Good thinking, Kate. But where did that come from?”

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"I got it from the ladies' room earlier. Just on a whim—and remembering what Cindy's boyfriend said just before we left the party. Something about always being prepared. I had no idea what he meant at the time—but it is certainly good advice. But no more words. I think our friend here needs a little relief." Standing on tip-toe she sank down onto him and throwing her arms around his shoulders she began to pump herself rapidly up and down. Animal sounds escaped the man's lips as his climax built up to an unbearable level. He ground himself into the woman, and screamed as the sperm exploded from his body. Kate dug her fingers deep between her legs, working herself to her own climax before sliding off him. "Your turn," she panted.

"Do you think he's up for it?"

"Well—if my eyes don't deceive me—he certainly is!" All eyes were on the man's rapidly inflating erection. It was going to be a long night.

But Nick had plans elsewhere. The scent of herbs once again assailed Cindy's nostrils and she was falling. She squeezed her eyes shut. When she re-opened them she found herself back on the couch in her apartment, her head resting on Nick's shoulder. Gone were the long cape, the armor, and the dashing steed. All that remained was the one red shoe she was still clutching in her hand. She looked at her watch. Only five minutes had passed. Had it all been just a dream? But that still didn't explain the presents. Or had that all been a dream, too? She was so confused.

"I think you need to get to bed."

She was too tired to argue. "Er—yes. It's been a long night."

As she let Nick out of the apartment she sought desperately for the words to tell him that she wanted to see him again. She had to know what had happened that evening. Her dilemma was solved when she heard him say, "I've had a wonderful evening, I wondered if you'd like to meet up again some time?"

"Oh, yes. I'd love to. How about tomorrow? You could come to the party at my parent's house. It starts at eight." Was she being too eager? She didn't care.

"That sounds great. I'll pick you up at about seven thirty, is that all right?"

"Yes, that's fine. I'll see you then."

"Until tomorrow, then." Nick hesitated. Cindy's heart began to race. Was he going to kiss her good night? After the events of the evening, be

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they real or imaginary, she realized she was feeling incredibly worked-up. If he kissed her she knew she wouldn't be able to stop there. Instead he turned and walked away. She shut the door and sighing got ready for bed.

Exhausted as she was, she hardly slept a wink. Tossing and turning, her thoughts were in turmoil. When she did drop off in the small hours of the morning, her sleep was plagued by dreams of Nick. He was making love to her and he was the most fantastic lover she'd ever had. His hands, soft and gentle, but oh so knowledgeable, discovering the secrets of her body of which even she had been unaware. When she awoke the following morning it was to a terrible feeling of disappointment and confusion. How much of the previous night had been a dream and how much reality?

She didn't know how she managed to get through the day, spending it frantically tidying the apartment. Anything rather than dwell on that evening. Making herself some sandwiches, she found she couldn't eat them. Eventually she decided to take a long bath to try to relax. As she lay in the soapy water, her tiredness took over. Her eyes drifted shut. Someone was standing behind her. Gentle fingers massaged the fatigue out of her shoulders. Strangely she wasn't surprised. "Nick?" she whispered.

"Yes, Cindy?"

"You're early. And how did you get in? The door was locked."

"Oh. I have my ways," he whispered. "Now, don't talk. Just enjoy." His hands moved to her breasts, softly kneading and caressing them. He kissed her lightly on the neck and she shivered.

Turning round, she discovered to her astonishment, that he was completely naked. She stared at his body. It was beautiful. Fine muscles rippled on his smooth chest, above a flat and taut stomach. As her eyes traveled downwards she noted that her own naked body hadn't left him unmoved. Hesitantly she reached out and touched him. He groaned. And then he was sliding into the bath beside her. He kissed her fervently as his hands continued their journey of exploration, until they reached their destination. She gasped as his fingers began to stroke her. Then he slipped beneath the water—and she felt his mouth on her. Her body stiffened as his tongue began to work its magic. Soon she was fighting for breath. Though at least she did have air. It crossed her mind that Nick would drown if he stayed under water much longer. Yet as her climax built nothing else mattered. She squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated

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on the feeling. Her body jerked up out of the water as she was hit by wave upon wave of orgasm. And still Nick didn't come up. She reached under the water—and felt nothing.

Her eyes flew open. The bath water was cold. She realized in disappointment that it wasn't Nick's tongue that had worked this magic, but her own fingers.

Nick arrived at precisely seven thirty, in a bright red sports car. He was carrying two bunches of flowers. One for her, and one for her parents. He kissed her on the cheek in greeting. Cindy wished it had been on her lips.

Half an hour later, they drew up outside her parents' bungalow. Her mother opened the door. She looked happier than Cindy had seen her in years. There was a glow on her face that wasn't the result of any make-up. Her father joined her mother in the doorway, and Cindy thought he looked years younger. "Happy Anniversary!" Cindy cried, handing over the bunch of flowers.

"Thank you, darling. Come on in and meet everyone."

As they walked through the hallway, she saw that her parent's bedroom door was open. She couldn't resist sneaking a peep inside. The blue negligee was folded neatly on the pillow, and the little pillbox lay open on the bedside table. Well—that explained her parents' wide smiles. As they entered the living room the smile faded from her face.

There were a lot more people in the room than Cindy had been expecting. Her two sisters were standing with their arms around the waist of a tall, muscular giant who was sporting a sheepish grin and a look of total exhaustion. Tuesday was holding hands with a handsome longhaired figure dressed in an expensive tuxedo. Auntie Esther and Uncle Lester were sitting close together on the settee and only had eyes for each other. And Dudley was in animated conversation with a fair haired, bespectacled man. The room was buzzing with laughter and excitement.

Cindy turned to Nick in a state of shock. "What is all this about? Who are you?"

He smiled and, cradling her face in his hands, he tilted up her chin. Leaning over, he placed his lips on hers. She felt as if she had been electrocuted. Her whole body tingled. As the kiss deepened, flashing golden lights danced in front of her eyes. His voice filled her mind, dark and mysterious and full of love. "The Christmas Spirit, of course, my darling."

Remember Me Next Christmas
by
Herbert Grosshans

Sometimes, when the moons are high on cold nights and the fog begins rolling across the moor, I can hear them calling.

We don't usually have snow for Christmas, but I think this year will be different. I think this year will be just like the winter of '95, when I saw them for the first time.

There were five of them, two men and three women. They were not human; no human is that perfect and that beautiful. Little tufts of fur grew from their ear tips and their strange eyes glinted with blue fire, as blue as the water of a glacier lake and just as cold.

They came walking out of the moor during a snowstorm, like ghosts out of nowhere. Their thin furs, which they had wrapped around their lean bodies, had turned white with the dusting of snow.

I was a young man then, young and arrogant, barely out of my teens. We all were, my brother James, my friends Jeremy, Peter, and Hagar, who was the oldest. Tall and lanky, his long hair the color of the setting sun, he was also the most arrogant.

The girls liked him; something I could never understand, until I saw him naked one day. I've never seen anyone with a trunk that huge. No wonder the girls liked him so much.

He was the first one to spot them and the first to step into their path.

Times have changed since then, but in those days not many strangers

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came through our village. The ones who did were always greeted with suspicion.

“Ho, strangers.” Hagar spoke boldly. “State your business!”

He should have looked closer into their eyes. We all should have, but we only saw their perfect bodies, especially the bodies of the women. Even the furs didn’t hide the shape of their breasts and flaring hips.

“We seek shelter from the storm,” one of them said, his voice soft and silky.

“We’ve never seen the likes of you,” Jeremy said, studying the strangers with open hostility.

The stranger laughed. “Where we come from humans know us well.”

“Where do you come from?”

“From there.” He pointed back into the moor.

“You live in the moor?” Peter asked.

“No. Way beyond that. We’ve been traveling for a long time.”

“We are tired and hungry,” one of the women said.

I was captivated by the sound of her voice. Her eyes traveled in my direction, locked with mine. A subtle movement of her body made the fur fall open and expose one of her breasts. Swallowing hard, I said with a voice suddenly gone hoarse, “You are welcome to stay the night with my family, but you’ll have to sleep in the barn.”

“That will be fine,” their leader said, “we thank you for your kindness.”

I was still staring at the woman. Only now I realized how young she looked. She was just a girl. The exceptional beauty of her face and her smile put me under a spell and I couldn’t seem to tear my eyes away from her. The girls in our village were ugly hags in comparison and I knew from that moment on I could never again look at any of them without thinking of her.

“I am Karima,” she said with her sweet, sultry voice.

My throat was frozen. I could only nod.

“Your father will be furious,” Jeremy whispered beside me.

“I’ll deal with my father,” I said, having found my voice again. It was time I stood up against him. I was not a boy anymore.

We broke camp and saddled our horses while the strangers stood watching us silently and patiently.

The village was only a little over an hour’s ride from our campsite. “We’d better hurry,” Peter said. “I think the storm is getting worse.”

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He was right. The wind had become stronger and was driving the wet snow into our unprotected faces. I looked at Karima, the girl I had spoken to. She seemed to shiver inside her thin fur as the force of the wind made it cling to her slender body. "You must be tired. Do you want to ride with me?"

She gave me a grateful smile and came running. My horse whinnied and shied away when she approached, but I calmed it with a few soothing words. Holding out my hand, I helped her up; lithely she swung herself behind me and snuggled against my back. Even through my rough shirt I felt the softness of her breasts.

"What about us?" asked one of the other girls, giving Peter a sweet smile.

Peter looked at me, and then shrugged. "Alright," he said gruffly then grinned lopsidedly. "My horse shouldn't feel your weight at all."

My brother James invited the last girl to join him on his steed. Jeremy and Hagar refused to be hospitable and digging their heels into the soft bellies of their horses, they rode away without a word.

"Your friends don't seem to like us," Karima said softly into my ear.

"They don't like strangers," I said and shrugged, trying to defend their attitude, even though I was furious with their rude behavior. "Perhaps it's because we get so few." I felt guilty about her male companions.

As if sensing my thoughts, she said, "Don't worry about my brothers. Rol and Blar are both strong. They don't mind running. It keeps them warm."

We rode a little slower than we would have liked to. Rol and Blar kept pace with us as they trotted silently behind us.

The temperature had dropped and even in my warm clothing I began to feel the chill. Turning me head, I asked Karima, "Are you cold?"

She pressed her body against my back and I could feel the heat radiating from it. "I'm fine," she said.

Her warm breath caressed my neck as she brought her face closer to my ear and I was suddenly acutely aware of her warm, supple body, her soft breasts and her slim arms around my belly. Her hands rested against my hips and I was hoping she wouldn't detect the pulsing of my loins.

Peter and James were a little ahead of us and barely visible in the thick white curtain of snow. Had we been on foot we would have been lost, but our horses knew the way. It was not the first time we had ridden to the edge of the moor.

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I began wondering about the five strangers. Where did they come from? Nobody ever ventured into the moor. There was nothing there but swamp, poisonous plants and deadly vipers. An unwary traveler would find himself lost soon in the thick fog if he didn't fall into a pit first or disappear in the quagmire or worse yet, if he wandered into the lair of one of the creatures that called the moor home.

The strange, eerie calls of the moor-dwellers had chilled my blood on many a moonless night when I had camped outside hunting night-hares.

"Is it far still?" the girl asked, shifting her weight behind me.

I shook my head then wiped the melting snow from my eyes with fingers stiff from the damp cold.

How could she not be chilled? What kind of creature was she?

We had ridden for over an hour and I was beginning to worry we might have strayed from the path. There was no sign of Hagar and Jeremy. The drifting snow covered the tracks of their horses quickly. Our horses were laboring now against the strong wind and their hoofs sank deep into the thick blanket of snow.

I looked back, searching the whiteness for the two men fearing we might have lost them, but then I saw their shadows not far behind us.

Surely they must be wary and tired by now! How could they not be?

It was getting dark. There would be no moons tonight. When I heard the baying of our neighbor's hounds, I knew we were close to my home.

* * * *

My father stood in the yard to greet us. He held the bright torch that gets its power from the sun in his large, calloused hands. The heavy fur coat he had thrown across his wide shoulders made him look like one of the giant cave-sloths that roamed the mountains to the north.

I knew he had been worried about us, but he would never admit to it. He seemed more concerned about the condition of the horses. "I hope you didn't ride them too hard," he growled. Only now he noticed our passengers. "You've brought guests I see," he said.

Karima had already slid off the horse. I did so more slowly, standing stiff-legged beside her. "This is Karima," I said, my teeth chattering and not just because of the cold. My father was a hard man. Big and imposing, he loomed even over me. As much as I tried to stand up against him, in his presence I always felt intimidated, more so than my younger brother James.

My father shone the bright light into Karina's face. I saw his gray

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eyes go narrow and his bushy eyebrows draw together into a frown. "Can I speak to you, boy?" he said to me. "Now! Alone."

"Can't it wait?" I asked. "I am tired and frozen."

"Now!" he said, his voice hard.

Rol and Blar had come up silently beside us. My father stared at them. His hand went to the big knife he always carried in his wide leather belt. "I don't know what my idiot son promised you, but no Xandra-born is welcome here!"

Had I not been as cold as I was, his voice would have made the blood freeze in my veins. I'd never heard him talk that way.

"We mean you no harm," Rol said soothingly. "All we want is a place to spend the night in a protected place. We'll be on our way as soon as the storm lightens."

"That can be days," my father snorted.

"Please." I felt Karima's warm hand clutching my arm. "We'll sleep in the barn."

Her nearness made me bold and standing straight, I looked my father in the eyes. "I promised them shelter, Father. Are you going to make me break a promise?"

Her fingers dug into my biceps and her free arm circled my waist. "Your son is a kind man," she said.

She had called me a man. There comes a time in every young man's life when he realizes that he is a boy no longer. I knew that day had come. "If you won't let them come into the house, I will join them in the barn," I said to him.

"So will I," James said unexpectedly behind me.

"That is your choice," my father said with a strangled voice. "But I promise you this: their kind will never cross the threshold of the door that leads into my house. I will not stay under the same roof, should that happen." With that he turned and stalked away, leaving us standing in the sudden darkness.

I waited until my eyes adjusted then I turned to James, "Let's take care of the horses." I noticed that he was holding the hand of the girl who had ridden with him.

Peter, who had silently been watching the encounter with our father, was still sitting on his horse, his passenger behind him, her head resting on his shoulder. "Did you expect something different from your father?" he asked with an accusing tone.

"No," I said stiffly. "I told you I would deal with it."

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“How?”

“I don’t know yet.” I grabbed the reins of my horse, started walking toward the barn.

From the direction of the main house came the anguished cry of a woman. The door was flung open, spilling light into the darkness and my mother came running out. “James, Frank Junior. Come into the house please.” She stood panting in front of me, half of her hair combed, the other half disheveled. She must have been getting ready for church.

The flame of the oil lamp she carried flickered inside its protective glass shade. She lifted the lamp to peer into my face. “You look cold, Frank. Come and warm up by the fire.”

“I cannot, Mother,” I said, avoiding her eyes. “Father forbade it.”

She stomped her foot. “Your father is a hard-headed old fool. Ever since the Darrin-twins came back he’s been babbling about the evil that rules the lands to the south. How we must steel ourselves to fight the coming invasion of the Spawn of Satan’s Mistress.” She touched my cheek. “It’s Christmas, Son, a time of love and sharing.”

“So you’ve been telling us, Mother. I haven’t seen anything yet.”

Her eyes fell on Karima who was still clinging to my arm. “You look cold, child. I welcome you into my house.”

“We wouldn’t want to cause you any trouble.” Karima pulled her fur closer around her shoulders.

“Nonsense! It’s my house, too, you know.” My mother brushed the snow from her hair then wrapped her arms around herself. “I’m chilled to the bone. Come let’s get all of you inside. You too, Peter.”

“I don’t think I should,” Peter said. “My folks will be worried.”

“I’ll send them a message on the far-speaker.”

“Your hospitality is greatly appreciated,” Rol said to my mother, “but my brother and I will stay in the barn. We are not comfortable inside fancy houses.”

My mother laughed. “We don’t have a fancy house, but you suit yourself. If you change your mind, feel free to join us.” She put her arm around Karima’s slim waist. “Come now. I’ll make all of us a nice hot mug of cider.”

“You and the girls go ahead. We’ll be there in a while. The horses need tending first,” I told my mother.

She patted my cheek again. “Good boy. I knew you’d listen to your mother.”

Shaking my head, I watched her and the girls walk to the house. She

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was a good woman, but not much different from my father. I'll never grow up even in her eyes.

James ran after them, took the lamp from her.

When we led the horses into the barn Peter chuckled. "Good boy," he mocked. "Good little mommy's boy."

"Oh, shut up!" I said irritated. "I bet your mother still tucks you in at night."

"Don't be mean, Frank," James chided me. "Peter is only joking. Besides he's right. Mother treats both of us like little children. And Father—well, neither one of us will ever measure up to him."

He pushed open the door to the stable. Warm, damp air and the smell of the animals came billowing out of the open door. Our horses pushed past us. They were anxious to get into the shelter of the stable.

Rol and Blar had followed us inside. "In here?" Blar asked.

I shook my head. "No. There is hay and straw in the big barn behind the stable. You can sleep up in the loft. I'll bring you some blankets."

His blue eyes reflected the yellow light from the lamp. "We don't need blankets," he said. "A bed of dry hay will do."

I pointed to the back of the stable. "There is a door back there. The barn isn't far away. I'd offer you a lantern, but I don't think it's a good idea. We can't afford to lose the feed for the animals. You'll have to grope your way in the dark."

They both smiled. "Our eyes are better suited to the dark than human eyes," Rol said. "We'll find the way."

* * * *

It was good to get back into the house. The three girls were curled up on furs in front of the fireplace while our mother was busy at the big woodstove. My two little sisters Lisbet and Sali sat cross-legged beside the girls, laughing and giggling.

Karima gave me a big smile when she saw me and rose to her feet. She had taken off her fur. The thin coarse-spun dress she wore covered her slim body snugly. A wide belt circled her narrow waist, accentuating her curvy hips. I'd never seen a girl with a body like hers and her sweet smile sent shivers down my spine.

Coming up to me, she said, "Your mother is such a nice person, and your sisters they are so lovely. And this house—it is nice. Thank you."

"Like my mother said, it's nothing fancy." I laughed, trying to cover up my embarrassment, feeling the blood rushing into my face. I turned to my mother. "Where is Father?"

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“He decided to go to church. In this weather! He is such a fool and so stubborn.”

“He never came for his horse,” I said.

She shrugged. “It’s only a couple of kilometers to the church. He took his torch with him.”

“Did you get through to my folks?” Peter asked.

“I did.” My mother nodded and wiped her hands on her apron. “The connection was bad, but your mother heard me.”

“She always forgets to hook it up to the sun-collector.” Peter took off his fur-hat and whipped it a few times against his leg, spraying water all over the wooden floor planks.

“Aren’t you going to the services tonight, Mother?” I asked.

“I was going to, but then it began snowing. I hope we don’t get too much. It’s been years since the last big snowstorm. Tommy Simms said the other day that the weather pattern is changing. He’s seen it happening before. It’s not good.” She made the sign of the cross on her chest.

“Old Tommy!” James laughed. “He’s been prophesying doom for a long time.”

“He’s not the only one.” She went back to her stove. “Others have said that bad things are going to happen.”

“Do I smell baking?” Peter asked.

My mother smiled over her shoulder. “I’ve got some biscuits in the oven. After all, it is Christmas. We can have some later, but first we’ll drink some cider. Father made a batch the other day.”

Karima pulled on my arm. “What’s Christmas?”

I shrugged. “An old tradition. It doesn’t mean much to me. Not anymore.”

“But what does it mean?”

“We exchange presents. We eat cake and drink cider. The old folks go to church in the morning and later, in the afternoon, we have a big community Christmas dinner in the church hall.”

“I don’t think the ducks are too fond of Christmas,” James commented, grinning.

“The ducks?” Karima gave him a questioning look.

“They are the main course,” James said, still grinning.

“Always joking.” Mother shook her head. “It wouldn’t hurt you boys to come to church with us.” She carried the pot with hot cider to the table. “Be a dear, James, and get the mugs from the cupboard.”

Karima was still clinging to me when I walked to the table. My little

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sister Lisbet gave me a strange look, lifted one eyebrow and smirked. Then she whispered something to Sali. Both girls giggled when they hopped toward the table.

“Come, sit down, all of you,” Mother called and waited until we were all seated. Then she bowed her head and said a little prayer of thanks. I was watching Karima and her sisters. It was clear they didn’t have a clue about what was going on.

“You girls don’t celebrate Christmas where you come from?” Mother asked over the rim of her steaming mug.

“No.” Karima shook her head and smiled. “We are not human. We don’t follow human customs.”

“Do you believe in the Creator? Surely you must worship a higher power?”

“We worship the Great Mother. After all, she is the one who created us.”

My mother sighed. “You poor misguided creatures. I’ve never been in the southlands, not many of us have, we like to keep to ourselves, but we are not completely ignorant about that part of this world. We know about the Xandra, the so-called Great Mother who claims to be a goddess. My own grandfather fled the south because of the Xandra’s thirst for control. His parents came to this world from a world called Earth, a place where everything was good, where there was nothing but peace. ‘Peace on Earth and Good Will to all human-kind’, that is what Christmas is all about.” She sighed again. “We believe in peace and we are teaching our children to believe it also.”

“It’s hard to find peace when every day is a struggle for survival,” I said, maybe a little too bitterly. “If Earth was so wonderful, why did our forefathers leave and come here?”

“Frank, Frank.” She touched my hand. “Try to believe in the spirit of Christmas.”

Karima stirred beside me. “I’m getting tired. I will go and join my brothers in the barn.”

I rose. “I’ll show you girls the way.”

She smiled up at me. “That would be nice.”

“Thanks for the cider and the biscuits,” Peter said, “but I must leave also.”

I threw one of the furs that hung by the door across my shoulders and grabbed the oil lamp. Snow blew in when I opened the door, the sudden draft made the oil lamps on the walls flicker. “Come,” I said,

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reaching for Karima. She clung to me as we fought the cold wind. Her sisters were close behind us.

It wasn't a good idea to take the burning oil lamp into the barn, but it was too dark and I didn't see a thing. When I opened the door I held the lamp high and looked for Rol and Blar, but I didn't see them. "Find yourself a warm spot in the straw," I said, "I'll wait here by the door with the light until you're settled."

Karima stood in front of me, looked into my eyes. The fur had slipped from her shoulders. She touched my cheeks with both hands and lifted up on tiptoes. Her lips were suddenly on mine, warm and soft. Then she put her arms around my neck, scraped my cheek with her tongue. "Stay with me tonight," she whispered into my ear.

Dumbfounded, I nodded, held her close for a moment. I became aware of her feminine scent. Between my legs, I felt my maleness press against the fabric of my pants.

"Come," she said with a smile of promise on her full lips.

"The light, I must douse the light." I had enough sense left in me to carefully turn down the wick. In the sudden darkness I let myself be led by Karima.

Surefooted she walked in front of me, pulling me with her. "Here," she whispered. "Here will be fine."

With deft fingers she began to unbutton my shirt, let her warm hands caress my shoulders and chest. "You have a hard body," she said huskily then she opened my belt, unbuttoned my pants. Slowly her hand moved down my belly, stroked it. When her fingers curled around my manhood, I groaned involuntarily. Helping her to push down my pants, I let them pool around my ankles and almost tripped when she let go of my pole.

She giggled and said softly, "Be careful. I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself."

I couldn't see her, but I heard the soft rustling as she slipped out of her own clothing. Then she was back in my arms; her soft naked body molded itself against me for an instant. Her warm lips burnt on my skin, traveled wetly down my chest. She pushed a hot tongue into my navel, slid it across my belly, around the base of my hard manhood.

I could feel the blood pounding in my temples and in the piece of iron that had suddenly grown below my belly. Licking my bag, she slid her lips along the underside of my mast and then she took the slippery knob between them, played her tongue around it. Her fingers dug into

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my buttocks and opening her lips wide, she slipped them over my mast, sucking my organ deep into her mouth.

Never before in my life had I experienced such pleasure and I wanted to shout with joy. Deep inside me pressure was beginning to build and when I thought I couldn't hold back any longer, she freed me.

Her arms reached up to pull me down. She turned around; I felt for her, touched her soft buttocks. I knew she was kneeling in front of me.

"That's good," she whispered. "Touch me."

I put my hand between her slightly spread thighs, touched the thick bush of her pubic hair. With one finger I searched for her slit, found it wet and slippery. She moaned, pushed backward and sucked my finger deep into her. Her inner muscles tightened around my probing finger. She cried out softly, pumped her pelvis furiously back and forth.

My pole was throbbing almost painfully now. Pulling my finger out of her, I tried to put her onto her back. When she resisted, I pushed harder, managed to slide on top of her. Her breasts pushed into my chest, soft and warm. Moving lower, I took one long nipple into my mouth, suckled on it.

Moaning and twisting, she pressed herself against my body. I put a hand between her thighs, but she refused to open them.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I've never been bred before by a man," she whispered. "I am a little afraid."

"You want me to stop?"

"No." She grabbed my head, pulled it toward her face. Hungrily, she began kissing me. Her mouth opened to let my tongue enter. She tasted strange, but not unpleasant.

Her passion was great, but still she wouldn't let me lie between her open thighs.

"I think I'm ready now," she moaned, "but it must be done my way, kneeling. You have to mount me from behind."

"I don't care," I panted getting impatient. Kneeling behind her, I put my rigid pole between her soft buttocks.

"Let me help," she said and grabbed my pole to guide it through the thick mass of hair.

I was surprised how easily I entered her and with a deep satisfying grunt I pushed forward.

She began bucking immediately. Bending over her writhing body I took a hold of her breasts, squeezed them gently as I moved in and out of

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her. She gasped and shuddered a few times, whimpering like a creature in pain. Warm liquid dripped onto my driving shaft.

Finally I could hold it no longer. With a hoarse shout I let go. How long it pumped out of me I don't know. It seemed forever. I thought I heard a deep-throated growl, but I didn't pay attention. Nothing existed, except for this furiously moving beautiful young woman underneath me and the pleasure-giving rigid piece of flesh that was somehow attached to me.

When it was over, she collapsed and I lay on top of her, totally spent and satisfied.

After a while she stirred. "You're heavy," she murmured. I slid off her. She turned around, moved into my arms.

"That was beautiful," she whispered, kissing me gently. "Thank you for your Christmas gift."

"I thought you didn't believe in Christmas?"

"I don't, but you do."

I kissed her back. "You're wonderful. I think I'm in love. Nobody has ever made me feel this way."

"You've never been with a female before?"

"Only once. With a girl from the next village. But it was over before I realized what was happening." I stroked her hair then kissed her forehead. "I never imagined I would ever meet a beautiful girl like you. Will you stay with me?"

She touched my lips with her finger. "I cannot. It wouldn't work, we are too different. And your father, he would not approve."

"Never mind my father!" I said hotly. "If you can't stay then I'll come with you."

"Hush," she murmured. "Don't talk. You don't know what you're saying. Go to sleep now."

I pulled the fur on top of us to keep away the chill.

* * * *

I slept in her arms that night. Never woke up once. In the morning we made love again. Afterward she lay in my arms beside me, her eyes closed.

Outside, the storm seemed to have died down, but through the small window in the back I saw that it was still snowing. It was getting light, time I fed the animals.

I disengaged myself gently from her embrace and stood up, looking around. Karima's sisters lay not far from us, snuggled together, fast

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asleep.

Rol and Blar were nowhere to be seen. I remembered telling them about the loft. Maybe they were up there.

Kneeling down, I bent and kissed Karima on the cheek. She stirred and smiled in her sleep. I kept looking at her. She was just so beautiful.

I picked up the oil lamp, before someone tripped over it. It wouldn't do to spill the oil all over the floor, not in here.

When I stepped outside, I found the storm had indeed let up. Large flakes of fluffy snow drifted slowly from the sky, adding to the deep blanket already on the ground. I stomped over to the stable with the wet snow clinging to my boots and pants. I felt like bending down and making snowballs and throwing them against the big barn door.

Then I smiled. I wasn't a kid anymore. Last night I had proved that I was indeed a man.

Karima, oh Karima. Why couldn't you have been a girl from one of the villages? Why couldn't you be human?

There was nobody in the stable. It was still early. James was probably just getting up. I was surprised when I didn't find my Father. He was usually in here before anyone else. It didn't matter. I could handle it by myself. I would prove to him that I had grown up. Some day I would have a son and I swore to myself I would always love him and treat him like a man. Give him respect; something my father had never given me.

I was almost done feeding and watering the horses, when James burst through the door. "Where did you sleep last night?" he asked. "I didn't find you in your room."

I smirked triumphantly. "Karima made a man out of me last night. All night. I believe I'm in love."

He almost dropped his bucket. "You sly tree-devil," he said, grinning. Then he became serious. "There'll be hell to pay when Father finds out."

"He won't find out—unless you tell."

"You know me better than that, brother."

"By the way, where is Father?"

He shrugged. "He wasn't there when I got up. I figured he'd be here."

"Not here."

"Mother doesn't seem to be worried too much. She says he's stayed away before, when Helm died. He drank himself into a stupor and spent

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the night at Old Eggert's place." James walked over to the milk-animals. "I'd better get the elks milked. Mother wants some fresh cream for the Christmas dinner today."

Somehow I had forgotten it was Christmas. "I guess we should take Mother to church."

"I guess," James said. He didn't sound too enthusiastic.

After we were done, we washed up in the stable with water out of the pump. It was always warm in the stable; even in a cold winter we didn't have to worry about the pump freezing up on us. I filled a clean pail and carried it back to the house.

Mother was already busy making breakfast. "Where are the girls?" she asked. I couldn't tell if she knew about me not being in the house all night.

"I'll go fetch them," I said.

All three girl were still asleep, all three of them lying curled up under the fur I had left with Karima. She was the first one to open her eyes when I touched her. Snarling, she snapped at my hand, a feral expression on her beautiful face. Then she relaxed and smiled up at me.

"Bad dream?" I asked.

She nodded and crawled out from under the fur. Still on all fours, she stretched her limbs and arched her back like an angry swamp-tiger. This was the first time I actually saw her naked body. In the heat of our lovemaking I had stroked her breasts, touched her round, firm buttocks, but I had not realized how beautiful and perfect they were.

She smiled when she saw me watching her. Rising, she padded closer and kissed me softly on the lips. "You can lie in my arms again tonight," she whispered into my ear. "If you want to."

My heart was pounding in my chest, my face burning and I felt my manhood rising. "I want to lie in your arms every night," I burst out. "I love you, Karima."

She laughed and went to retrieve her discarded clothing.

"Who dares to wake us this early?" said a sleepy voice. One of the sisters was peeking at me from the fur she had pulled up to her chin.

"My mother wants you to come for breakfast," I said, still watching Karima as she slipped into her clothing.

"Is there a place where we can wash up?" the sister asked.

"In the stable," I said. "There's a pump. The outhouse is there also."

"Tell your mother we'll be along shortly," Karima said.

* * * *

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After breakfast James hitched one of the horses to the old sled and we took our mother to church. Father still hadn't shown up. He wasn't in church, either.

The place was packed. It usually was for Christmas. Most of the time the church was half-empty. Only the old folks went regularly, the young people somehow didn't feel the urge to go. I know I didn't.

Reverend Mundelson spoke about the birth of a child who some say was a god. He spoke of a holy man named St. Nikkola, who came down to earth in a golden sled every Christmas to bring gifts.

Then we sang songs and prayed.

My heart wasn't in it. This was not Earth; this was a planet somebody with a great sense of humor had christened 'New-Eden'. If this was Paradise, what was Hell like? Every day was a struggle to survive. The soil we worked was fertile enough, but the weather harsh, unpredictable. What the hailstorms didn't destroy, the wild animals did.

Even as kids our father made us work the fields. No, this world certainly didn't live up to its name.

My thoughts began to drift. I was thinking of Karima. Sweet, beautiful Karima. Maybe I would run away with her, move to the south. It was warmer there, the weather more stable. I'd heard stories about a modern city where mostly new immigrants lived, people who believed in technology and traveled between the stars.

James poked me in the ribs. "Don't snore," he whispered.

I was glad when the service was over. It had stopped snowing. "It's going to be a beautiful Christmas day," Mother said as our sled glided over the snow.

When we turned into the narrow road that led to our farmstead, we saw a man staggering out of the little grove of trees not far from our house.

"That's Father," little Sali exclaimed.

"Looks like he's still drunk," James commented disgustedly.

Getting closer to the yard, we noticed that Father was carrying something across his shoulders. He dropped it into the snow in front of the stable.

It was a goat.

James and I jumped out of the sled and ran over to see what that was all about. "What happened, Father?" James asked.

"Look for yourself."

The goat's neck had been ripped open, red blood trickled from the

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ghastly wound into the white snow. Part of one hind leg was gone.

I bent down, touched the body. "Still warm, must have happened early this morning," I said. I looked at my father.

He had a grim expression on his unshaven face. "You're the hunter," he said. "You tell me what did this?"

I shrugged. "Obviously a big predator."

"Obviously a big predator," he mocked me. "Of course it was some large predatory animal that did this, idiot. But what kind?"

Anger flared up inside me, anger and hurt. "How should I know? I only hunt night-hares."

"Maybe it's time you go after some bigger quarry, something with teeth and claws," he said.

"The snow and the cold might be bringing the cave-sloths searching for food," James suggested.

Father shook his head. "No sloth ever ventured this far east. No, it must be something else." He stared at the bloody body of the goat. "It's like Tommy Simms said, something bad is going to happen." Then he glared at me. "Make yourself useful, boy, and butcher this animal. No need to waste good meat."

"But it's Christmas, Father," I protested.

"So it is. I see you've been to church. That should make your mother happy. You don't like those community dinners anyway. Go to it, boy!"

"I'll give you hand," James said.

"I hope it's alright if we change our clothes first, Father?" I couldn't help being sarcastic.

He just grunted something and stalked toward the house.

Mother wasn't happy. "It's Christmas," she told him, but she knew better than to argue with him. She insisted he clean himself up and take her to the community dinner.

James and I dragged the carcass into the stable where we hung it from one of the rafters. It didn't take long to skin the animal. James peeled off the two strips of loin and I cut up the rest of the meat. We wrapped everything in clean cloths and put the meat into the icehouse beside the barn.

Mother must have had a good talk with Father because he didn't object when Karima and her sisters joined us for supper. But he refused to talk with them. I still hadn't seen their brothers, Rol and Blar, which was probably just as well. I don't think Father would have allowed them into the house.

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None of the girls were big eaters. They seemed starved for fresh milk, but they hardly touched the boiled tubers or even my mother's baked goods. "You girls will waste away, the way you eat. You're already so thin," she said.

"You're very kind my lady," Karima said, "but we are not used to this kind of food."

"I always forget you're not really human even though you look like us. But you're stomachs can't be that much different." She filled their mugs. "At least you like the milk."

After supper Mother lit the candles on the Christmas tree. "Time to open the presents," she announced.

Lisbet and Sali, being still little, got most of the presents of course. Mother had knitted a sweater for me and sewn a jacket for James. She was good at that sort of thing. Father got a package of tobacco for his pipe. He seemed genuinely pleased since he had run out about a month ago.

"Where'd you get this?" he rumbled.

Mother smiled. "Traded it for a box of biscuits. From Walt Hoskins. He's given up smoking on account of his lungs going bad." She looked at the three girls. "I'm sorry. I didn't expect company for Christmas."

Karima patted her hand. "We don't believe in Christmas anyway," she said and smiled. "You've given us so much already." Her blue eyes locked with mine. "So much," she added.

I could feel the blood rushing to my face and hoped Father wasn't paying attention. I noticed James exchanging glances with Serena, one of the sisters. Couldn't blame him, she was as pretty as Karima.

Father went into the cellar and brought up a large gourd. Pulling the stopper out of the long neck, he put his nose to the opening. "I think it's ready. Get yourselves a mug, boys. Tonight you'll drink a man's drink," he said good-humoredly. "And bring one for me and one for your mother."

"I don't know if I should, Frank?" Mother gave a little laugh. "Your fermented cider is always so strong. You know how I get when I drink it."

Father chuckled. "It's Christmas, woman."

He didn't offer anything to the girls, but I don't think they would have liked it. After the second mug I felt as if someone had punched me against the side of my head.

"I'm getting tired," Father said, looking at Mother. He got out of his

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chair, stood on unsteady feet.

“So am I.” Mother yawned. “It’s been a busy day.”

“Would you like to come for a walk with me?” Karima asked, touching my arm. Her sweet smile made my head spin even more than the cider had done. I had a fair idea what she wanted from me and I didn’t mind at all.

* * * *

The fresh, crisp air cleared my head a little. Karima hung on my arm as we stomped through the snow.

“Look at all those stars,” she exclaimed. “I love the stars.”

I stopped walking and pulled her close. “And I love you,” I said and kissed her.

She clung to me. I could feel her tremble in my arms. Breaking the kiss, she looked at me with her clear, blue eyes. “You really love me?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, I do. I want us to stay together forever.” I pushed a strand of black, silky hair out of her eyes, covered her beautiful face with hot kisses.

Laughing, she pushed me away. “I’m not kneeling down here in the snow,” she said.

“In the barn, then. I will sleep with you again tonight—if you want me to.”

Her slim arms went around my neck. “I want you to,” she whispered.

The two moons were appearing above the treetops, throwing double shadows in front of us as we hurried into the barn. It was not complete darkness inside, some pale light filtered through the small window, enough to let me see where I was going.

We spread the fur on top of a soft layer of hay then lay on top of it.

“There is no hurry,” Karima said when I wanted to undress her. “We have all night.”

With tantalizing slowness she took off her clothes. When she was naked, she began removing mine. I let her have her way, enjoying her soft hands on my body and her wet long tongue on my skin as she licked my face, my chest and my genitals.

She let me lie between her spread legs, but when I tried to enter her, she pushed me away. “Not like that,” she said and smiled. “Never like that.”

“Why not?”

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“That is not our way.” She kneeled on the fur, arched her back, pushing up her buttocks. “Come,” she said, her breath coming in little gasps.

Her body quivered when I mounted her and when I slid into her hot, moist sheath she let out a deep, satisfied cry.

Her passion was even greater than the night before and so was mine. Seeing her sinuous naked body writhe and buck in my grasp made my pole harder than it had ever been.

She must have felt it too because she began pumping her pelvis with such furious speed that I almost slipped out of her. Claspng my hands around her hips, I steadied her movements, slowed her down.

When I filled her for the first time, she clawed at the fur and growled deep in her throat until I was finished. Then she looked back at me over her shoulder. Her blue eyes were hidden behind the curtain of her long black hair, but her lips were curled into an almost savage snarl. “Don’t stop!” she panted, her voice sounding strange.

Her inner muscles held my still rigid pole in a tight grip. Pushing her buttocks higher, she took me deeper into her belly and milked me by slowly rotating her hips and grinding her buttocks into my lap.

We were locked together like this for a long time.

Exhausted, I finally drew the fur over our sweat-drenched bodies and pulled her close to me. Holding her tight, I stroked her silky hair and told her again how much I loved her.

“You say you love me,” she said softly. “But can you protect me? Will you protect me?”

“With my life.”

* * * *

Aaron and Hart, the two men who worked for us, were already busy clearing some of the snowdrifts away from the outbuildings when I stepped out of the barn. Aaron waved and called something, but I didn’t hear what he said. I found James in the stable milking the elks. He smirked when he saw me come in.

I felt tired this morning, but happy. The cold water from the pump felt good on my body and woke me up.

“Had a good night?” James asked.

Grinning, I nodded. “How about you? Drink any more of Father’s cider?”

“Didn’t have to. Had other things to keep me entertained,” he said smugly.

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“Like what?”

“Like Serena and Deemah.”

“You don’t mean...?”

He got up and poured the milk from the small pail into a larger one. “I mean.” He grinned from ear to ear. “Those two girls demanded all my attention—all night long. I am totally exhausted.”

“Where did all this happen?” Sometimes James did like to spin little yarns.

“In the bunkhouse. Much more comfortable than the barn. I think I’m also in love.”

I still wasn’t sure if I could believe him, but I had seen him exchanging glances with Serena. It was possible and there was nothing unusual about it. Why couldn’t he fall in love with her? But also with Deemah? He couldn’t possibly love both of them.

“You’re not in love,” I said. “Nobody loves two girls at the same time. You’re in rut.”

“I’m not! I feel total love for Serena and for Deemah.” He looked suddenly like a lost kitten. “I’ve never felt this way before. It’s confusing. I don’t know what I should do.”

We were interrupted by someone busting open the door. It was Peter and he didn’t look too good. “They found Hagar!” he burst out.

“I didn’t know he was lost,” James said.

“He’s dead. Old man Perez found him this morning in his field. He’s been mauled by something. There are tracks in the snow. Come, maybe you can figure it out, Frank. You’re good at tracking.”

We saddled up two of the horses and followed Peter to the Perez farm. It was not far from ours and we made it in about fifteen minutes of hard riding.

It was Hagar indeed. He lay under one of the big thorn-trees. There was blood everywhere. The clothing had been stripped from his body; one of his arms was missing. He held a bloody knife in his other hand. That meant whoever or whatever had attacked him was wounded. When I looked at his genital area I almost threw up. There was nothing there but a gaping bloody hole. His thighs had been ripped to shreds, half of one eaten. On the other side of the tree lay the remains of a goat.

“My father found a goat yesterday,” I said. I heard retching sounds behind me. I guess I had a better stomach than James.

Old man Perez was sitting on a fallen tree trunk, his face gray, a crazed expression in his sunken eyes. “He was a good boy,” he

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mumbled. "Used to help me out in the fields." He looked at me with those crazy eyes. "It's beginning, you know. We knew it would happen some day. This is not the Lord's world. He's abandoned us."

"What do you think did this, Frank?"

I shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, Peter." I searched the red snow for tracks. They weren't hard to find and they confirmed what I had already suspected.

"Maybe it was one of those wild moor-hounds that Jeremy claims to have seen."

I shook my head. "No hound did this, besides no one has ever seen one except for Jeremy and you know his talent for making up stories. No, this was a more real predator. I've seen tracks similar to these when I went hunting in the mountains last summer. This looks like it was done by a mountain-skate."

"But they never come out of the mountains." Peter looked at the clearly visible prints in the snow. "So I've heard."

"He must have surprised it after it killed the goat." I followed the set of tracks that led away from the scene and another suspicion of mine was confirmed. "More bad news," I said to Peter who had followed me. "There are two of them. Look—here," I pointed to a red spot inside one of the prints. "This one was wounded. Notice the drag mark in the snow. Left front leg. The other track is close beside it, but easily distinguishable." I straightened. "We could track them."

"Not just the three of us," James protested. "We didn't bring any weapons. If they're mountain-skates, as you suggest, then they're dangerous. We wouldn't stand a chance against two of them. Even if one is wounded."

"We'll have to organize a hunt," Peter said.

"It'll take time, by then they'll be gone." I looked back at Old man Perez. He was still sitting on his tree-trunk. Poor fellow. This would put him over the edge. His wife had been killed by a wild Elk-bull a couple years back and his son, Darsy, had drowned just last fall when he got caught in a freak storm while fishing in the big lake to the north.

"Anyone else know about this yet?" I asked.

Peter shook his head. "He sat there when I rode by his farm this morning. I saw his horse wandering around in the field and thought it odd." He looked at me. "I figured I'd pay you a visit; see how things were with you and your guests. Your father calmed down yet?"

"He's alright; at least he was last night. He even offered us some of

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his precious cider. I haven't seen him this morning though."

"Maybe he can help, he's an experienced hunter."

I drew myself erect. "And I'm not?"

"Calm down, Frank. You're the best, you know that, but your father, well, he's been around longer. Maybe he knows the habits of the mountain-skats. It can't hurt to ask him."

"It'll just prove to him that we are not capable. I'd rather not. We'll handle this ourselves."

"Someone needs to tell Hagar's folks. They'll have to pick up his body."

"You're right. People need to be warned to be on guard. We wouldn't want anyone else to get hurt." I looked in the direction the tracks were leading. The skats would have to hide somewhere, probably in the thick of the woods where you couldn't get to with the horses anyway. Wounded animals will seek shelter to heal their wounds. Peter was right; it would be foolish to go after them now. "I'll go and tell Hagar's folks. You take care of Old man Perez." I sighed. "And this right after Christmas."

Hagar's father was busy in the yard chopping wood when James and I rode in.

"Ho, what's up boys?" he greeted us, straightening his bulky body and leaning on his axe.

I felt awful about what I had to tell him. Hagar was his youngest, his only son. The other three of his children were all girls. Swallowing a couple of times, I said, "Something bad has happened. It involves Hagar."

"Is that boy in trouble again?" he rumbled.

"It's worse than that. He's dead," I blurted out.

He stared at me with that uncomprehending look people get when you tell them something they don't want to hear. Then he picked up a chunk of wood and chopped it in half. And then another one.

I saw that sudden look of anguish in his eyes and that's when it hit me too. Hagar was dead! It was so easy to say it, but hard to accept. He had been a longtime friend. We had grown up together and I couldn't imagine him not being around.

I dismounted and touched the old man's shoulders. "He died bravely," I said.

He shook off my hand and turned to look at me. "Did you have a hand in it?"

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I was shocked to hear him say that. “No, of course not. A mountain-skate got him. He wounded one of them. Why would you think I had something to do with his death?”

He stood with slumped shoulders. “When he came home Christmas eve he was babbling about how you’d be sorry. How angry he was with you. Talked about you messing with things you shouldn’t. I didn’t pay much attention. What was he talking about?”

“Just about some girls we picked up. Nothing that would cause his death, trust me.”

“Sorry, Frank. I didn’t mean what I said. You’re a good boy. Where is he?”

“At Old man Perez’s place, back in the fields.”

He sat down on the tree stump he used as a chopping block. The axe lay forgotten beside him. Staring at his hands, he said, “I’m getting old. He was supposed to take over the farm. How am I going to tell his mother? I don’t think I can look at his dead body. I’ll have to tell the coffin-maker to go and pick him up.”

“You want us to go tell the coffin-maker?”

“I’d appreciate that. Did you find his horse?”

“No, we didn’t. Probably got spooked and ran off. It’ll come home eventually.”

“I’m sure it will.” He blew his nose noisily and wiped it with his sleeve.

“Sorry about Hagar. He was a good friend.” I said lamely. “We’ll ride now and look for the coffin-maker.”

* * *

Mother cried when we told her about Hagar. Father cursed loudly and went to get his longbow.

“Where are you going, Frank?” she asked.

“First the goat, now Hagar. Somebody has to stop them.”

“You can’t go out there by yourself. Be reasonable, Frank.”

“I am reasonable, woman.”

“We’ll come with you, Father,” I said.

“Good. Here is your chance to prove your manhood.” He looked at James. “You can come too, boy. If you’re up to it.”

“I’m up to it.”

I went to get my own longbow and a quiver with steel-tipped arrows. James preferred a crossbow. He had never gotten used to a longbow, maybe it was because his muscles weren’t fully developed yet.

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We took ropes too, just in case. On the way we met Peter and Jeremy. Both carried spears. "We figured you might go hunting," Peter said.

The tracks were still visible and easy to follow until we got to the forest. The trees weren't too thick here and the horses had no trouble maneuvering between them. We may have ridden for an hour when the underbrush became thicker and Father had to dismount in order to see the paw prints in the snow. When I dismounted also, he waved me off. "Stay on your horse just in case we stumble upon them. Have your bow ready. I'm counting on you, Son."

He had called me 'son'. He only did that when things were serious.

When I saw Father kneeling down, I asked, "Find anything?"

"One of them is wounded alright," he said. "They bedded down here for awhile. There is more blood. And it is fresh. Maybe half an hour old. Be on guard."

Just when the brush became too thick for the horses to get through the spur veered off to the right, heading back into the open forest. Father got on his horse again, but he told us not to be fooled and relax. "These animals are cunning. They might be lying in wait to pounce on anyone following them."

We had barely ridden for maybe ten minutes when my father held up his hand. He pointed forward and put a finger on his lips then he dismounted and began crawling.

I looked in the direction he was heading and saw a clearing ahead. My nerves were on edge. It was too quiet; we should be hearing the twittering of birds and other small tree dwellers. Sliding off my horse, my bow ready, I slowly followed Father.

When he reached the edge of the clearing, he rose and shaded his eyes against the sun. Coming up beside him, I saw what he was looking at. We had found them. They had brought down an Elk-bull. Except there weren't just two, but four of them, tearing into the carcass, ripping out large chunks of meat with sharp claws and long teeth. All in complete silence.

"I'll go tell the others," I said and turned to walk back.

A roar and scream made me swing around. The skat must have been lying in ambush. It had its teeth buried in my father's arm, which he had thrown in front of his chest to protect his throat. His longbow was useless and he dropped it. With his right hand he groped for his knife, but the animal was strong, pushed him to the ground.

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I drew back the string on my own bow, took aim, trying to get a good shot without hitting my father.

“Shoot!” he shouted, struggling to keep the snarling beast away from his throat. “I can’t get to my knife.”

My hands were shaking. What if I missed? What if I killed my own father? I knew there was little time left to save his life. Then I remembered his words. ‘Always shoot as if your life depended on it. Think of nothing else.’ He had taught me since I was barely old enough to hold the small bow he had made especially for me. It wasn’t my life that depended on me it was his.

I shut out everything, just concentrated on my target. When I released the arrow I knew with absolute certainty it would find its mark.

The arrow struck. Those metal tips were sharp, designed to rip apart tender organs, cut muscle tissue and tendons. With an angry roar the beast let go of my father’s arm. My father twisted away from it and pushed his long knife into the animal’s chest. It rolled away from him, crouched, ready to spring at him again then it collapsed, shuddered and lay still.

My father rose, sheathed his knife and held his bleeding arm.

The others in our party had come running in the meantime shouting.

“Get on your horses. We’ll have to get the rest of them,” Father commanded.

We rode as fast as the horses would go toward the four beasts. They had left their grisly feast and watched us approach. There was nowhere to run for them because of the pond behind them and the deep ravine to their right. We had them cornered.

One of them, the largest, charged us with a roar and flashing teeth. James stopped his horse and aimed his crossbow. His arrow hit true, went deep into the chest of the animal. Loading another arrow, he spurred his horse to keep on going, but the animal refused. James jumped off the horse, approached the three skats who were watching him. He shot another one and kept on walking.

“Come back, James,” Father called. “Don’t get too close to them.”

The last two attempted to circle around us. I tried to cut them off, but my horse wouldn’t go any further so I followed James’ example and dismounted.

I had a closer look at our quarry now and realized that we were not facing mountain-skats. They were similar, but not as large, and the coloring was different. The one I was stalking, a magnificent black-

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coated creature, looked at me with its strange blue eyes. I aimed my arrow, hesitated when the beast kept looking at me.

“What are you waiting for?” Peter yelled.

There was something about the way the animal looked at me. It began to slink past me. I still didn’t shoot.

I saw James running toward us, his crossbow lifted. He let an arrow fly; it glanced off the shoulder of the beast. By this time it had passed by me. With a defiant scream it took off, toward the forest. Peter and Jeremy followed it on their horses, waving their spears, but it disappeared among the trees.

In all this confusion the other one also managed to escape.

“Why didn’t you shoot?” James demanded to know. “You had a perfect shot.”

“It’s alright, James,” Father said. “That happens sometimes after a kill. You lose your nerve. You did alright, Frank. You remembered everything I taught you. You saved my life. I won’t forget.”

“What about the two beasts that got away? We could have had them both.”

“We’ll get them. You might have wounded one of them. Now let’s see what we actually got. Those aren’t mountain-skats.” He looked at his arm. “And then we better get to the doctor. I’m bleeding all over the place.”

* * * *

While James took Father to the doctor I rode home to let Mother know what had happened. She was probably worried sick.

Just before I came to the junction where our farm road cut into the main road, I saw a black shape coming out of the small forest next to our land heading for our yard. I grabbed my bow then and nocked an arrow. Galloping at top speed, I tried to cut off the beast before it reached the stable. What if Mother or one of the girls was outside, or in the stable or barn?

The animal must have seen or heard me coming because it broke into a run. I saw that the door to the barn was open and feared the worst. I couldn’t reach it before the beast disappeared inside the barn.

Jumping off my horse while it was still moving, I ran to the barn, my bow ready. Once inside, I let my eyes adjust to the semi-darkness, alert for the intruder. I saw a black form lying on top of the fur in the back of the barn. It watched me as I slowly advanced, trying to get close enough for a good shot. I couldn’t afford to miss.

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The beast lay there, sides heaving, staring at me. My arrow was trained at its chest. I was within range, but still I hesitated.

Something seemed to be wrong with my eyes. The shape of the animal began to waver, became blurry, changed, and then instead of looking at a beast I looked upon the form of a naked woman.

“Please, don’t take my life,” she pleaded.

I felt my bow slowly sliding from my numb fingers. “Karima,” I cried out in anguish, my heart suddenly trying to burst out of my heavy chest, when air refused to enter my dead body.

She sat up, reached out for me. I rushed to her side, sank to my knees and took her into my arms, covered her face with wet kisses. She cried out softly when I pulled her to me. Letting go of her, I asked, “Are you hurt?”

She nodded and touched her arm. I saw the gaping wound running along her left shoulder. Blood had stained her arm and ribcage red. “It needs to be treated,” I said.

She shook her head. “I cannot take that chance.”

“You must. I will not lose you.”

Gently touching my cheek, she smiled sadly. “Do you love me that much?”

I could only nod. Looking deep into her eyes, I asked, “What kind of creature are you, Karima?”

“I am a shape shifter,” she said, “a creature of the Xandra. Humans believe we are animals, but we are not. We think. We love. Just like you.”

“Do you love me?” I asked.

“I do. But I know it is wrong. It can never be.” She sighed deeply. “I saw you and your brother kill my brothers and my sister without remorse.”

I grabbed her hands. “I didn’t know. I only saw five savage beasts. Your brothers murdered my friend Hagar, almost killed my father. You should have told me what you are. We could have worked something out.”

She laughed. “We’ve had dealings with humans before, Frank. We know your kind.” She studied my face. “You told me you would protect me. Will you protect me now?”

“With my life,” I said, “as I promised you.”

“Step away from that creature,” said a voice suddenly behind me. “Let me put an end to its miserable existence.”

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I turned around slowly. He held my father's longbow awkwardly in his hands. "Jeremy," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"I followed you. Hagar suspected what kind of creatures they were; that's why they murdered him. They're wercats. Now let me kill the last one."

Karima's fingers dug into my shoulders, as she clung to me. "Protect me, please," she whispered. "Protect me and your son, which I carry inside my belly."

"Don't listen to her whisperings, Frank!" Jeremy said sharply. "She is evil. She put you under her spell. Your thoughts are not your own."

"My son?" I said to her.

"Yes, your son."

"How do you know?"

"I know, my love." She kissed my neck. "I've taken your seed into my womb. Our joining was fruitful. You will have a son."

"Move aside, Frank! Let's end it right now!"

"No," I said. "You must kill me first."

"Frank!" His arm shook from the strain. "You don't know what you're doing. She has seduced you. Will you betray your lifelong friends, your family? Just to protect this evil creature?"

"She's not evil." My eyes fell on my bow, which lay not far from me. I knew Jeremy was not a good marksman, and the bow he held was not his own. I could easily reach mine before he could nock another arrow.

The decision was taken out of my hands, when a dark shadow streaked from the protection of the hay bales, roaring angrily. Jeremy went down, his scream cut off suddenly when sharp fangs ripped out his throat.

I jumped up, raced for my bow. The wercat let go of Jeremy, crouched on powerful hind legs and hissed at me with bared teeth. I had my bow drawn, but again I hesitated.

A defiant scream from behind me, then a black shape glided in front of me. The two wercats faced each other, hissing and spitting.

Karima was the first one to shift into her human shape and her sister did so a few moments later. I recognized Serena, which meant James had killed Deemah.

"Rol and Blar didn't murder Hagar," were Serena's first words. He found me after I brought down one of the goats. When I took on human form to talk to him, he demanded I couple with him. I agreed, but Hagar

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tried to kill me while we were locked together.”

“So you killed Hagar?”

She shook her head. “No, Blar did. He came upon us just as your friend was about to slit my throat.”

“Why did you have to mutilate his body?” I asked.

“Our reasoning is different when we are in our natural form.”

I stared at the body of Jeremy. “You cannot stay here,” I told both of them. “Not now. They may have told others about you. You are not safe here anymore.” Karima’s shoulder was bleeding again. “I will get some of my mother’s healing-salve to put on your wound to prevent infection.”

She smiled. “We heal fast. Don’t be concerned.”

Putting my arms around her, I said, “But I am. I love you and I don’t care what you are.”

I took them to the edge of the moor in the old sled. Both girls shed their clothes, rolled them into a small bundle.

“Remember me next Christmas,” Karima said softly before she changed back into her natural form. She picked up her bundle with her teeth and padded away.

I waited until they were lost in the mist that always hangs over the moor.

* * * *

Sometimes on cold nights, when the moons are high and the fog rolls across the moor, I listen to their calls.

I miss her the most at Christmas time.

Christy's Web Journal - Bravenet Web Journal
<http://cpoff.bravejournal.com/>

From Whiskey Creek Press and now available: Internet Bonds #1: The Rebirth of Rachel, Internet Bonds #2: Black Heart and Internet Bonds #3: Charlotte Mastered. Coming soon: Internet Bonds #4: Memphis Belle and Internet Bonds #5: Doctor, Heal Thyself
Dante's Flame (October 2005) - the first in the EYES OF DARKNESS series followed by Spark of a Wolf (November 2005) and Love Hurts (December 2005)
Look for Entranced by Jasmyne (February, 2006), Chase for an Angel (March, 2006) and Hellfire (May, 2006)
Coming soon from Midnight Showcase: Lost Love

Yule Desires
by
Christy Poff

CHAPTER 1

Mara Bergeron made her way down Greenwich Street in the West Village after Christmas shopping on Fifth Avenue. She'd finished most of it weeks before, but had to pick up one or two last minute gifts at Saks Fifth Avenue. Coming out of the store, she'd taken in the elaborate holiday display at Rockefeller Center before taking the subway to return home to her loft.

She'd been fortunate when she arrived in New York two years before. Blonde haired with innocence in her bright blue eyes, she got a job at a prestigious advertising agency making enough to afford the loft. In a short time, she'd made the massive open space of a warehouse into a comfortable home with a magnificent view of the city. *And they said I couldn't do it.*

She stepped off the freight elevator and put her bags down at the doorway to get her keys out. She unlocked the door and took everything inside. After she did, she picked up her mail seeing nothing of interest until she found an envelope with only her name handwritten on it. Recognizing the writing, she ripped it open then groaned. The card said

My love to you at Christmas, may it be everything you hope for...

His note inside caught her attention.

*I truly wish I could be with you but
I've been summoned to the family's
annual Christmas celebration.
I'm sorry and hope you can forgive me.*

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All my love, J

“Damn you!” she cursed. She’d sworn before she left Pennsylvania not to get involved with a man with *complications* as she referred to his wife and his mother’s tight reign on his life. She’d gone against her vow after falling madly in love with Jared St. Nicholas, a stockbroker at one of Wall Street’s largest firms after they met at a party in Manhattan. Love at first sight, she became his mistress—in every respect of the word—cherishing every moment they spent together.

Jared towered over her slightly by about six inches. His dark hair only served to bring out the color in his green eyes while his smile overwhelmed her from the minute they met. Her pussy clenched thinking about his hard body and how much she loved running her fingers up and down the length of it.

Needing honesty between them, he’d told her from the start he had a wife though they hadn’t been a couple for some time. He warned her about his family and his mother’s demands for holidays and St. Nicholas family responsibilities, and she lived with it, but her disappointment got the better of her. She put the card on the counter and went to the window looking out over a snowy city always on the go. A tear ran down her cheek, but she wiped it away, berating herself for her foolishness.

Mara realized she had no right to be mad. He’d told her all this up front and she’d entered into their affair with her eyes wide open. She went back to the bags from Saks and pulled out the leather portfolio with his initials on it she would give him when they finally celebrated Christmas. Running her fingertips over his initials increased the longing so she wrapped it up and placed it under the Christmas tree they’d decorated together the weekend before.

“Jared, this... no, I promised I wouldn’t push you,” she said, clenching her hands. The dreams of them together and married caused her body to react. She wanted him and needed his cock inside her aching pussy because only he could satisfy her, but now it wouldn’t happen until after New Years—two weeks of agonizing desire needing him. *It’s a hell of a way to spend the holidays. Damn it!*

* * * *

Jared St. Nicholas left the card under Mara’s door hating the fact he wouldn’t spend Christmas where he needed and truly wanted to be, but his mother always got what she wanted. On his drive out of the city and away from Mara, he went over what he had to do.

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In his briefcase lay the divorce papers. He no longer wanted to be married to a woman he had not been in love with for several years. She'd had her dalliances while he worked to become a driving force on Wall Street. He'd been a workaholic, his love affair with his job obvious until he met Mara Bergeron. She made him see he could enjoy life again even after he'd been brutally honest with her. She'd been a wonder and he wanted her in his life in every way, including as his wife and, hopefully, his obedient submissive. It wouldn't happen until he divorced Julia, though the problem with this had been Julia's flat out refusal to give up the life she'd become accustomed to.

He smiled, looking forward to seeing her face when he broke the news to her. He'd finally found what he needed to get her signature on the papers and, if he had to use it, he would.

"Try to get out of this."

He pulled his Lexus to the front of his family's huge estate in the Hamptons. A young man ran to the car door so he could park the car as soon as Jared got out.

"Can you get my bags out of the trunk and see they are put in my room?"

"Yes, Mister St. Nicholas."

"Jared, I'm glad you're here. I was afraid you wouldn't show up." Elinore St. Nicholas met him at the door, giving her son a kiss after he bent his six-foot frame to meet her shorter height. No matter how tall his mother was, she still ruled with an iron fist and he loved her dearly. He hated having to hurt her by telling her about Julia. The last thing he wanted to admit to his mother was his failure at marriage.

"And be accused of ruining Christmas? Never."

Jared's mother hugged him as they went into the living room.

"Is Julia here yet?"

"No, but I need to know something. When do you intend to divorce her?"

"Mother?" he asked, surprised.

"I was talking to Mary the other day and she told me Julia's openly seeing some Broadway type. You deserve better."

"I found someone who I want to spend my life with. I thought you..."

"My darling, I've known about her affairs for years. She doesn't know the meaning of discretion."

"You should have said something."

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"You know me. I don't like to interfere in your life."

"Not much," he smiled, kissing her cheek. "The papers are in my briefcase."

"Good."

* * * *

Julia St. Nicholas arrived late, as usual. As soon as she did, she went straight to the room she'd share with Jared in order to keep up the appearance of a happy marriage. Why she put herself through this, she didn't know. If she sued him for divorce, she could get alimony, remain comfortable financially and would give up wasting her time at St. Nicholas family functions where she did NOT want to be.

A servant put her bags in the dressing room and left.

"I see you're on time, as usual."

"Don't start, Jared."

"It's good to see you, too, Julia. How are you?"

"Miserable. You know I hate this."

"Then make it easy on yourself and sign this."

"What is it?" she asked suspiciously.

"Divorce papers. In order to end this travesty of a marriage, I'm prepared to give you five hundred thousand over five years then..."

"Is that all? I don't think so."

"If you don't want lover boy named in the tabloids, I would agree."

"What do you mean?"

"*The Daily News* is prepared to print a picture of the both of you in tomorrow's edition. You promised me you would be discreet and you agreed to my terms. With this, you've broken our agreement and you get what you get."

"This is..."

"I feel I'm being extremely generous."

"You can't be serious."

"I am and it will hold up under scrutiny."

"You bastard!"

"Julia, you did this to yourself."

Julia grabbed the pen he offered and signed the papers without reading them, safe in the knowledge he would be fair—Jared St. Nicholas the epitome of the term. She called the servant back to take her bags back to her car then left the house without saying good-bye. Relieved, Jared went to find his mother and give her the good news.

CHAPTER 2

Mara took a shower, poured a brandy and tried to watch television. She surfed through channels unable to find anything of interest, not even *White Christmas*. She wanted Jared, no more, no less. She felt her need and desire for him intensify, hating their separation. She desperately wanted to ease her body's tension, but refused to. They had a unique relationship and pleasuring herself would equal betrayal, something she couldn't do to him.

They learned early what path their affair would take. Soon after they began seeing each other, she willingly became his submissive, a slave to his dominance and she loved it. He controlled her when they were together, though out in public he took care not to embarrass her.

They'd gone to one club devoted totally to the life and she saw the different degrees of dom/sub relationships. He noticed her reaction to a sub being passed between several masters. Her grip tightened on his hand and he inwardly smiled. He wanted her for himself and didn't want to share. He wanted what they had between them to remain between them, because if he could find a way of changing things, he would.

"I will never do anything or tell you to do anything you cannot handle and I swear, I will never share you with another Dom."

He remained true to his word.

They had come back to the loft where he brought out the very submissive side of her personality, Mara submitting willingly. She thought of that night when he removed her clothes and gave her a gold necklace with a diamond teardrop suspended from it. He'd asked her to be his submissive and in accepting the necklace, she accepted his possession of her in every way.

On fire for Jared, Mara's body cried out for his, praying he would find some way to make Christmas perfect for her. *Oh, well. Maybe next year.*

HOLIDAY VOICES

* * * *

Near midnight, Mara lit some candles, adding their faint glow to the one created by the tiny lights on the Christmas tree. She felt closed in, her body sensitive to anything touching it. She removed the gown she'd put on earlier, replacing it with a diaphanous robe made of an extremely thin material. The soft touch of it against her sensitive nipples drove her crazier.

She looked in the antique floor mirror, her piercings catching the candlelight. Shortly after they started seeing each other, he'd asked her if she'd have her nipples and navel pierced. She agreed without question, liking the idea of the intimate jewelry and the constant arousal. Mara loved the sensations she felt, especially when he would take her nipple between his teeth and his tongue played with it.

Mara felt her reaction to the memories as damp heat settled between her legs. Her clit throbbed with her heartbeat as she fought to ease the sexual tension, something she could quickly accomplish with one of her toys, but she refused.

"Jared!" she cried. "Two weeks is too fucking long!"

Mara went into the bathroom to draw a hot bath hoping it would relax her. She thought she heard a noise and went into the other room to see what might have caused it. She looked around, seeing nothing wrong. She checked the front door, still locked.

"Don't turn around," a gruff voice ordered.

"Please, I don't have any cash."

"Put your hands on the door and assume the position."

"What?" she asked stunned. "Who are you?"

"Do it," he commanded. Even though she could tell he made an effort to disguise it, she thought there was something familiar to his voice. She did as he ordered and waited. He blindfolded her, then spun her around to face him.

Her breath caught as he ran a thinly gloved hand over the length of her body. She rued her body's reaction, not wanting to give the intruder the wrong impression. She thought about calling 9-1-1, but the phone sat on a table across the room – too far away.

"Please, don't..."

"I watched you at the club the other night. Does your master enjoy you sucking his cock?"

"That's none of your..."

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"I am a dominant. You are a submissive. Don't forget your place," he warned.

"You're not my master."

"Do I have to punish you?" he growled, his meaning evident.

"No, my apologies. Yes, my master enjoys when I..."

"Show me what's so special about the way you suck cock."

"Please, don't make me betray my master," she pleaded. She heard nothing, worried what he might do next. She didn't have long to wonder. He led her to where Jared had set up his *dungeon* for their forays into bondage. The man shackled her ankles to the floor. Then he cuffed her hands out to her side after he slid her robe off.

Her breath caught as a cool draft brushed over her heated skin.

"I can't betray my master," she tried to tell him, hoping he would change his mind.

"Jared will understand. We've done this before."

"He never told me. He vowed not to share me."

"He doesn't have to tell you. You are his slave and our agreements have nothing to do with you."

She gasped when he placed a lightweight collar on her. She heard him lock it in place, her mind racing.

"Please, don't do this," she begged.

"Why?"

"Jared won't..."

"Jared's not here, I am. Now, you will not say a word while I decorate your luscious body. One word and I will punish your indiscretion."

Mara felt him attach a chain to the collar at the side of her neck. He crossed it to her opposite nipple, threaded it through the ring then around her back. She felt it slip through her navel ring and between her legs. The second chain crisscrossed her body the same way only in the opposite direction then went between her legs. He pulled both up the length of her spine putting light pressure on her clit. She wanted to come desperately, her body going against her will. When he added a chain between her nipples she gasped as shocks went through her from the erotic thrills he sent through her.

"Perfect," he commented as he clipped the chains to the main clasp on the back of her collar.

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She heard him move her antique floor mirror in front of where he held her. Standing off to the side in the shadows, he tugged on the blindfold, removing it.

“Look at the gorgeous decorations,” he commanded. She caught her breath as she saw the chains draped around her like garland on her tree. Mara liked what she saw, but refused to admit her feeling to her captor.

“Why are you doing this?”

“What if I told you I was part of Jared’s Christmas gift?”

“I don’t even know you.”

“You do, slave. Believe me, you do.”

He replaced the blindfold, Mara trembling. She couldn’t figure out what he was doing next until he explained he was setting her up to receive a call from Jared. He placed a headset in her ear so she could answer it without the need to use her hands. She heard his footsteps as he went to the door then left the loft. The phone rang a few minutes later, Mara answering it.

“H-h-hello?”

“Mara, are...”

“Jared, what’s going on?”

“Didn’t Troy explain? He’s part of my gift to you. I can’t make you go through two weeks without...”

“Please, Jared, I want you. No one else. I’ll promise I’ll behave.”

“I know you will, but my slave will accept this without questioning my decision. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master Jared.”

“Good. I love you, Mara. Remember, this is for you. It’s not betrayal because I command this. You’ll be fine.”

“I love you, Jared. I swear I do.”

“Then enjoy.”

The call ended, Mara feeling lost while desperately wanting release. She heard the door open then close followed by footsteps. Trembling, she waited.

“Relax, Mara,” he ordered. “I’m going to make this one memorable Christmas Eve.”

“Yes, Master,” she said, gasping when he pinched her nipples. Her hands clenched as heat coursed through her. She sensed him kneeling before her, groaning at the touch of his tongue as he lapped the traces of desire from her legs. His tongue lapped at her pussy, drinking her essence while his assault on her breasts continued.

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“You have gorgeous tits, woman.”

“Thank you, Master,” she gasped as his tongue thrust into her pussy.

“Come for me, Mara,” he commanded. She cried out when a climax washed over her. Her present master’s tongue-fucked her, making her scream several times. Each time she came, he squeezed her breasts, shocks rippling through her.

He stood up, kissed her then pulled back.

“I want to suck your tits and fuck you until you scream.”

“But, Master Jared, why can’t I see you?”

“Are you sure of what you think you know?”

“Only you, Jared, can make me come like you just did. My master wouldn’t share me because of a promise he made several weeks ago. He would not command my betrayal.”

She heard him undress and come back to her. He kissed her, finger-fucking her using three fingers to drive her insane. He suckled her nipples, nipping them when she cried out. While the orgasms overtook her, he thrust into her, his cock putting light tension on the chains as she cried out again. Jared pressed his fingers to her lips and she sucked them like she took his cock, while tasting her desires.

“Jared, I’m sorry. I can’t behave. I need you too much. Please, may I come for you?”

“I love you, Mara,” he said, pulling out of her in order to release her. He carried her to bed then used the scarf to bind her hands behind her after he positioned her on her knees.

“You have made me extremely proud of you. Suck my cock, wife-to-be.”

She hungrily took him, his cock filling her mouth before he exploded into her. She swallowed every bit wanting more. He drew her up to him, kissing her roughly.

“You’re beautiful, Mara.”

“Only for...wait a minute. What did you call me?”

“Wife-to-be.”

“But how? Your wife?”

“She signed the papers a little while ago. I went to the Hamptons with them figuring it would take the better part of the holidays to convince her to do the right thing. She arrived, stayed all of twenty minutes and left. She’s out of our lives.”

“But what about your mother?”

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“She can’t wait to meet you. She’s known for a long time about the marriage, but kept quiet. She appreciated our putting her feelings first, but she wants me to finally be happy.”

While he gave her the good news, he pushed her head down to the bed, her ass in the air for him. He took out gel and rubbed it into her anus before inserting an anal plug, this one a little larger than her normal one. Her gasp pleased him as he untied her hands and retied them to the headboard of her brass bed.

“I want your tits hanging free for my attention, slave.”

“Yes, Master Jared.”

He loved her body, perfect and everything he wanted. Her breasts fit his hands perfectly, her body molded to his as if she had been designed just for him and her pussy enveloped him without wanting to relinquish his cock for any reason. While he rubbed her back and teased her breasts, his free hand went directly to her pussy. He parted her labia and tortured her swollen clit until she moaned with an obvious need to please him when he commanded her release.

“Drown my hand, slave,” he ordered.

“Oh, yes, Master Jared.”

“Perfect, slave,” he complimented as he started the anal plug vibrating. Her hands clenched from the sensation, especially when he drove his engorged cock into her in one powerful thrust.

“Jared!” she cried out.

“Tell your Master what you want me to do,” he ordered.

“Fuck me, please. Take me as only you can—the harder the better.”

“Anything, Mistress Mara, anything.”

With smooth powerful thrusts, he obeyed her. The harder he drove into her, the more she begged him to go on. She cried out his name as the urge to come overwhelmed her. She held back, waiting for him to give her permission.

Jared knew he tortured her, taking her to the edge and forcing her not to come. He wanted her body begging for his, needing her to want him as much as he wanted and needed her. Each time he took her to the edge, he squeezed her breasts, playing with her nipples while the chains kept her teetering on the brink of disobedience.

Finally, she could no longer take it and begged him for release.

“Jared, please. Either that or punish me without mercy. Please...”

“Yes, Mara, come for me. Drown my cock with your honey while I fill you to overflowing.”

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Mara reacted to his command, obeying him as his name echoed in the open space of the loft. He squeezed her breasts as he pulled her body against his, wanting no space between them. His hand slid between her legs, teasing her clit while he fucked her again. His other hand pulled her to him, holding her breasts tight.

Her hands clenched then opened finding support on the bed frame as she held on as if for dear life. Her head rested in the space between his shoulder and his neck. She nibbled on his ear lobe, but gave up when another wave crashed over her.

Their mouths met and he kissed her roughly, with the same desire as he fucked her pussy.

“Marry me, Mara, as soon as the decree is set. I want you as my wife with no sneaking around. I want everyone to know who owns my heart and soul. Please, Mara...”

“Yes, Jared, yes.”

He released her from the bed and they sank down on the comfortable mattress, spent from unbridled sex. He went to turn off the anal plug, but she stopped him as she straddled his shoulders, her pussy in his face. He groaned as she took his cock in her mouth and began teasing his slit.

“You said you would fuck me in every spot you could.”

“I did, didn’t I?”

Jared pulled her into position; his tongue laving her hot wet pussy. He drank from her as he sucked his cock. She massaged his balls and tried to smile when she felt his hands on her breasts, yanking lightly on the chains. The shocks coursing through her caused her to increase her pace to take his essence when he released it into her waiting mouth.

“Come, slave, I want to feast on you,” he commanded as she climaxed. He exploded into her mouth, filling her totally. She loved the sweet taste of his hot seed as she swallowed it. She licked his shaft clean and jolted when he nipped her clit. He pressed the plug in a little further before he removed it.

Mara switched her position, their lips meeting. His tongue filled her mouth as he committed her to memory. His hand tangled in her hair as he pressed her face to his. She surprised him when he felt his cock slide into her waiting pussy.

“I should punish you for taking my cock into your hungry cunt without permission. It is hungry, isn’t it?”

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“Yes, Master Jared, very hungry. Please, punish me if you have to. I’m sorry for overstepping.”

“Sit up and ride me, Mara. I want to see your tits bounce as you make me fill you.”

Jared enjoyed watching her fuck herself with his cock embedded deep within her pussy. He knew she rode the edge and he would make sure she got the full ride.

“Play with your tits, slave. Roll those buds between your fingers and make them hard for me.”

“Yes, Master Jared,” she cried out, obeying him. He could tell she had just about hit the edge and told her to come. The minute the orgasm claimed her, he slapped her ass, but Mara was so far gone with the feelings she never noticed his punishment. Euphoria took over, Mara crying out.

“You’re beautiful, slave.”

“Thank you, Master. Tell me what to do.”

“Lie here next to me,” he said pulling her to him. “I’m here for tonight and every night from now on.”

“Then I got my Christmas wish.”

“What’s that?”

“I wanted you.”

“They don’t call me St. Nicholas for nothing,” he said, laughing.

“Thank you, Santa.”

CHAPTER 3

She woke the next morning to the smell of breakfast and hot coffee. She slid from bed and walked to stand behind him, hugging him as he cooked bacon and eggs.

“Merry Christmas, Jared,” she said, kissing his back.

“Merry Christmas, Mara. God, I love when you walk around naked.”

“Only for you.”

“Sit down and I’ll get you something to eat.”

“Yes, Master,” she said, smiling.

He slid a plate across the counter to her and she gasped. In the center of an English muffin sat a perfect diamond solitaire.

“Jared?”

“I got the ring at the same time I bought your necklace. I was in Tiffany’s and I wanted a matched set. You’ll get the earrings later and the belly piercing, too.”

She looked at him, her eyes sparkling. He picked the ring up and slid it on her finger while he asked her again to marry him.

“Of course, I’ll marry you. I’ve waited a long time for someone like you and I don’t want to lose you.”

“I mean it. As soon as the ink on the decree is dry we get married.”

She slid from the stool and knelt in front of him, her hands behind her, her head bent in submission.

“I will love, honor and obey my master and husband.”

“God, I love you,” he said as he walked to her. He lifted her chin, her tongue immediately trying to lick his slit of the drop of pre-cum waiting for her. His hand pressing her closer, she hungrily sucked his cock, her pussy wet and ready for his assault on her senses as he laid siege to her body. She took him deep and he filled her. He held her

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tighter against him, her lips at his balls when the final drops released. Her hands came from behind her back to squeeze his ass.

Jared lifted her up to kiss her, his cock trapped between their bodies. It swelled more, his body begging to be inside her. Life and love with her would be heaven, something he had not known for a long time, Mara sheer perfection.

"I'm afraid what I got you for Christmas pales with what you've given me."

"You gave me your life when you agreed to become my wife. What more could I want?"

"You're amazing."

"All I have ever wanted since the moment we met was you. I have everything any man could ever want."

"I hope I don't disappoint you."

"Never, Mistress," he assured her.

They spent the rest of Christmas Day in bed, loving each other without reservations or anything holding them back, unless Jared decided to tie her to the bed. No matter how he made love to her, she took it, and wanted more. She could not believe how her Christmas had turned out and prayed it hadn't been a dream.

"I'm not imagining this, am I?" she asked.

"No," he said as he slapped her ass. "Does that feel like a dream?"

"No, Master. Thank you."

"For?"

"Coming into my life and dominating me."

"You brought out the best in me."

"Will things change now?"

"How so?"

"With not having to hide our feelings..."

"Mistress, I want you on display. I want you to enjoy everything and, yes, some things will change as I can now ask you to do things knowing it won't make a damned bit of difference if anyone sees how much I enjoy having you by my side."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Secluded booths in the best restaurants, and your naked pussy waiting for my attention. I want to finger fuck you in public knowing you'll hold back until I allow you to come. Riding naked at the estate..."

"But your mother?"

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“She won’t mind. In the spring, she summers in the Bahamas and I mind the place. It’s very secluded and we can do whatever we want without prying eyes.”

“You mean I can walk around the house with nothing on?”

“Pretty much. She gives the staff time off until she comes back and the housekeeper comes by once a week to make sure the pantry’s filled and the house is clean. We’ll have the place all to ourselves and, if you want, I’ll fuck you in every room. Then there’s my playroom...”

“What?”

“When Mother’s home, I stay in the east wing of the house. I had it all to myself when I grew up and I have a playroom waiting for my gorgeous slave.”

He smiled as her nipples hardened. She still wore the chains, her body even more aroused.

“Are you sure she...?”

“She never liked Julia, but she let me do what I thought I had to do even though I’ve paid for it over the years. When I told her about you, she grinned and told me she couldn’t wait to meet you.”

“What about the dom/sub aspect?”

“When she’s with us, it remains our little secret. She knows what I’m into, but she lets me go because I’m happier in a relationship like we have than a normal one like I tried to have with Julia.”

“Master?”

“What?”

“Tie me up and use me. I want to be your toy,” she said, licking a trail along his neck.

* * * *

Late in the afternoon, after he fulfilled her wishes, he held her in his arms watching her sleep. For the first time in a very long time, he felt at peace and where he should be. Watching her made his cock swell wanting her pussy enveloping him and refusing to let go. His cell phone rang and he tried reaching for it without waking her.

“Yeah, what?”

“Is that any way to answer the phone when I call?”

“You woke me up, Mother. Merry Christmas.”

“And to you, too. I assume you’re with the love of your life?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I expect to see the both of you here for dinner in two hours.”

“But...”

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“No buts. I want you here.”

“I can’t get out of the city and to your place inside that time frame and I am sure Mara wants to look her best for you.”

“Alright, three hours.”

Elinore St. Nicholas hung up, the call over. She knew how to get her way, now he had to break the news to Mara about the *command performance*.

“Jared?”

“Mara?”

“Who was that?”

“My mother. We’re expected for dinner.”

“When?”

“Three hours.”

“What? I can’t go to dinner in the...”

His mouth covered hers, his kiss deeply passionate. He knew what she needed to calm her and he intended to take care of her before he gave in to his mother’s commands.

“Come,” he said as he led her to where the shackles hung waiting to be used. He bound her hands over her head, her feet apart. “Does my slave want anything else while I’m restraining you?”

“No, Master Jared.”

Jared nodded then went to her back. He unhooked the chains along her spine, slowly taking them down the length of her body. He held them up to apply some pressure to her clit while he knelt in front of her. He laved her pussy, loosening her tight lips to remove the chain. She moaned with the sensations he sent through her. She trembled, her body sliding out of control.

“I was going to give these to you later, but I think now is the perfect time.”

“Master?”

She watched him remove her naval piercing and replace it with a diamond solitaire, an exact mate to her necklace and engagement ring. He removed her nipple rings and inserted diamond studs. She gasped with the new adornments while her body begged for release. He finally removed the collar, leaving only his mark of ownership remaining.

“You are made for diamonds, Mara.”

“Thank you, Master Jared.”

“You make a beautiful Christmas decoration, too. I shall have to decorate you more often.”

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“Jared, please...you’re torturing me.”

“Exactly,” he said as he took her by surprise when he inserted three fingers in her hot wet pussy. “My lady is ready for my cock in her cunt?”

“Yes, Master, always.”

He released her ankles then lifted her up only to impale her body on his. She grabbed the shackles above her for support as he swelled inside her, his finger teasing her clit. Her legs wrapped around him holding him tight as he fucked her. She felt the emotions rise within her and held back her cries, waiting for his permission to come.

“Do it, Mara. Soak me. Drown me in your heat.”

“Jared!” she screamed as she came. He filled her with his release, wanting her in every way and wanting to forget the outside world existed. He wanted to spend the rest of their lives in this loft and forget the Hamptons and the Stock Exchange and the social scene.

As the last remnants of his desire filled her, he lifted her up so he could play with her nipples. Releasing her hands, he teased her hardened buds sending her soaring. She held his head to her breasts, crying.

“Mistress, what’s wrong?”

“I’m so damned happy right now...”

“So am I.”

He eased himself from her heated embrace, found his phone, and called his mother.

“We’ve got a problem. It’s snowing here and traffic is tied up. We need to get changed and by the time...”

“Get here if you can and if you can’t, I understand. I want to meet Mara and soon. I wish you had not kept her hidden the way you did.”

“Sorry, I honestly didn’t know how you would take this.”

“I lived with your father. You know what he was like and I know you’ve inherited some of his taste. Does Mara...?”

“She’s a natural.”

“Interesting.”

“We’ll see you later and if not tonight, tomorrow.”

He hung up and shut the phone off totally before throwing it in a chair.

“Jared, we should...”

“We should go back to bed and enjoy each other or I can keep you like I had you and torture your senses all night long.”

“I like the way you think.”

CHAPTER 4

The week passed, Jared and Mara enjoying each other while remaining inseparable. Dinner in the Hamptons went easily as Elinore and Mara hit it off immediately. Jared watched them together and wondered where Mara had been all his life.

While at his mother's, he got word from Judge Colin Styles informing him the divorce decree had been approved and signed without any fight from Julia. Jared breathed a sigh of relief since he expected her to come up with some delaying tactic. Styles told him to expect his secretary to deliver the document to him, but Jared had a different idea.

"Colin, how about you hold onto it, and marry us on Friday. We can get the license this afternoon and take care of everything at once."

"I'd love to. Be in my office at eleven."

"Great, we'll be there."

Jared hung up, grinning from ear-to-ear. Mara saw his face as she came down the long winding staircase.

"What are you so happy about?"

"I'm a free man. The decree is official."

She kissed him, the mere touch of her body exciting him. He grabbed her hand and led her to the east wing. They went to his room then into another room off to the side.

"Most of these rooms have dressing rooms, but I did something different."

He watched her face light up as she inspected his playroom. Her fingertips trailed along the edges of the tables and frames as she looked at everything. When she turned to face him, he smiled at the sight of her nipples aroused against the soft fabric of her blouse.

"Master?"

"Strip, slave."

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Quickly, she obeyed. Since Christmas, she chose to wear no lingerie except the skimpiest of thongs. When they knew they were completely alone at either her loft or his Manhattan apartment, she chose to walk around naked, ready to obey whatever desire he had.

He took her to the X-frame by the wall and cuffed her to it. Next he blindfolded her, explaining to her about his desire to see her natural reaction to what he planned to do.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, Master Jared.”

He first massaged her anus with gel and inserted her anal plug. Next, he strapped on a vibrator and made sure her anal plug remained where he wanted it. He switched them on, her body crazed with the need to climax for him.

“Not yet, my slave.”

He turned up the pulsations and watched her. As she would near the edge, he took a soft suede flogger and slapped her with it. The first one jolted her, but she came to enjoy the stinging sensation while not knowing where he would hit next. A chain went between her nipple rings and she jolted when he tugged on it, all the while holding her reaction.

“Very good, Mara.”

Her hands clenched when he attached a clip to her swollen clit. Her legs parted a little to relieve the aching between her legs, drops of her honey dripping along her thighs.

She jolted at the feel of his tongue laving her nether lips seconds before he thrust it within her hot pussy. Her body writhed, fighting the cuffs, needing to touch him.

“I want to eat you and feast on your glorious cunt, slave. Come for me.”

Like a flood erupting over a rain-swollen dam, she obeyed him while he feasted on her. Her body loved the assaults to her senses and wanted more. She begged him for more and he brought her to the edge again.

Without being told, she came for him, feeding her master while her body begged for his cock to fill her.

“I’m sorry, Master Jared.”

“No problem, you did exactly what I wanted you to do. Drown me in your desire, slave, and don’t stop.”

His words coursed through her followed by shockwaves. He kissed her while his fingers played with her clit. He removed the belt and the

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plugs and lay siege to her again. Kissing her roughly, he finger fucked her pussy without mercy. She pressed her cunt to his hand wanting more of him, needing to have as much contact with him as she could get. Her breasts moved, inviting his attention and he didn't refuse her.

"I love you, Mara."

"I love you, Jared."

* * * *

"Master?"

"What?"

"Would it be wrong for me to ask you to do something?"

"What does my slave want me to do?"

"I want to cuff you to the frame so I can pleasure you."

"Interesting."

He allowed her to lead him to the table where she had him stretch out. She strapped his ankles to the foot of it then went to the head of the table where she slipped his wrists into the fur-lined manacles. She bent to kiss him, her tongue teasing him.

"Will my master obey his slave?" she teased.

"Yes, Mistress Mara."

Mara went to where he had laid the flogger and picked it up. She started lightly slapping his legs then massaging them as she worked her way up the length of his body. Each groan told her how he enjoyed her sweet slow torture of his senses.

She took a thin strip of leather and laid it on his rock hard stomach watching his eyes widen. She massaged his balls, his cock standing at attention and waiting for her luscious lips to surround it. Mara teased him, licking the pre-cum from his slit. His cock swelled more, Mara smiling as she took the strap and tied it around the base of his cock and then around his balls. His body tightened telling her she had the right amount of pressure.

"Mara..."

"My slave disobeys his mistress," she said taking the flogger to his hip.

"My apologies, Mistress."

Another slap, his other hip took the sting of the leather.

Mara smiled then trailed light kisses along his heated body, his cock begging for her to suck the life from him. He writhed, the emotions coursing through him while submitting his entire being and trust to the woman who possessed his heart and soul.

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“Do you trust your mistress?”

“Yes, without question.”

“Is that the truth?”

“Yes, Mistress Mara, I would never lie to you.”

“Do you like your cock and balls bound as they are?”

“Yes, Mistress Mara,” he answered quickly. He saw her smile, a hint of devilment in her eyes. “And if I wanted you this way when we marry?”

“The thought of it makes me harder. Please, Mistress, give me relief.”

“Not yet.”

His groan made her smile.

“May I ask where Mistress learned this technique?”

“I read a lot when we weren’t together. I thought it was a novel idea and wanted to try it, but never had the nerve to ask my master if I could.”

“What else did you learn?”

“If I tell you now, I won’t have anything to surprise you with.”

Jared’s groan sent heat coursing through her body. Her pussy clenched, needing his cock inside her while her breasts ached for his touch. She wanted to suck his cock while he teased her clit and tongue fucked her. *Where do I start?*

Mara straddled his hips, her breasts brushing his upper legs. She put her hands behind her then bent to take his dripping cock in her mouth. She took it deep to the back of her throat, her lips touching his balls. Slow torturous movements drove him to the edge as she slowly sucked his cock, driving him crazy as he fought the restraints of the table.

“Mistress, please...” he growled. Unable to say anything, she nodded as her pace quickened. “Mara!” he screamed as he filled her, his cock filling her several ways. She drew back licking him clean then surprised him by quickly moving. His body trembled as she kept her mouth near his cock, but pressed her pussy to his lips. Hungrily, he tongue fucked her as she took him again, the leather refusing to give him respite.

They cried out together as he drowned in her essence while she swallowed his. He begged her to release him so he could hold her, but she refused. She moved again, this time straddling his hips while she bent to kiss him. Before he realized what she had planned, his cock felt the heat of her cunt wrapped around it. Her breasts brushed over his chest as she teased him.

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“What do you want me to do?”

“Ride me while you play with your gorgeous tits. I want you as aroused as you’ve made me, woman.”

Mara sat up and obeyed her master as she moved up and down on his cock. Her breasts bounced with her movement, Jared loving the sight of her teasing her nipples, driving her body on. She moved on him, her body hot with desire and the adrenaline rush of having him at her mercy. He loved the change in roles and prayed this wouldn’t be a one-time thing with her. He needed to submit to her and only her.

“Master, may I come?”

“For God’s sake, slave, fuck me!” he ordered.

Mara cried out, screaming his name while he felt like he burst at the seams filling her again. She rocked on him, her hips trying to get him in the right position inside her to drive her crazy. She found one spot and screamed again as she shook out of control.

“Ride it, slave, and don’t ever stop. You’re beautiful, Mara.”

While the thrills overpowered her, she grabbed her breasts, pinching her nipples and sending more shocks through her. As much as the restraints allowed him to move, Jared pounded his bound cock into her pussy needing her aroused for as long as possible.

“Jared!” she cried out again as she fell to him, her lips finding his.

“You’re perfect, Mara,” he told her.

“I’m glad,” she answered. She slowly released his hands and he held her.

“Mara, I collared you and asked you to be my slave and you said yes. I gave you my ring and you agreed to marry me. Will you collar me so I can serve you while being your husband?”

“Jared, I...”

“Please, Mara, I need to wear your mark of possession.”

“Yes, Jared, I will.”

Jared finally felt whole, Mara his saving grace.

CHAPTER 5

New Year's Eve found Mara Bergeron and Jared St. Nicholas in the office of his friend Judge Colin Styles. Elinore St. Nicholas joined them along with Jared's brother and sister. By noon, Styles had pronounced them man and wife, the happy couple kissing as if they were the only ones in the judge's chambers.

"Colin, will you join us at Tavern on the Green for a quick reception?" Elinore asked.

"Of course. You know I can't refuse you anything," Colin told her. One of Jared's oldest friends, Colin had spent a lot of time in the Hamptons with the St. Nicholas family.

"Good," she said smiling. She hustled everyone out of the judge's office so the newlyweds could be alone.

"We'll meet you there. You said four?" Jared called to her.

"Yes, Jared," Elinore smiled, coming over to them. She kissed her new daughter-in-law, welcoming her to the family. "You are so good for him."

"Thank you, Mrs..."

"Elinore or Mom, you're family now."

Overwhelmed, Mara smiled as she hugged her mother-in-law, once more thanking her. They waited until the others left before Jared said anything. He saw Mara admiring the simple gold band on her ring finger with the diamond solitaire.

"What can we do for a few hours?" he asked, a devilish hint to his voice.

"What does my master want?" she asked, giving him a playful kiss.

"Well, you could give me my Christmas present."

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She gasped. In the whirlwind week they shared, she'd never gotten the chance to give him her gift, but after everything he'd given her, she wasn't sure if it would be enough for him.

"Mine is no where near what you've given me."

"Mrs. St. Nicholas, I'll love whatever you give me. I have you, which is what I wanted."

"Then, your slave wants to give you something she knows you'll really want – again and again."

"Let's go," he said as they left Colin's office.

They went back to her loft, Jared feeling more comfortable there than the Manhattan apartment the family kept. When they walked inside, he locked the door then spun her around, his mouth covering hers.

"You are the best Christmas gift a man could ever get. I love you, Mara."

"I love you, too," she said, slipping from his arms to get the portfolio from where it had sat for over a week waiting for him to open it. He followed her to where the tree stood, watching her kneel down to pull it out from under the balsam they had decorated together. Remaining on her knees, she handed him the box, a wicked glint to her eyes.

As Jared ripped the paper off the box, she pulled his zipper down then his designer trousers and silk boxers. His cock fell to her lips and she teased it before taking him deep into her throat. She moved back and forth on his velvety shaft as it swelled more. She looked up to see her husband failing to keep his concentration on the leather bound organizer in his hands.

While she sucked him, she found a piece of red ribbon and bound his cock and balls. His gasp sent heat through her, loving how she could please him. His body trembling, his hand went to the back of her head, pressing her close as he pumped his cock into her mouth.

"Mistress, may I..."

Unable to speak, she nodded as she feverishly worked to please him. The power of his explosion into her took her by surprise, but she refused to stop. His loud groans sent thrills through her, his thrusts harder.

"Stand up, Mistress," he commanded. She did, Jared brutally kissing his wife while holding her tight against him. "Somehow, you'd better be naked and fast or I'll rip your clothes off you."

"As my master wishes – rip away."

The sound of ripping satin echoed through the loft as he ripped her blouse from her, followed by her skirt and thong. Standing in front of

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him in thigh-high stockings and black high heels sent him over the edge. Jared picked his wife up and carried her to bed. She pulled at his shirt, buttons flying then opened her arms to welcome him anyway he wanted to come to her. He lifted her hips and impaled her hot waiting pussy on him, then pounded her body as he had her mouth.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he said as he leaned down and suckled her hardened nipple. He inwardly smiled when he remembered the day they went to the studio to have her piercings done. She’d been enthusiastic about the body jewelry, another sign of his possession of her entire being. Ever since then, Mara had enjoyed the constant arousal, along with her desires for his cock between her nether lips. Now, they had each other twenty-four/seven and he could not believe his good fortune.

“Jared!” she cried out as he filled her.

“Do you have any belated Christmas wishes?” he asked, thrusting into her still.

“No, Santa, I have you.”

“Merry Christmas, Mara.”

“Happy New Year, Jared.”

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ANN CORY

<http://www.anncory.com>

A Personal Assessment

A “Let’s Make Waves” Ocean’s Mist Press contest winner

An Ocean’s Mist Press Bestseller for October 2005

4 Cups! This is one of the most erotic short stories I have ever read. -Reviewed by Kelley at Coffee Time Romance

The Spirit of Christmas

**By
Ann Cory**

A repetitive scratching sound woke Elisa from a sound sleep, a noise like something or someone climbing around inside the chimney. She'd just gotten to sleep after tossing and turning for half an hour, which only added to the frustration. Once she was awake, it was nearly impossible for her to fall back asleep. Insomnia was a recurring event in her life and she fell into it easily. She heard the scratching sound again and threw back the bed covers.

Her shaky hands fumbled along the nightstand until she located a faintly sharp letter opener. The cool sensation against the palm of her hand gave her a brief moment of empowerment. It wasn't like she'd ever needed to use it, but it gave her comfort. She reached to the end of the bed for her robe and slid her arms in the silky sleeves, tying the sash tight around her waist. Armed and hardly dangerous, she tiptoed into the family room. Elisa's fingertips felt around for the light switch on the wall, and after a mental countdown from three to one, she flipped it on.

The bright sixty-watt light bulbs brought the decorated room to life, reflecting off strands of silver tinsel hanging every which way among the Christmas tree. She noticed her Uma Thurman Kill Bill-like image in the mirror against the wall and had to laugh. Who was she kidding? Dressed to kill in a silk robe clutching a letter opener. After she collected herself, she did a quick scan around the room. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. It was probably just her imagination. Elisa walked over to the chimney and squatted down, craning her neck to see up inside it. All that was visible was a tunnel of black that stretched on forever. Satisfied with what must have been an overactive imagination she considered going back to bed. Then something caught her eye.

An unusual present lay on the floor beneath the tree wrapped in shiny, silver paper. There had been precisely four presents neatly tucked under the tree before she slipped off to bed, one from her sister that had arrived a week early, one from a co-worker who was her designated

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secret Santa, and two from herself: a writing journal covered in red stilettos and the new Celtic harp CD she'd been waiting for. Now as she looked quizzically beneath the tree, there were five presents.

She bent down and picked it up. A little bell was attached to the bow making a soft tinkling sound as she turned it over every which way possible. Like a little kid, she shook it, pressing her ear as close to it as she could. Whatever was inside was as secretive as how it found its way inside her house. It occurred to her that her landlord Mrs. Denton might have put it there. The lonely old woman had entered her house before and left cookies, cakes and usually a little something for her birthday. Elisa felt a tinge of guilt for not having bought Mrs. Denton something, but would make it up to her by calling for a bouquet of flowers delivered, maybe a pretty poinsettia.

With a shrug of her shoulders she set the present back down and ran to her bedroom, flinging herself onto the mattress and landing on her stomach. She rolled around for the better part of two minutes when reality hit her...Mrs. Denton was in the hospital getting hip surgery, it couldn't have been her. Someone else had been in the house. With the letter opener clenched even tighter, she went back to the scene of the crime. This time she looked behind the sofa, both of the big, fluffy chairs, and even underneath the dark pine coffee table. Elisa held her breath. If someone wanted to scare her, they succeeded. Gone was the curiosity and intriguing thoughts of a present she knew nothing about. Instead she was concerned for her own safety.

"I'm going to pick up my cell phone. If you come out now, I'll give you a two minute head start to get out the door before I notify the authorities."

Adrenaline raced through her body as she walked around the two-bedroom townhouse, flinging closet doors and cabinets open like she watched people do in movies. She hated the way scenes from scary movies entered her mind when she was alone.

"Whoever you are, I want you to leave right this minute. Don't even think about pulling a Black Christmas prank on me, I'm trained in martial arts."

Well, Tae Bo for beginners anyways, courtesy of Billy Blanks, but still, she could perform a mean roundhouse kick on her left side when she was warmed up. Elisa wasn't much for working out, preferring to eat moderately healthy and taking long walks. Her weight was a daily battle,

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thanks to consistent indulgence in chocolate. Otherwise, she was content with her size 8 figure and happy with muscle tone in her arms and legs.

Twenty minutes later she'd finished a total search of her house. Nothing was out of place or missing and there was no sign of forced entry. Satisfied there wasn't an intruder, she sank to the couch and set down her phone. The package flickered against the light, enticing her with its tiny silver bell and pretty paper. There was no way she could go to sleep without at least taking a tiny peek. She looked up at the clock. It was almost midnight. Should she open it? Instincts told her no, but curiosity begged her to, and it always got the better of her. The absence of a card only furthered her need to find out what was inside.

She meant to unwrap the present slowly, saving the paper and being neat like her mother taught her to, but instead she ripped it open like it was aluminum foil hot out of an oven. Beneath the paper was a lightweight box, the kind that usually indicated clothing of some sort. Elisa rummaged open the lid and spread away the layers of holiday tissue paper. Her eyes lit up as she stared at the gift; a red satin bra, matching panties and garter belt, with red stockings. Who would have left her something so sexy?

It had been ages since a man bought her lingerie. Without the time for a steady boyfriend, the whole dressing up like a vixen-thing went out the window. There wasn't much reason to buy sensuous attire when no one was looking but her reflection. She carried the outfit into her room and sat on the edge of the bed, running her finger along the smooth satin bra and panties. Should she? It wasn't like anyone would see. The color alone prompted her to be daring, the color of sin.

Slowly she disrobed and slipped on the panties. To her surprise they fit perfectly, scooping seductively underneath her bellybutton. Elisa liked the way the sides hugged her full hips, almost like warm, strong hands. With her hands strategically placed on the back of the bra, she fastened it behind her. Standing in front of the mirror, she was impressed with the way it held her breasts up, adding a flattering rounded shape like models in advertisements did.

With a surge of confidence, she paraded in front of the mirror, posing provocatively. She tried her best to ignore her flaws. Her curves were womanly, though her thighs were thicker than she liked, making her very self-conscious. Thanks to recent step aerobic classes, she had bulked up considerably instead of adding subtle definition. Still, her sun-kissed tan skin wore the deep crimson red very well and flattered her

long chocolate tresses. Carefully, so she wouldn't run the nylons, she rolled each side of the thigh-high stockings on and finished the ensemble with the garter belt, hooking everything into place.

Again she stood in front of the mirror, giving smoldering looks like she was straight out of the Victoria's Secret catalog. She turned to the side, jut out her chest, and ran her hand along the curvature of her tummy. For once she could say she looked hot, and no one was around to agree. Damn her need for independence! Three lousy relationships in a row and then she went cold turkey, swearing off men and their Neanderthal ways. With her luck she'd used up all three chances and would spend her days as a spinster.

All of a sudden she heard a thump come from the other room. Elisa panicked, where had she put the letter opener? Another thump, this time louder, sent chills up her spine. Now was not the time to scream and overreact, she would have to be brave. Cautiously she crept down the hallway to the family room and flipped on the light. A figure dressed in a Santa suit was bent over, facing away from her.

"Get out of here or I'll call the police!"

The stranger straightened and turned around. For a split second Elisa lost herself in a pair of jade green eyes framed with dark lashes. He put his hands up in the air and offered a smile.

"Please, if you'll give me a moment to explain. I..." The black belt around his middle popped off and his oversized red pants fell down, revealing the kind of package Elisa had been missing for a long, long time. A deep red glow painted the mystery man's cheeks, and his eyes sparkled like gems. "Uhhh...Merry Christmas?"

She bit her cheeks to keep from busting out laughing. It was impossible not to notice his strong, muscular thighs and immediately she imagined how they'd feel rubbing against her. Elisa's legs weakened and almost buckled beneath her. He was an intruder, and here she was visualizing him naked.

"You think you're going to come in my home and rob me blind? You don't know who you're messing with."

His smile seemed to extend further across his face. "Okay."

"Ar-are you armed?"

"Nope."

"Swear it."

"I swear, I have no weapons on me. Well, not the kind you're referring to."

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Heat instantly filled her cheeks. It was hard enough trying to keep from sneaking peeks at his prominent member. "Who are you?"

"Name's Chris."

"Okay, Chris, I want to know what the hell you are doing in my house."

"May I put my hands down first?"

She hesitated a moment, her body tensing. There was no reason for her to trust him so quickly, what if he took advantage of that and made a move. No, she was in control here, or at least she wanted to think so. The way her body was behaving, left her unsure. A thin layer of perspiration coated her forehead and she used the back of her hand to wipe it away. Swallowing hard she tried to resume her tough girl act.

"Not right yet, I want to be able to see them."

"Fair enough. To answer your question, I came here to deliver your belated Christmas gifts. I see you are wearing my first one. I guessed the size and color. It looks like I was dead on both counts. You are like a goddess."

Elisa, suddenly aware she was half naked and in a vulnerable position, fought the stinging pang of embarrassment. Somehow the knowledge his piercing green eyes had grazed over her flesh sent a bevy of feelings through her body. For a bitterly cold evening, she was blistering hot. Without looking down she knew her nipples were visible, piercing through the satin bra, hard and erect.

She swallowed hard and found her voice, "Why would you do a thing like that?"

"You mean pick out lingerie?"

"No, I mean yes, but...oh! You're flustering me. I meant, why would you bring me presents. I don't even know you. Do I?"

"We've never been properly introduced, but I know of you. For some reason you haven't been receiving your Christmas gifts the past three years. I didn't think it right, so I decided to come and personally deliver them myself. I assure you I'm not here to hurt you."

Elisa could hear in his tone he was being serious.

"Fine. You can put your hands down. And pull up your pants."

"Thank you." She watched him scoop up the too-big pants and wrestle with the belt. His red overcoat flopped open several times, giving her a peepshow of a hairless chest she was certain would be smooth to the touch. Elisa imagined covering his pecs with butterfly kisses. Again her legs buckled, snapping her to attention.

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“Please don’t tell me you expect me to believe you’re Santa Claus, because let me assure you right here and now, I quit believing in him a long time ago.”

“Oh heck no, I just work for the guy.”

She wasn’t sure how long she stood silent with her mouth open, but her jaw started to ache.

“It’s late, I’m tired, and I don’t believe a word you are saying. Did somebody put you up to this?”

“No. I mean he knows I’m here and all, but it was at my personal request.”

“This ‘he’ you are referring to is *the* Santa. Mister bowl full of jelly with a big round belly?”

“Yep.”

“I think you’re an escaped mental patient. Tell me something I can believe or I’m calling the cops.”

He pointed to a small bag on the floor. “Inside there are your other two gifts. Go ahead and look. I can’t leave here until you’ve opened them.”

Elisa slowly approached the bag and picked it up, hurrying back to what she considered to be “her” side of the room. She opened it and found two boxes, each with the same silver sparkling paper and bells.

“Please, open them.”

Elisa looked him over, this time with a more meaningful stare. She had to admit he looked pretty cute in the Santa outfit, though she didn’t like the fact it hid too much of his body. His face was heart-shaped and his smile lit up the room. Everything about him was beautiful, which made it difficult for her to keep her guard up.

“And once I open them, you will go?”

“If that’s what you want.”

She opened the first box, this time trying not to seem quite so eager as she had in opening the lingerie. It was obvious he had good taste. Inside was an assortment of bottles and tubes marked massage oils. She put them up to her nose and inhaled their intoxicating scents.

“Mmm, vanilla bean, eucalyptus, and this one reminds me of chocolate-chip mint ice cream.”

“So you like?”

Elisa nodded her head and started on the other box. It was smaller but weighed more. Beneath a layer of red tissue paper were fur-covered handcuffs.

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“What the...why did you pick out these gifts?”

“You don’t like the handcuffs?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then you do like them. I thought so.”

“I like all the gifts, but why you? Why would you give me gifts when I’ve never met you?”

“I was chosen as your secret Santa for the last three years. As I mentioned, I’m not sure why you weren’t getting your gifts. I put them in the sleigh myself, but they kept coming back with a return to sender card attached to them.”

“Sleigh?”

“Yes.”

“Of course, to haul the toys to good little boys and girls.”

“See, you do know all about it.”

She wasn’t sure why he tried so hard to keep up the charade, but she had no desire to play along.

“Well, I’m sorry I didn’t receive these earlier, they are wonderful gifts. The problem is, I really don’t need them.”

“You will.”

Elisa let out a deep, exasperated sigh.

“Well, looks like they were worth the wait. Thank you for the lovely gifts and I’ll do my best to find a use for them.”

“Better late than never.”

She thought about the vow she’d made three years ago. If she remembered right it was right before the holidays. No more men. She refused to get involved in another tumultuous relationship. There had been too much taking and not enough giving.

“You are free to go now.”

“Yes, I suppose I am. Forgive me; it’s difficult to keep my eyes off you. Such a lovely vision.”

She shifted her weight nervously and tried to find a way to change the subject. Inside she wasn’t in a rush to have him leave, but she didn’t want him to know.

“Tell me something, how do you plan to leave? Is it as simple as putting your finger aside your nose and up the chimney you will go?”

Chris laughed heartily and a smile played across her lips.

“No, I’ll have to climb up, and to be honest it’s not as easy as it sounds. Santa is the one with all the magic, I just assist him when he needs it.”

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"I see. That Santa stuff again." Elisa cringed inside. He was absolutely perfect...when he was silent. She laid her palm against the furry handcuffs and rubbed it around, enjoying the soft texture.

"Why did you choose these particular gifts? You say you know so much about me, but these are things I don't even buy for myself."

"I know. That's why somebody had to."

"I don't even have, you know, a boyfriend. These things will sit around unused. Maybe you could find someone else who could actually use them."

"I can't give your gifts to someone else. I picked them out especially for you."

"It was very thoughtful."

"I almost forgot. There's another reason why I'm here."

"Oh really?" Elisa's laugh came out as a snort. Her cheeks flushed crimson as she stared at her unpainted toenails. "I figured there would be a catch."

"It's not a catch, I promise. I'm here to grant you a special Christmas wish. You can choose to take it or leave it, but it's yours tonight."

"A wish? What kind of wish?"

"An anything you want kind of wish."

Elisa crinkled her brow. Damn he was incredible eye candy. As big as the suit was on him, she'd already seen his lower region and couldn't help the fleeting thought of wishing him to seduce her.

"I don't know...I can't think of anything."

"Oh come on. Anything your heart desires. What has been on your mind lately?"

There was no way she was going to answer him with the truth. The only thing on her mind over the past few weeks was sex. Lots and lots of sex. Wild, dirty, adventurous, kinky, one hell-of-an-orgasm kind of sex. The kind where she was tied up and the man had all the control, easing her body into submission. She wanted to be pleased until she couldn't stand it any more. Elisa paused in mid-thought; she had a strange feeling Chris was reading her mind.

In a way it made sense; each of the gifts would satisfy her one way or another, though they were something one gave their lover. The idea of him being her lover wasn't too much of a stretch, but she didn't want him to know that.

HOLIDAY VOICES

“You know, most people don’t have a problem coming up with a wish.”

“Yes, but I’m sure it’s the usual money, fame, and material possession cliché of wishes. None of those things interest me. When I have money, I spend it. There’s no sense in having more at this point. I’m a private person so the fame thing seems intrusive, and as far as material things go, I don’t get attached to things. Or people for that matter.”

“There has to be something you want. A dream you’ve had. What thoughts are floating around in your head? Tell me your wildest desire and I’ll make it a reality.”

Elisa wasn’t sure how to respond. Where had wishing for something ever gotten her anywhere? As to wild desires, did she dare? She paced around the room, shaking her head, hoping to dislodge the ridiculous notions going on in her head.

“Forget the wish, I’m a big girl and I don’t need anything.”

Chris walked up to her and brushed his fingertip along her smooth cheekbone. She bit her lip, resisting the primal urges welling up inside. He smelled good, a cross between musk and mint. It filled her mind with delicious thoughts.

“Talk to me. Tell me what you want more than anything.” His words turned into whispers, the kind of whispers that made her whole body tingle, further exacerbated by his mouth closing the gap between them. Startled, she jumped when his lips brushed along the rim of her earlobe. “I want to know what would satisfy you.”

Elisa’s body was charged. The room took on a spiral effect, spinning and circling in varied colors and shapes. Her breath quickened. How was he able to get to her so easily?

“Close your beautiful blue eyes and let your mind wander to the cravings going on inside your mind and body. Allow the fantasies to rise up from their dormant stage and dance about. Let down your guard...please.”

His mouth was close, much too close; there was no possible way to turn down what it was offering. She leaned forward, parting her lips slightly, moving to meet his. The first kiss was gentle but insidiously addicting, she had to have more. Ravenous kisses followed as tongues bathed among one another, hands pressing each other close, as close as they could get.

HOLIDAY VOICES

Her inner desire pounded inside her chest and she gave into his request. Between the lust-filled exchanges, she told him what secrets lay inside her mind. "I want...you..."

He put his finger to her lips, not letting her finish. "As you wish."

Elisa walked, or more like floated to the bedroom while Chris gathered up her gifts. She decided it was too late to do anything about her room at this point and set to work lighting candles. Every now and then she kicked stray clothing underneath the bed. Was she really going to do this? Give herself to a complete stranger without analyzing over every single detail? Chris came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. Instantly her body melted, and the answer was clear. Yes, she would give herself to him. She was thirty-two and certainly mature enough to do what she wanted...and she wanted him.

He slid his fingers beneath the straps of her bra, letting them fall down along her arm. Instinctively she reached back to help unhook it for him, but he shoed away her hands. "I want you to relax. I know what I'm doing."

The red satin lingerie fell to the floor and she scooted it away with her toe. Chris walked in front of her and admired her breasts. She'd always been proud of her breasts. Full, with a nice shape to them, though the bra had given them a lift.

"You're beautiful, like a dream. May I touch you?"

She couldn't find the words, so instead she nodded her head.

His hands were electric, bringing her nipples to life with hardly a touch. They hovered around each hardened pebble as his fingers ran across the smooth contours of her breasts. Elisa let her head fall back as his lips sought out her neck. The feel of his lips against such a sensitive and delicate place had her body buzzing and tingling. Her panties would be thoroughly soaked in no time. His lips left a heated trail along her neck and chin until they reunited with her lips again. They devoured one another like starved animals needing immediate sustenance. Never had she felt a kiss rage through her body all the way to her toes. When his mouth left hers she nearly fell back, dizzy from passion.

Chris lowered to his knees and unhooked the garters. He slipped his fingers inside the waistline of her panties and brought them down, carefully detaching them from around her ankles. Elisa stood before him wearing nothing except the red stockings. His movements grew still and she had a feeling he was admiring her clean-shaven area with only a thin streak of dark, guiding his way to her sweet spot.

HOLIDAY VOICES

He glanced up at her quickly, an appreciative smile plastered on his face. "I like that."

Standing up, Chris led her to the bed and pulled back the covers all the way.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to give you a relaxing back rub. Trust me when I say you'll love it."

When was the last time a boyfriend said such alluring words? There was no way she was passing Santa Junior up.

"I have no objections," she said and wrapped her hair into a bun atop her head. Elisa laid her body against the cool cream-colored sheets and made herself comfortable.

"Any preference on which scent you'd like me to use tonight?"

"They all smelled heavenly. Surprise me."

She could hear the faint sounds of him twisting off a lid and rubbing his hands together. The instant his hands touched her back she felt the tension leave. Her neck, shoulders, and upper back had been tight for weeks thanks to overtime at the office. With a possible promotion to vie for, she'd slaved away at files and reports. Not just anyone would have the chance to become a senior partner with the law firm, but she knew she was a strong contender. Now all the aches and pains melted away, allowing the stress to dissipate completely. There were a few times she struggled to not laugh when his fingers stroked her shoulders, making it tickle horribly.

Between the warmth of his hands and the vanilla aroma of the massage oil, she was putty in his hands. He worked her neck, upper back, shoulders, and slowly started to make his way lower. She loved the way his hands acted like heating pads, knowing exactly how and where to touch her. Slowly he worked his hands down further, rubbing her lower back, and kneading her ass. For a brief moment he removed his hands entirely, leaving her to wonder what would come next.

"Thank you, I swear I've died and gone to heaven," Elisa groaned, her body sinking right into the mattress.

"Oh I'm not anywhere near done with tending to you."

Chris took her hands and put them together up over her head, palm to palm. Soft fur glided against her skin and it was then she remembered about the handcuffs.

"Just in case you try and get away," he whispered in her ear.

"Don't worry, I won't."

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His finger slid along the prominent swells of her ass until they reached a lower destination. She held her breath the second his finger entered her nether regions.

“You are amazingly wet, my dear.”

Her pulse pounded and she instinctively spread her legs. A second finger found the damp entrance and slipped inside, roaming between her thighs. It didn’t take him long before he found her clit and manipulated it.

“I’d forgotten how good it feels.”

He dipped his fingers further in, catching his thumb on her swollen nub, adding momentum until her thighs started to quiver. Elisa positioned herself on her knees and in a swift motion he spread her lubricated lips apart, filling her with his cock. The massive width of his shaft made her cry out, pushing her inner walls open as she took him all the way in. Movements were slow to start while they found a steady rhythm. He would pull out until all she could feel was the tip of his head, driving her crazy. She would then push her body back into him. Chris gripped her hips and thrust himself deeper inside, slamming her ass against his thighs. When he entered her she caught her breath in her throat. His large cock dived between her soaked layers, parting them wide with his size. It was a far cry from the feel of a small vibrator or her fingers.

Elisa couldn’t help but tremble beneath his touch. Faster he drove his cock in until she couldn’t stand it any more.

“Chris, I think I’m going to come. Move faster, please.” She wiggled her ass while throwing herself into him.

“Like that?”

“Mmm hmm. Just like that...”

His fingers traveled back to her clit and rubbed it quickly while thrusting away inside her.

“Yes, now...right there only faster...yes that’s it...” Her pleas to bring her to a full orgasm grew loud and demanding. The release neared and she braced herself for it. With one final plunge, Chris had secured her orgasm along with his own. Their moans and groans competed with one another as spasms erupted throughout their bodies. Elisa waited for him to lie on his back and then snuggled up to him, resting her head in the crook of his arm. She curled her legs and listened to the fast pace of his heartbeat. It was exciting to have a warm body beside her. Elisa hardly remembered if anyone had stayed long enough to cuddle up with.

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No, no one had...instead it was a wham, bam, thank you ma'am kind of deal.

Chris stroked her face. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"Oh, I'm just...thinking many things all at once. It's nothing really."

"That's not true. I'd say you've been alone for so long, you've forgotten how to share your thoughts and dreams with someone else."

Elisa stifled a laugh. "What are you, a part-time shrink?"

"I care about you. Is there something wrong with that?"

"No. I mean, I guess not."

"Then tell me what you're thinking, what thoughts are hidden inside that pretty head of yours."

The last thing she wanted was to tell him he was right, but he was. She spent too much time alone. Even at work she maintained a lot of privacy. It wasn't that she couldn't make friends, it's that she didn't try. The few friends she'd kept in touch with after high school had understood when her letters became infrequent, but now she hadn't written them in years. She heard him sigh and was sure it was meant for her.

"If you must know, I'm enjoying this moment. I've never been this relaxed and pampered. You're right about your massage. I loved it! You make a great gift."

Chris laughed and it was music to her ears.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Elisa laughed. "It was brutal."

"You're just getting started, go with the flow."

"Okay, I'm also thinking how silly I've been all this time. I don't talk to other people and I don't open up."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I guess, well...by not allowing anyone to get close to me, I don't have to worry about letting anyone down. It's kind of sad, really. I've completely shut down emotionally. That's not a healthy way to live. I don't want to be alone."

"You don't have to be alone, but I'm not sorry you are."

Elisa gave him a playful glare. "What a mean thing to say!"

"No, you're taking it wrong. Do you realize how awkward it would have been had I come here and seen you with another guy?"

She laughed and nudged him in the arm.

"I'm enjoying the way I feel right now, it's a nice change."

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“How so? I hate to think of you not loving yourself. You are a special woman.”

“It’s nice to hear you say so. I’ve been feeling sorry for myself all month, and fighting depression. No wonder the suicide rate is so high around this time. The holidays are rough when you don’t have someone in your life to share it with. Every song on the radio is about spending time with a special person and reuniting with your true love. Listening to “Blue Christmas” over and over is enough to make me want to go get run over by a reindeer, or something. It affects me deep inside, but I have no one to blame, only myself. How about you? Do the holidays ever get you down?”

Chris sat up and rested his back against the headboard. He took both her hands in his and kissed them gently.

“To be honest, I haven’t really experienced relationships the way you have. I’m hoping someday that will change.”

Propping herself up on her elbows, Elisa studied him. “When I wake up, will you be gone?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

“On you. I came here on my own volition, to deliver your gifts and grant you a special wish. Since I’ve done both, I’m free to leave anytime. I’ve enjoyed your company more than anyone else I’ve ever met. There’s something about you that fascinates me. But when you say the word, I’m gone.”

“And where will you go?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

Elisa sat up and folded her arms in front of her breasts, doing her best pout possible. “Why so many secrets? Here I am opening up to you, pouring my heart out, and you can’t even tell me where you are from?”

“It’s how things have to be right now, I’m afraid you aren’t ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“The truth.”

Elisa felt some of the tension return to her upper back and neck. Things were so nice she didn’t want to ruin anything.

“I’m not sure why you think that, but you’re entitled to your own opinion.”

“I say it based on your past.”

“What would you know about that?”

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“Not too many details, but a few. I read people very well; it’s sort of a gift. Anyway, you have to believe in the magic of Christmas to understand, and as you’ve stated earlier, you let that go a long time ago.”

“Oh come on, you really expect me to believe in something as hokey as Santa Claus? There’s no big guy sitting on frozen tundra with little people spending their days making toys. There’s no jolly Saint Nick granting things to good little girls and boys. Trust me, if he were real, my life would be very different right now. Christmas is nothing but one big let down.”

“You’ve obviously been hurt and I hope you’ll feel comfortable enough to share that with me. But I’m not talking about believing in Santa Claus, necessarily. There’s more to the magic than seeing it through the eyes of an innocent child. Stories of Santa aren’t very accurate, but he doesn’t mind, he only wants to keep them believing in his existence. Without magic, the holiday spirit would cease to exist. I would cease to exist.”

“Hold the phone, now you want me to believe you are a spirit? I can touch you, feel you...we had sex for Pete’s sake. There’s only so much hoopla one girl can stand, you know. What are you going to turn into next, a dwarf with a poor self esteem?”

“Why do you make fun of these things? Do you think I’m silly because I believe in them?”

“Well...no.”

“Good. And to answer your question with all honesty, yes, I’m a spirit.”

Elisa ran her fingers lightly across the red stockings she still had on, the texture giving her a rush of goose bumps.

“Have you shut yourself up so much that you can’t feel the magic around you anymore? Do you have any idea what you’re missing by closing yourself up inside make-believe walls?”

Great, he’d gone from shrink to lecturer. There was a part of Elisa that wanted to run away, right then and there, but the other part longed for this kind of attention. She wanted to know where the spotlight was and why was it on her tonight.

“I don’t know how to answer you. I can’t honestly remember the last time I felt much of anything. Since you’ve been here I feel like I’ve escaped into a fantasy. I knew I had closed myself up, but I didn’t realize to what magnitude.”

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“Well maybe you need to open your eyes and see things for how they truly are. There’s a bigger world out there than just what it is you’re experiencing in the here and now. Life is passing you by, don’t you want to enjoy it?”

Now her defense mode was starting to kick in. “Don’t talk down to me like I’m some child. I’m not blind or ignorant. I know what goes on around me; I just choose to handle things differently. Does that make me a bad person?”

“No. But in many ways you’ve never grown up. I understand that love hasn’t been kind to you over the years, but there’s something else...I can’t put my finger on it. Something happened to you when you were a child that changed everything and blocked out the magic. You’ve tucked those emotions way so deep inside, so incredibly safe and sound, that you can’t see them. I can’t even see them. Won’t you talk to me and open up to me some more? Talking is a healing process.”

Tears welled up beneath her eyelids and she fought to keep them at bay. “I can’t.”

“You’re safe here. Talk to me.”

A surge of emotions churned inside her stomach and she felt like a dam was about to break. Elisa turned and buried her face in his chest, her shoulders bobbing up and down as she sobbed. “I haven’t talked about it for so long. I don’t think I can anymore.”

“Try me.”

Chris reached over and pulled a tissue from the box, gently dabbing her eyes and cheeks with it.

“I don’t want you to feel sorry for me.”

“I’m not like that.”

“No, you’re not. I appreciate that. I’m not sure why, but things are becoming more obvious to me, like I’m seeing them in a new light. I used to love Christmas; it was my favorite time of the year, and not just because I got presents. Then it all came to a sudden stop one day. I remember I was ten at the time. My father was called away on a last minute business trip, he was a gallery owner and he’d been trying to close a deal with a friend of his. I remember my dad being excited, but I couldn’t be excited for him. All I could think about was how it affected me. It was Christmas Eve and I was begging him not to go. I even threatened to hate him forever if he left. He promised me he’d be back before I even got up in the morning. We were very close, he and I. The

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thought of not spending Christmas all together as a family seemed wrong to me, on many levels.”

Elisa paused a moment to blow her nose and gather her thoughts. It was comforting for Chris to have his arms around her as she talked, sitting there and listening attentively. She did feel safe.

“When I got up the next morning, I ran down the stairs and stared at the enormous pile of presents beneath the Christmas tree. My parents spoiled me rotten every year and I could tell this year was no exception. I had every notion to charge back upstairs and wake my parents up, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw strange lights reflecting against the window. The front door was ajar and I peeked out, careful to not get caught. It took a few moments to register in my head what I was seeing, but I knew everything was about to change, for the worse. Before I heard anyone say anything, I knew right then and there that my daddy wasn’t coming home. My mother was crying hysterically in the arms of a police officer. As soon as she saw me I bolted and hid myself in the corner of the room. It didn’t take her long to find me, it was the same hiding place I’d always had. I loved my mother dearly; she raised me well and had a lot of love to give. All of a sudden the roles changed, and it was her turn to be a scared, little girl. She gathered me in her arms and told me that my daddy been in a car accident on the freeway coming home. It had been sheer ice, and the car had lost control. He wouldn’t ever walk through the door again. All I could think about what how it was my fault for asking him to rush home.”

“But you were only a little girl.”

“He wouldn’t have been rushing if I hadn’t made him promise to be there.”

“You can’t hold on to that, it was only your perception as a young child. You must know now that it wasn’t your fault.”

“I still blame myself every day, especially around Christmas.”

“You’ve got to stop that vicious cycle. I have a feeling he wanted to be there as badly as you wanted him there.”

“But you don’t understand. For four years I asked Santa to bring my daddy back, but he never did. I said he could take back all my toys, all my clothes, absolutely anything if I could have my daddy walk through that door again. And you know what? Not once did my wish come true. No amount of belief, wishes, or magic was ever going to bring him back.”

“So you stopped believing in Santa.”

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“I stopped believing in everything.”

Another set of tears started and she was back in his arms, wanting nothing more than to be sheltered in his manliness.

“It makes sense why you’ve lost your hope and why the magic has gone out of you. It also makes sense as to why you don’t get close to people, and push those away who want to be with you.”

Elisa opened her mouth to say something, to come to her own defense about past relationships, but she found she couldn’t. All this time she’d blamed everyone else for her unhappiness. Now as she thought about them, she was the one who wasn’t emotionally there for anyone. It wasn’t she who felt ignored, uncared for or unneeded; it was how she made others feel. She was just able to turn it around to make herself the victim.

“Oh Chris, you’ve helped me see so many things in a short span of time. Thank you.”

“It’s easier when you’re not involved in it, and you’re very much involved in it. All I did was offer a soft place to fall when you finally could open up about it. You’ve needed to release that guilt for a long time in order to grow and flourish. Maybe now you can find a way to heal those old wounds, and let some magic back into your heart.”

“You don’t think I’m too old to do all that?”

He shook his head at her, sweeping her body closer. “You’re never too old. Like I said, magic isn’t something only children experience, it’s reserved for anyone who simply believes. Opening your heart is a great first step. It will be essential in the healing process. You might want to write out your feelings in a journal, to hold yourself accountable.

“Then I’m glad I bought myself a writing journal.”

“Beautiful! Once you’ve started on this healing path, you’ll notice the weight dissipate from your shoulders, and you won’t be carrying such a heavy load. Magic is what you make it, so why don’t you try and make some magic.”

Elisa kissed him on the forehead and moved a strand of hair away from his eye. “You really are a spirit, aren’t you? I mean...you’re full of wisdom, the kind of wisdom that can only come from experience. Here I thought you were full of beans, but now I’m thinking you’re full of magic.”

“Do you truly believe I possess magical powers?”

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She wasn't sure if he was testing her or not, but she believed it. The night had taken a sudden turn, and all for the better. How was it possible he knew when to reach out to her? She couldn't let him go.

"Yes, I'm convinced you are magical. There's no other explanation. Look at what you've done for me since you appeared. You came out of nowhere, bringing me gifts only I knew I wanted, and loved me in a way I've never experienced before. If it isn't magic, what could it possibly be?"

"Love."

Elisa's brow furrowed. "Love? Is it really that simple?"

"Three years ago I came here as your secret Santa, and as a guardian. I immediately fell in love with you, and I wanted to profess my love to you right then and there. But I was advised not to because you weren't ready. The next year I came back again with a gift and still you weren't ready. This time around I found a secret way in. I thought if I could help you see the good things in your life, and help you open up, I might stand a chance to win your heart."

"Is that so?"

Chris gave her a sheepish grin and she couldn't help but double over in laughter.

"I hate to think what would have happened."

"The sad truth of it is I wouldn't be able to see you again."

"Ever?"

"Ever. It was my third and final chance."

"Then I'm even more glad it all worked out. I would have missed out on a beautiful gift. You. I'm glad you took one last chance."

"I'm glad it worked too."

"If it's not too painful to talk about, would you tell me how you became a spirit?"

"Seems like a fair request. My earliest recollection was of growing up with a strange yet loving family. I had at least thirty brothers and sisters and we all had to fight for attention. It wasn't until I was eight-years-old when the people who raised me told me the truth. I guess when I was born my parents couldn't afford to take care of me and wanted to make sure I had a better life. So, they left me alone in the house on Christmas Eve and never returned. The story, as it was related to me, was that a man found me there alone with a note attached to the basket I was in. All it said was they wished I could be raised by caring parents, and that's it."

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“That’s awful!”

“Well, I wasn’t even six months old, so I didn’t know any different. It turns out the person who found me is the one who raised me, who I called dad every day. He built a magnificent house, better than any other house in the district. Everything was fine until one Christmas when a fire broke out. No one made it out alive.”

Elisa could only imagine the pain he had went through and felt terrible. “Wh-what happened?”

“I was given a second chance.”

“Are you a guardian angel then?”

“No, just a wandering spirit. I can materialize when I want, but I try not to take advantage of the situation. I try and help people see the importance of forgiveness and especially about appreciating those in your life. We have things in common, starting with losing special people in our lives.”

“Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“It gets easier to talk about every time.”

“I’m dying to know what was it about me that caught your attention.”

“I picked up on your sadness, but couldn’t decipher the root cause. Sometimes I came in for a quick peek, just to make sure you were okay.”

Elisa held her breath a moment. “Did you know I used to get the feeling someone was watching me? I’m wondering if that was you!”

“Candle flickers, a warm spot, air on the back of your neck. They were my way of making sure you were okay. I didn’t want you to feel alone.”

“So tell me again, are you going to disappear in the morning?”

“I have certain obligations, but now I can come back every year.”

A knot started in Elisa’s stomach at the thought of him going away.

“That’s not good enough, not if you want me to heal. How can I possibly wait all year for you?”

“Just as I waited for you.”

“That’s different. I didn’t know about you at the time. I have you now, I can’t fathom the thought of losing you.”

“I don’t know how I can stay.”

Elisa refused to give him up without a fight. It was then a thought came to her that she was sure would work. “You do realize you never let me finish telling you my wish.”

“What do you mean?”

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“Well, I was trying to tell you what I wanted, but you interrupted me. So, as it stands, I still haven’t made my official Christmas wish.”

Chris ran his hand through his hair and gave her a puzzled look. “I’m sorry, how embarrassing. I thought for sure I could read your mind correctly. Didn’t you want me?”

She reached over and stroked his arms, her fingers tracing the subtle muscles of his biceps.

“Most certainly. In fact, I want you...365 days a year. Is that possible?”

A look of relief washed away his puzzled expression, but then turned serious.

“It is my sworn duty to grant you your wish, no matter what it is. Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Elisa slid her hand down to his cock and fondled it lovingly, delighting in the way it responded to her touch.

“Oh, without question that is exactly what I want.”

She could feel the lubrication between her thighs start up. How could she have gone so long without feeling a man between her legs? More importantly, how could she have sworn off men when there were still a few good ones left out there? She guessed she had been waiting for the right one to come along. And finally he had.

Chris gazed at her lovingly while her hands readied him for her. “I’d say you made magic today by finding the one loophole to keep me here with you.”

She smiled at him. “I can think of another way to make magic.”

Elisa straddled her stocking covered legs over him and sank her drenched sex over his cock. She relished the thrill of feeling his hard shaft as she slid up and down, clenching her inner muscles tight around him. His eyes never left hers as he stroked her breasts, brushing his palm against her erect nipples. Reaching down she fingered her clit, sending waves of sensations throughout her body.

“Right there...right there...” she chanted, willing the first ebb of the release to come. Faster she rode him, ignoring how the bedpost hit the wall making loud banging sounds. One of the pillows fell onto her table and knocked over the lamp, switching the radio on. “Jingle Bell Rock” successfully drowned out her husky cries and moans. The orgasm toyed with her, refusing to fully let go. “I’ll be damned if I have to wait until Christmas morning,” she mumbled.

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"Maybe I can help." Chris tousled her sweet spot with his fingers, rubbing her nub in fast circles. It was just the thing she needed to send her over the edge. With her thighs clasped tight around his body she felt the jarring orgasm rip through her body like a tidal wave. Her inner muscles contracted tight around his slick shaft as spasms shot in all directions, racing each other from her head to her toes. Quickly she climbed off and enveloped his cock in her mouth, using her hands, tongue, and lips to make as much friction as possible. His legs tensed up and she looked up, watching his head toss side to side. She loved the way he tasted, especially after having been inside her.

"That's the spirit, right there..."

She suckled him while sliding her mouth up and down, refusing to stop until he'd been pleased. His legs trembled wildly as he exuded his own carol of grunts and moans. Faster she went down on him, milking him dry. His cock pulsed in her hands and she knew he was near. His body thrashed across the sheets and then in a powerful frenzy she felt his release and let his magical serum coat her tongue. Elisa showered his chest with butterfly kisses and nestled close into him. Chris reached over and turned off the radio, filling the room with satisfied sighs.

She couldn't have felt any more content if she tried. He filled her up with love in every way possible. "I want you to know, I couldn't have asked for a more magical Christmas."

"It's good to hear you say so. It reflects my sentiments exactly."

"I feel bad though."

His eyes were wide and concerned. "What? Why?"

Elisa tossed her hair over her other shoulder so she could feel his warm flesh against her face. "Because I didn't get you a present."

"Yes you did. You gave me love, what gift could top that?"

"You're right. I do love you."

"I love you."

She yawned and turned over, moving her backside into him until they were spooning.

"This is going to be a treat. I'm not used to falling asleep in someone's arms."

Chris laughed, more music to her ears. "Me either. I hope you aren't one of those women who hog the sheets."

"Are you kidding me? All I need is your body to keep me warm. Promise you'll be here in the morning?"

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He kissed her shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere, ever again. You're stuck with me on account of that wish."

"In one night I've been given a wish, found love, and made magic. I wouldn't mind every Christmas being as good as this one."

"Now that you've found your Christmas spirit, I think that's possible."

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