

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE

Fall Season

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Hearth Fires

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE

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SIMON MAGEE

Mystery

The Siamese cat, Simon Magee, didn't know what a precious cargo he carried in his collar. The thief, Louie Barden, who stole a tiny piece of microfilm and placed it in the address pouch of the feline's collar, knew and followed the cat on its nightly territorial observance trying to retrieve his stolen booty. In doing so, Louie encountered the worst experiences of his life. Who would expect that following a cat could be hazardous to your health?

MURDER PLUS FIVE

Mystery

Was it an accident? Or was it murder? Audrey Canning only knew that her father was aboard their company jet that crashed into Elk Mountain. Accompanied by her father's partner, she traveled from her home in California to the small Wyoming community sitting close to the mountain. Here she encountered a local detective, a rancher, and a government man from Washington D C. These men were anxious to find a briefcase in the downed plane. Did one of them sabotage the plane? They each seemed to have a motive. Only when the group flew to California was the mystery solved with a surprise that baffled them all.

THE PROMISE

By

K.B. Ross

Snow falling outside the office window caught Bethany Holly's attention. Slipping her hands from computer keys, she folded her arms allowing herself the pleasure of watching the featherlike snowflakes glide past the glass.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Her secretary, Margaret, stood in front of Bethany's desk, waiting patiently, with papers in her outstretched hand.

"Very lovely," Bethany answered, pulling her attention from the serene view.

"These have to be signed." Margaret laid the papers on the desk.

Bethany sighed. "Of course." She picked up her pen then motioned toward the window. "Sometimes I'd like to be one of those snowflakes with nothing to do but sail from heaven to earth."

"Being vice president of this department is a wonderful position, but it doesn't leave you much time to go sailing," Margaret smiled.

"Yes, it is," Bethany agreed. "But, as you say, there's not much time for sailing." She chuckled at the thought of being a snowflake and began signing the papers.

"What are you doing for Christmas?" Margaret asked as she took each signed paper. "Do you and John have exciting plans?"

"It's only Christmas," Bethany sighed. "What's so thrilling about that?" She signed the last paper and handed it to Margaret. "Why does everyone get so irrational about Christmas?"

Before leaving the room, Margaret turned to Bethany and smiled. "Why, Bethany. I believe you're a Scrooge."

“I’m a member of that large group,” Bethany shouted, turning her chair back toward the window. “Christmas,” she sighed. “I have to think of something to get for John.” As the fluffy flakes floated past the window, she bit her lower lip and shook her head. “I can’t give him what he wants. I just can’t. A wedding and babies absolutely won’t fit into my plans.” She twilled her chair around to her desk. “This is my life, my dream. I’ve almost reached the top.” Banging her hand on the smooth surface, she stiffly sat back in her chair. “I can’t even stand babies,” she said, steeping her fingers and rubbing the tips along her straight white teeth. “I’ll just tell him that. That’s how I do things.”

Rocking in the office chair, she clasped her hands and gazed at the opposite wall. She had known John since childhood and in high school they dated, but nothing serious developed. It seemed that they were destined only to be friends. The last year changed all that when John asked not only to be more than friends, but to marry him. He knew she wasn’t ready, for she had not accomplished her goal, to be president of the company.

“Why can’t he wait?” she asked aloud. “John knows how important this is to me.” She wiped the perspiration from her upper lip. “It won’t be easy, I know,” she said softly. “I do love him and I do know him so well.” She scooted forward in her chair. “He said he was bringing something special and that would be the ring. I’m certain of that.”

Lifting the phone, she dialed his number at work. His secretary’s message left her cold. He’d left early to pick up something very important. Bethany let the receiver drop into its cradle. The ring. He’d gone to buy her wedding ring. She twisted the engagement ring he’d placed on her finger months ago. He warned her he’d shop for the wedding ring without her, and now she’d be roped and tied with a baby on each hip. Just say no. That’s all she has to do. Say no.

Walking the floor, she waited for John’s call or to see him walk through the door with a glint in his eyes equaling the brilliance of the gem he carried.

No call came and no visitor entered. “He’s going to surprise me at dinner tonight,” she smiled. “He is a truly wonderful fellow,” she said sitting in her chair. Trying to busy herself with papers, she finally pushed them aside and studied the pleats in her short gray skirt. Giving them a press with her hand, she crossed one leg over the other and drew a mirror

from the drawer. Carefully she rearranged her short, soft blonde curls. “I need to visit the beauty shop,” she said. “Maybe straight this time.” She pulled on a curl and let it spring back to its original position.

“I’ll give John another call,” she said, reaching for the receiver. “Maybe he’s back in his office.”

Before she picked it up, the phone rang in her hand. She felt a lump jump into her throat. Saying no was terribly uncomfortable.

“Hello,” she said, expecting John’s voice. Instead, his secretary’s voice filled her ear.

A cold numbness flashed through Bethany. She stared at the snowflakes that had calmed her before, but they gave her no peace.

“Say again.” Bethany’s voice trembled. “I can’t understand you.”

Bethany turned back to the desk, her gaze on the far wall, seeing nothing, feeling nothing. Finally she forced reality into her consciousness.

“John’s had a car accident, you say?” The high pitched projection of her words sounded unfamiliar and she cleared her throat. “He’s where? In what hospital?” She listened so intently that her head began to ache. “All right. I’m on my way right now.” She slammed the receiver into its place and grabbed her coat and purse.

No, no, no. The words screamed through her mind as she stepped into the elevator. She had reserved her negative response for something other than this situation, but the words were appropriate at the moment. John was in the hospital. Maybe close to death. You can’t say no to a dying man.

The elevator and the taxi ride seemed endless and when she arrived at her destination, the nurse at Mercy Hospital wouldn’t let her see John. Family members only, she’d been told. Bethany had to wait and patience wasn’t one of her virtues.

She folded her arms and hugged herself, trying to quiet her drumming heart. Breathing deeply, she blew the air from her lungs then noticed her foot violently twitching from side to side. With a growl, she jumped to her feet and began pacing. Jamming her hands to her hips, she forced her over exuberant legs down the hall to John’s room.

Stepping close to the door, she hoped to hear something to quiet her anxiety. Did she hear a sob? Was John all right? Perhaps he’d died. No, not that. She paced the hallway, her gaze on her feet. “Oh God, I’ll do

anything, *anything* if John can be all right.” She studied her gray pumps. “I’ll give it all up and have babies and all the things I don’t want to do.” She shook her head. “I’ll even enjoy it. I *promise*. Just let him be all right.” Wiping the tears streaming down her cheeks, she forced herself back to her chair in the waiting room.

As John’s mother, father, and sister came toward her, Bethany felt her heart rush from her chest to her throat. Gasping replaced her shallow breathing as she waited impatiently for the news. Their smiling faces revealed Bethany’s deepest hopes.

“He’s going to be all right,” John’s mother, Sarah, sighed as she held Bethany’s hands.

“It was touch and go for a while,” John’s father, Robert, said. “We thought we’d lost him.”

John’s fifteen year old sister, Caroline, smiled. “And just a minute ago, just like that he became conscious and grinned at us.”

Bethany felt numb. Just a minute ago she stood by John’s door promising to give up her well established life for the health of the man behind the door.

“You can see him now,” Sarah said softly. “He’s asking for you.”

Bethany nodded and forced a smile. As she strode to John’s room, she thought. *It wasn’t because I said anything. It just wasn’t his time. That’s all.*

She stepped as quietly as her pumps would allow to his bedside and gazed at his pale face. As she touched his hand, he opened his eyes revealing the pain he felt.

“I hoped you’d come,” he whispered, trying to squeeze her hand.

“I came as soon as I heard,” she said, stroking his fingers.

“I was bringing you a Christmas gift.” His voice was faint and Bethany leaned closer. “I’m afraid it was lost,” he said.

“It’s okay,” she said, kissing him on the cheek. “Christmas is weeks away.” She chuckled. “We’re scarcely over Thanksgiving.”

He tried to smile. “It was important that you have it now.”

Bethany nodded, knowing the gift was a small velvet box with a diamond inside. At this moment she wasn’t positive that her negative feeling toward marriage was accurate. Perhaps she sympathized with John’s predicament and that clouded her judgment.

“It’s all right. There’s plenty of time for gifts.” She smiled and the chuckle trying to force its way to her lips sounded more like a groan. “Anyway,” she concluded. “By Christmas you’ll be back to your old self.”

The smile became a gash on her face as John stroked her hand.

“I can’t feel my legs,” he said flatly.

The air left her lungs and Bethany gasped to refill the empty pouches. Had a bowling ball hit her in the stomach? Her gaze left his face and traveled to his legs. Trying to stay calm, she nodded and returned her gaze to his face. “It’s probably just part of the injury. I’m sure they’ll fix you up wonderfully well.” Her words fell like dry leaves, without expression, and with little hope of being whole again. She wished she could gather them back into her mouth and spew out something else. At the moment her stomach was swirling from the impact of his words and she felt her breakfast churning violently. Swallowing the disgusting feeling, she sat down on the edge of the bed and cleared her throat.

“I’m here for you,” she said, hoping he believed what she uttered.

“I know,” he smiled. “I knew I could count on you.”

A nurse entering the room relieved Bethany’s tension.

“You’ll have to go now,” she said. “He needs his rest.”

Bethany kissed John, stepped into the hall and sighed, grateful for the stagnant air and the solid floor. Her legs wobbled as she returned to the waiting room. She just wanted to go home to her apartment and have everything as it was earlier this morning or to be signing endless papers at work and returning home dead tired. But it wasn’t the same. The faces of John’s family mirrored that.

“How does he look to you?” Sarah asked anxiously as she rang her hands.

“He’s in good spirits,” Bethany said, nodding. She didn’t know if John had told them about the lack of feeling in his legs so she decided not to mention it.

“It will be an awful Christmas,” Caroline whined. “Just the worst Christmas ever.”

“Now, now,” consoled Sarah. “Let’s not think that way. You’re fifteen now and old enough to realize these things happen. We have to go on and make a good Christmas for your brother.”

Bethany put her arm around Caroline's shoulders. "Yes, of course we will. And John will get better and better. Who knows? By Christmas day he'll probably be all right." She was afraid the encouragement was a lie, but no one actually knew the outcome. "There are three weeks until Christmas. A lot can happen in that time." She felt Caroline nod and Bethany gave the young girl a hug. "It will surely be the best holiday ever." Bethany tried to smile, but the motion was a forced grimace.

"You'll come to our house for Christmas, won't you?" Sarah asked.

Bethany's brain reeled with thoughts of usual holidays with her own parents. If she accepted this invitation, she feared the day would be sad and distressful, but she smiled and nodded. "Of course, I will."

Excusing herself and telling John's family goodbye, she stepped into the cool December evening and inhaled the crisp cleanness. "Hospitals are so depressing," she sighed. "I'll be glad to get back to my regular routine."

When she reached her apartment, she drew a hot bath and soaked until she felt all the hospital odor was washed away. Lying in her bed, she planned how she would squeeze time for hospital visits into her busy schedule. The holidays were always frantic. Orders for toys and children's merchandise, that company sold, kept everyone hopping.

She pounded her pillow and forced her eyes closed. "I'll think about the schedule tomorrow," she breathed. Trying to encourage sleep, she urged her thoughts to pleasantries, but the image of John in the hospital would not leave her consciousness. She loved him. She realized that, but marriage was not in her immediate future plans. Fluffing the pillow, she gave it another blow and plopped her head into the indentation she'd made.

"He had a ring," she sighed. "I know he had a ring." Gazing at the ceiling, she suddenly realized she had no proof of that. "What am I doing?" she asked the squares above her. "I'm making this ring situation into something serious." She smiled and closed her eyes. A chuckle eased its way to her lips. "I'm certain John had no ring at all." Wrapping herself into a fetal position, she sighed. "Anyway," she said to the pillow. "John's recovery is all that's important now." That thought released her stress and permitted welcome sleep to comfort her.

The next morning she called the hospital from her office. John had experienced a relapse during the night. Her heart sank as she gazed at the orders to sign piled in front of her.

“Bad news?” Margaret asked, waiting patiently for the finished papers.

“John’s worse.” Bethany replaced the receiver and gazed at the work in front of her. “I don’t know what to do.” She patted the papers. “These have to go out today.” Twirling her chair to the window, she tried to hide the anguish forming as tears.

“Can I process and sign them for you?” Margaret asked.

Bethany whirled back to the desk. “Oh, could you?” Thinking a moment, she shook her head. “I don’t know if the upper office will accept that.”

“Well,” Margaret smiled. “Only one way to find out.” She gathered the papers and held them against her breast. “You go now. I’ll make excuses for you.”

“Are you sure?” Bethany sprung to her feet, waiting for Margaret’s assurance.

“Everything will be all right. I promise,” Margaret said, rushing toward the door.

I promise. The words flashed through Bethany’s brain. Yes, she had said them herself in a moment of anguish. She’d meant them then, but people say things like that under stress. She shook the thought away.

“You’re a blessing, Margaret,” Bethany said as she grabbed her coat and purse. “I’ll keep in touch with you on my cell phone.”

Leaving Margaret with her own duties, Bethany raced to her car. The early December air felt refreshing and its coolness enhanced her energy.

The familiar faces of John’s family greeted her as she rushed to the waiting room.

“What’s happened?” she asked anxiously.

“He stopped breathing, but they resuscitated him,” Robert said.

Bethany gazed at Sarah’s tear stained face. “I’m so sorry,” she said, hugging the woman. “I wish there was something I could do.”

“Just go to him,” Robert insisted, motioning toward the room. “He’s asking for you.”

“Of course,” Bethany said, loosening her grip on Sarah. Her heart beat wildly as she neared John’s room. Wiping her damp hand on her brown skirt, she pushed open the door. Gasping, she gazed at him lying silently, oxygen tubes extending from his mouth. Rushing to him, she held his hand and stroked his fingers.

Smiling, she clasped his hand. “Don’t try to talk,” she said. “I’ll do all that.”

His free hand raised and his finger pointed to the night stand beside his bed. Bethany’s gaze followed the poking finger to a small velvet box. Grasping it gently, she closed her hand around it then looked at John’s shining eyes. She nodded as he tapped her tightly closed fist and exposed the blue velvet container. Opening it slowly, she expected a diamond to wink at her.

“It’s empty,” she said, almost relieved. “Did it get lost in the accident?”

He nodded and tried to shrug.

“It’s all right,” she said and sat in the chair by his bed. “There’s plenty of time for rings and things.”

He forced a smile and clasped her hand.

“I’m right here, John,” she said, drawing the blue box to her breast. “I accept your box.”

Another smile and he nodded.

She gazed away from him to the far blank white wall. Why had she said that? The word no was in her mind, but I accept came out instead. Climbing the financial ladder was her goal. Now, here she was, accepting an empty blue velvet box and smiling, as uncommon warmth flowed through her.

“You’re a crafty one, John Simms, to do all this so I’d accept an empty box.”

His eyes shone and he squeezed her hand again.

“You’ll have to go now,” the nurse said as she stepped into the room. “He’s had enough for today.”

Bethany nodded, kissed John’s forehead and returned to the waiting room.

“He wanted to give you a ring.” Sarah choked on the words. “But all the police found was the empty box.”

Bethany held the velvet container in the palm of her hand so Sarah could see it. "I accepted the box," she smiled.

"I'm glad," Sarah said. "That will make him feel better." The woman choked on the words.

"It seemed to help." Bethany gazed at the box then put it in her coat pocket. "I'd better get back to the office. Call me if there are any changes."

Sarah nodded and hugged her. "I hope the box means we can welcome you to our family."

Bethany smiled and returned the show of affection. "As far as John is concerned, he has amply proposed." She drew back from Sarah and patted her pocket. "And I have accepted with this empty box." She chuckled at her words and the expression on Sarah's face assured Bethany that she was thoroughly accepted.

As Bethany stepped into her office, Margaret followed her.

"What's up?" Bethany asked as she hung her coat and hurried to her desk.

"Mr. Chambers won't accept my signature on the orders. They all have to be done over." She sighed and stepped closer to Bethany's desk. "And he wants to see you in his office."

Bethany felt a sharp anxiety pain shoot through her chest. "Okay," she said, gulping for air. "Just leave the papers here. I'll get to them when I return."

What Mr. Chambers wanted, Bethany didn't need to imagine. She knew. At the busiest time of the year she'd left her work to her secretary. Hurrying to the elevator, she pushed the button to the top floor. Wiping her sweating palms on her skirt, she entered the boss's office and nodded at her secretary.

"I'm here to see Mr. Chambers."

The secretary waved toward the door. "He's waiting for you."

Yes, Bethany knew. She took a deep breath, turned the knob and entered.

"Hello, there," Mr. Chambers said from behind his desk. "I'd like to know what's going on. I can't have you walking out like that. Tell me what the problem is. Maybe I can help." He smoothed back his white hair receding at the temples and leaned forward. His bony face reminded

Bethany of pictures of Abraham Lincoln, but his tailored blue suit and his groomed appearance would cause anyone to feel underdressed.

Bethany didn't expect that. She presumed he'd be very upset. She took a deep breath and told him the tragic happening.

"There now," he smiled, revealing straight white teeth. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"No," she said, puzzlement filling her brain.

"This won't happen too often will it?" he asked. "I'd hate to replace your signature on those orders with someone else."

There it was. The words she knew she'd hear. Bethany swallowed as her heart leapt to her throat. "I'll try to keep it to a minimum," she finally squeaked.

"See that you do." His smile dropped to a frown. "You've only one step to the top of your department. I'd hate to see you jeopardize your opportunity."

"I'll do my best," she said then gazed into his stern gray eyes. "But some things must take precedence."

"That's your choice," he said coolly. "Remember. Come to me when you have a problem."

"Thank you," she said as she backed to the door. "Thank you very much." Drawing a deep breath as she closed the door, she hurried back to her office. "Help me with my problem," she growled. "The only way he'll help is to replace me."

"How'd it go?" Margaret asked as Bethany passed by her desk.

"So far so good." Bethany tried to smile. "Come on. Let's get all those orders filled."

Bethany eyed the phone as she signed the papers. "How many more?" she asked Margaret.

"This is the last one you have to resign. And now we have the new orders to work on." She handed them to Bethany. "Only thirty or so. That should be all for today."

Bethany nodded and signed until a cramp in her hand forced her to stop. As she stretched her fingers, the phone rang.

Giving her hand a shake, she reached for the phone. A lump in her throat began growing forcing her to exhale in short, shallow gasps. Was it the hospital? She was almost afraid to answer. Inhaling deeply, she moistened her lips.

"I'll get it," she told Margaret. As she listened a smile broke, replacing her opened mouth and she sat back in her chair and relaxed. Replacing the receiver, she sighed. "He's better again, breathing on his own and he wants food."

"That's wonderful," Margaret beamed. "So? Your visits really help. Even though it makes Mr. Chambers unhappy."

"Okay," Bethany said, feeling strength surging through her body. "Now, let's get this stuff done." She straightened in her chair. "I think I could battle a buzz saw."

Margaret laughed. "I think you just did."

The day's work done, Bethany stopped at the hospital on her way home. The waiting room was vacant and she guessed John's family had already gone home. When she arrived at John's room, her eyes widened as she found him sitting in a chair.

"Well, look at you," she said, hurrying to him. "You're already out of bed." Warmth filled her as she kissed him and pulled a chair close to his.

"I think I'll live," he grinned. "That is if I can see you more often."

She stopped and gazed into his face. "You know I do have this interfering job." Trying to sound jovial, she chuckled, but it sounded more like a whine.

"I know," he said and laid his hand on hers. "I know how important it is to you."

She searched his expression. "You think I consider it more important to me than you are?"

"I know you've worked hard to get where you are. I can't take that away from you." He tried to smile.

His sad eyes sent a dark shadow through Bethany. *Is that happening? Was his situation preventing her from pushing upward in the company?*

"What are you saying, John? Tell me what you mean." Her heart began to race as she felt his hand shake.

"The feeling is coming back in my legs, but they say I'll need therapy to be able to walk again." He patted her hand. "I don't want to hold you back."

She saw that the painful words distressed him terribly and stinging tears formed in her eyes. Shaking her head, she angrily wiped them away. Before she could reply, he continued.

"Maybe it was best that the ring was lost. You can go ahead with your career and I—" He stopped and looked away. "I'll go on from here."

A hot anger that she'd not felt before raged inside her. It was not a warm fuzzy feeling, but a fiery blaze. Wiping her sweating hands on her skirt, she grabbed his head and turned his face toward hers.

"Now you listen to me, John Simms and you listen good. I'm engaged to you. Some girls get a sparkling ring, but I received a box. A beautiful blue velvet box. Even though I can't wear it on my hand, it means the same to me. You're my man. You hear me John Simms? And you can't get out of it no matter how hard you try. Do you understand?" She patted his cheeks. "Tell me. Do you understand?"

He smiled as tears streamed down his face. "I was so hoping you'd say that, but I was so afraid you didn't want the ring at all."

She fell to her knees before him and hugged him tightly. "I love you. Don't you dare think you can get away from me by having an accident." She felt his body rock with sobs. "I'm here," she said. "Whatever it takes. I'm here."

"Time to go, the nurse said, stepping into the room. "It's way past visiting hours."

Bethany unwrapped her arms from John and stood. "Okay," she said to the nurse. Then to John. "I'll be back." She pointed a finger at him. "You have to walk down the isle with me so you'd better get busy. I'm looking forward to the ring."

Outside, in the cold of December, she shook off the thick emotional cloud engulfing her being. She had accepted his proposal, received with approval the walk down the isle, and verbally uttered the words-*whatever it takes*. She sighed and her breath created a cloud as she exhaled.

"I'll need this job," she argued with her emotions as she unlocked her car door. Sliding onto the seat, she pounded the steering wheel. "John won't be able to work. Someone will have to." She turned the key. Nothing happened. Twisting it again, she urged the car to start. "Come on, come on." Keeping her brain working logically, she checked the gas

gauge. Empty. "This is all I need," she grumbled, banging on the steering wheel. "I can't take one thing more."

Leaving the car, she returned to the hospital and walked to admitting. "I need to use your phone," she said urgently.

Bethany shivered in the cold as she waited for the taxi. Seeing it coming, she raced to the curb, but that cab passed by. She rubbed her freezing arms and searched the busy street for her ride. Gritting her teeth, she stomped in the snow. She had to get home. Tomorrow was another working day. Oh, would this nightmare ever end?

The next taxi stopped and Bethany hurried in, shivering and trying to stop her quivering jaw. She gave the driver her address and sat back in the seat.

"Looks like you need something to warm you up," the driver said.

"Just take me home," Bethany ordered. "That's all I want. Just take me home."

"Okay," he said. "I'll get you there safe and sound. I promise."

I promise. The words banged in Bethany's brain like someone pounding on a garbage can lid. Why did those words bother her? She crossed her arms and watched the buildings pass by. Deep inside she knew why those two words bothered her. She had promised God that she would do anything if John would be all right and that wasn't to be taken lightly. For some reason He was forcing her to keep that promise, but she could not fathom why it was so important that she honor the vow. Holding the explanation deep in her subconscious, she shook her head. She had to solve immediate problems and she couldn't let words she'd said when she was so distressed cloud her thinking.

Rushing into her apartment, she drew a hot bath and slipped the icy clothes from her shivering body. Soothing her frayed emotions in the warm water, she collected her thoughts.

"Let's see," she said as the frigid feeling disappeared into the comforting liquid. "Call the garage to fill the gas tank and get that car back to me at the office." She swirled her hands in the bath and gazed at the ceiling. "What else? I just can't think right now. I feel like John's little sister, Caroline was right when she said this would be an awful Christmas." She stopped her twirling hands and sat upright. "John's gift. Whatever will I get for him?"

She pulled the plug, dried herself quickly and relaxed beneath the crisp sheets and warm blanket. "I'll think about that tomorrow. I must get some sleep. Tomorrow's Friday and that means there's only two weeks until Christmas. Oh, boy. Sleep, sleep, come to me."

When Bethany woke the next morning, she thought she was wearier than when she went to bed. Having wakened later than usual, she grabbed a cup of instant coffee and rushed out the door. Of course her car was not sitting in its usual place. That's when she remembered where she had left it.

Dumping her coffee, she hurried back into the apartment and called a taxi. Repeatedly she checked her watch then paced to the curb in front of her residence. She gritted her teeth and grumbled. She was going to be late for work. That wouldn't help her standing with Mr. Chambers. She had no time to call a service station to retrieve her car.

"I'll call from the office," she concluded as the cab stopped and she slid into the seat. She told the driver the address and rested her head on the back of the seat. As the taxi stopped, she grabbed the handle of the door.

"Hold on, Lady," the driver shouted. "We're not there yet. Looks like an accident or something up ahead."

"Oh, no. Not this morning. I'm late for work already." Bethany slammed her body against the seat and huffed at the situation she could not control.

"Just have a little patience," the driver smiled. "It's not the end of the world."

As far as Bethany was concerned, it *was* the end of the world. One dreadful occurrence after another followed her since John's accident. Being caught up in that experience prevented her from concentrating on her day to day routine.

By the time she arrived at the office, Margaret had piled her desk with work. Bethany pushed the documents aside, grabbed the phone and called the garage where she usually took the car for repairs. A few minutes later she felt so relieved. They said it would be no problem to take care of everything and have her car at the office before lunch.

With a sigh and a surge of determination, Bethany attacked the work before her.

“Sorry there are so many,” Margaret said. “No one could keep up with that stack.”

“It’s all right,” Bethany sighed. “It’s my job. Right now it’s a solace from the chaos my life is in. After Christmas it’ll calm down.”

“Only two more weeks,” Margaret said. “Just hang on for two more weeks.” She took the papers Bethany handed her. “Then it will all be over until Easter. I promise.”

Bethany snapped her attention from the papers to Margaret’s face. “Why do you keep saying that?”

“Saying what?” Margaret asked.

“I promise. You’re always saying I promise. Why are you always saying that?” Bethany felt all patience slipping away.

Margaret shrugged. “I don’t know. It just jumps out.”

“Well jump it back in,” Bethany scolded. “I don’t want to hear about promises any more.”

“Sure,” Margaret said. “I’m sorry it annoyed you.” She took the signed papers and left Bethany to fume.

Bethany tossed the pen on the desk and whirled her chair to face the window. “Promises,” she growled. “I promise I’ll retain this job to keep my life on track.”

She twirled her chair back to her desk as the phone rang. Holding her breath, she gingerly picked up the receiver as if it would attack her if she didn’t execute the first blow.

“Hello,” she said softly perceiving it to be the hospital. Then recognizing the man’s voice from the garage, she heaved a sigh of relief.

Her peace of mind lasted only a second.

“What?” she asked puzzled at hearing what the man said. She listened intently, reliving yesterday’s episodes and grabbing her purse. “I’m sure I took my keys out of it,” she said, rummaging through the pouches in her handbag. “Anyway, I thought I did.” Pushing the purse aside, she concentrated on the voice on the other end of the line. “But my car has to be there. I left it there last night.” Listening again, Bethany leaned back in her chair. “Yes,” she said. “Maybe the police confiscated it.” She nodded. “And yes, possibly it was stolen.” Rocking back and forth in her chair, she swallowed at an angry sob working its way up her throat. “Yes, I suppose I should call the police. Thanks for your help.”

Replacing the receiver with a bang, she growled and brushed the tears from her cheeks. "What is all this for? Am I supposed to learn something from all this mess?" Slamming her hands on her hips, she jumped from her chair and stomped in front of her desk.

"Can I help?" It was Margaret with more papers to sign.

"Yes." Bethany took a deep breath. "Would you call the police and see if they picked up my car last night in front of the hospital?"

"You have had a time of it," Margaret sympathized. "I'll do that right away."

Bethany returned to her chair. "*I promise*," she said. "Margaret forgot to say that." She picked up the pen and began scribbling her signature on the orders.

"The police said you were parked in a no parking zone," Margaret said as she returned to Bethany's desk. "They took it and impounded it. You have to go pick it up and pay for it, of course."

Bethany slumped in her chair like a balloon whose air has escaped. "Anything else?" she asked without expression.

"Mr. Chambers wants to see you," Margaret said softly.

"Is that all?" Bethany asked. She felt as if oxygen was not completing its journey to her brain. She took several long breaths and filled her lungs. Perhaps that would implore her brain to engage. Finally nodding in surrender, she rose to her feet. "Tell him I'm on my way," she said tossing the pen on her desk still stacked with papers.

She let her feet lead her to the elevator, but decided to take the stairs. "Only three flights up," she moaned. "I'm in no hurry to greet dear old Mr. Chambers."

Pausing momentarily at the door, she heard the secretary announce Bethany's arrival.

"Go on in," the woman said.

Bethany's frustration prevented little subtlety as she pushed the door open. Did she observe surprise in his eyes at her aggressive behavior?

"What is it now?" She tried to cover her disappointment with a smile, but it caused her to appear even more stressed. She didn't like the expression he tried to cover. She knew what it meant.

"You're under a lot of pressure lately," he began. "You've much to handle right now." He tried to smile, but Bethany read the meaning behind the false motion.

“I’m all right,” Bethany argued. “I’m just going through some kind of siege. I’m sure it will be over soon.”

He nodded. “I’m sure.” Then he shook the nod away. “I need someone’s full attention to the job. We must not get behind.” He gazed into her face. “And we’re falling behind. Two weeks to Christmas and I just can’t fall behind now.” He looked away and sighed. “I’m letting you go.”

Bethany backed up, stunned. “But it’s so close to Christmas. Mr. Chambers, please rethink your decision.”

“If I need you, I’ll call you back.” He gazed at his desk. “That will be all, Miss Holly.”

She left the room, having no feeling in her legs. Being certain they would not hold her up, she took the elevator. There was no need to hurry. She was being laid off. Fired. He’d possibly never call her back. If so, she’d possible have to start as a sales clerk on the first floor.

“It looks bad,” Margaret said as Bethany returned to the office.

“It is,” Bethany said. “I’ll need a box to put my stuff in. I’ve just been laid off.”

“What?” Margaret shouted. “Didn’t he even mention sabbatical leave?”

“Nothing. Just good bye.” Bethany slumped in her chair. “It isn’t fair. It just isn’t fair.”

“I’ll get that box,” Margaret said and hurriedly left the room.

“There must be more of a reason than what he gave me,” Bethany grumbled to the walls.

The phone ringing interrupted her complaining. Cautiously she lifted the receiver. “What now?” she whispered.

From the other end of the line she recognized Sarah’s voice. Her soon to be mother-in-law sounded gleeful. Bethany sat back in her chair welcoming some good news. As she listened, she became ridged in her seat and her eyes took on life once more.

“Are they sure John’s well enough to go home?” Bethany asked leaving her seat and pacing in front of her desk. “He’ll what?” she asked pressing the receiver closer to her ear. “Oh, I see. He’ll go to the hospital for therapy.” Nodding, she returned to her chair and spun it toward the window. “Yes, of course I’ll take him to therapy. No, no it won’t interfere with my work at all.” She watched winter break up into little

flakes outside and nodded. "Yes, of course. I can learn how to help John so he won't have to go back to the hospital everyday." As she watched the snow fall outside her window, she felt the gliding flakes touching her cheeks, but as she wiped them away, she realized tears had formed and were sliding down her face. Wiping them away angrily, she concentrated on Sarah's words. "Yes, Sarah. I'll be there. I'm on my way now." As she hung up the phone, she remembered her car was still in the impoundment yard at the police department.

Leaning back in her chair, she extended her arms in surrender. "Okay. I give up. I give up." She exhaled all the air from her lungs and let her body go limp. She sat for a long moment like a rag doll a child had abandoned, then slowly reached for the phone and dialed the number for a taxi.

Bethany paid her fee at the police department and headed her car toward the hospital.

"Now, let's see," she planned as she drove. "My lease is paid on the apartment until the end of the month. I'll have to use the savings for gas, utilities and a little food." She banged the steering wheel. "I can probably find some kind of job to sustain me." She shook her head. "If I'm to help with the therapy, it'll have to be part time. Probably nights." Gritting her teeth, she stopped in front of the hospital. John's family stood beside his wheelchair attempting to settle him into the car.

Dashing to them, Bethany stared at John's pale, gaunt face. "Sorry I'm late," she said. "I had a few problems." She could see that the explanation didn't go well with Sarah.

"Well, you're here now," Sarah said flatly, an icy inflection edged her words. "We're taking him to our house to recuperate. Why don't you follow along behind?"

Bethany nodded and returned to her car. "This is going to be difficult," she said as she turned the key. "But what in the world do I have to do otherwise?" Heat from exasperation rose to her cheeks as she followed the family's car to the suburbs and to a white frame house with a lawn enclosed by a chain link fence. A snowman grinned at her from the front yard and Bethany felt her childhood haunting her thoughts.

She felt elated to see John, leaning on his father's arm, walking slowly to the house. Quickly she moved to John's opposite side and gave her support.

“You’re going to be fine,” Bethany told John.

“I will now that you’re here,” he smiled. “What’s happened to you? You look worn out.”

“I’ll tell you later,” she said. “Let’s get you settled in here.”

Bethany helped him to his childhood bedroom and she heard him sigh as he lay on the bed. She stepped back as Sarah pushed in front of her and flipped a blanket over him.

“Now,” Sarah said. “You’ll recover quickly here at home. Those hospitals are no place to get well.” She tucked the cover around John and smiled at her only son. Then she turned and faced Bethany.

Bethany felt her heart leap; hoping she had not instigated dislike from the woman, but Sarah smiled and patted her arm.

“He’s all yours,” she said as she grabbed her husband’s arm. “Come on. Let’s leave these two lovebirds alone.”

Bethany sighed with relief. Perhaps something was beginning to go right. She sat on the edge of the bed and held John’s hand.

“Tell me about it,” John said weakly.

“I think you’d better get some rest,” she said as she stroked his cheek. “You’ve been through a lot.”

“I’d like to know now,” he said, holding her arm. “Something is not all right with you.”

She nodded and her words spilled out like rain from a roof’s rain gutter. The car. The job. Losing the apartment. It all splashed out.

“And,” she finished. “I forgot all about asking you what you wanted for Christmas.”

“What a relief,” he sighed. “I thought you’d changed your mind about marrying me.”

She giggled softly and kissed his lips. “No, my darling. That was the least of my worries.”

“We’ll figure all that stuff out,” he told her. “Right now, this is the only important thing.” He drew her to him and held her. “I was afraid you didn’t want me now.”

Bathed in his words and actions, she felt warmed and refreshed. “I will always want you,” she confessed. Her anger and disappointment faded as she nestled in his arms. She felt safe and desired. At that moment there was nothing in the world but her and this man.

The opening of the bedroom door brought Bethany back to the present. Sarah stood over them with a tray containing two bowls of soup and fruit on the side. Bethany rubbed her eyes, realizing she had fallen asleep in John's arms.

"All right, you two. It's meal time. Stop your loving and start your eating."

Bethany chuckled and made room for the tray on the bed. Sarah wasn't going to be so bad to get along with after all, she concluded. The woman stood, hands on her hips, until the food was eaten, as if making sure they'd eaten every drop. Then Sarah beckoned Bethany to step outside the room.

A bit of anxiety grabbed Bethany as she followed Sarah. *Now what?* She wondered. She searched Sarah's face for answers before the woman spoke.

"I was wondering," Sarah began tentatively. "If you could take some time off from your job and stay here." She swayed from one foot to the other. "John seems to do so much better when you're around." Motioning to the room further down the hall, she continued. "I'll fix Caroline's place for you and she can sleep on the couch." She waited, gazing at Bethany's expression. "Just for a short time." Then she smiled. "You're practically a member of the family."

Bethany swallowed the lump in her throat. "That would be fine." She knew she had no job to worry about and her apartment would get along without her, for a short time anyway. "I'll get some things from my place and be right back."

"Supper's at six," Sarah said as Bethany put on her coat.

"I'll remember," Bethany smiled. She walked past the snowman, gave it a pat and slipped into her car.

At her apartment, Bethany tossed underwear and her nightgown in a suitcase then gently folded two sweaters and two pairs of slacks.

"That should be enough for a couple days," she said. "I can always come back for more." Shutting the case, she went into the bathroom and picked out the necessary items there. As she stopped and gazed into the mirror, sighing.

"What has happened? Why has everything fallen apart?" The reflection had no answers. She washed her face, put on make up and ran a comb through her hair.

“What have you done to bring this on yourself?” she asked the woman in the mirror. Shaking her head, she concluded. “Nothing. You’ve done nothing. Things like this just happen. There’s nothing you can do about them, but ride them out. And, I guess, I’ll do that at Sarah’s house. Anyway, maybe I’ll be of some help there.” Her words rang around the cold room.

Sudden warmth filled her. She questioned it as she gazed in to mirror. “What is going on here? How can I feel good about all this?” She shrugged. “But I do.”

Grabbing her bags, she hurried from the apartment. Something strange was happening and Bethany tried her best to run from it. As she drove back to Sarah and Robert’s house, she hummed a tune. What surprised her most was that she sang a Christmas carol. It didn’t matter. She sang along with the music on the radio.

When she reached the Simms’ house, she jumped from the car and stopped in front of the snowman. Giggling, she began rolling snow into a ball, larger and larger until she was satisfied with its size. Then she sat it beside the snowman. As she started a second ball, Caroline ran from the house to help her.

“I’d forgotten how fun this was,” Bethany said as she and Caroline lifted the sphere onto the first ball.

“We’d better make a head,” Caroline laughed. “And I’ll find a hat for her.”

“We can put stones for eyes and nose,” Bethany said excitedly.

“And a strip of candy for her mouth,” Caroline said as she ran to the house.

Bethany gazed at her work as if it were the most important project she’d ever accomplished. With her hands on her hips she studied the balls of snow then smoothed the edges and filled in around the neck.

“Here we are,” Caroline giggled. “You can put the face on and, look; Mother gave us this red apron for her. We can use sticks for arms, too.”

Bethany laughed as she carefully created the face and watched Caroline wrap the apron around the cold mass. As Bethany stuck the sticks in for arms, she twined one of the branches with the other snowman’s arms.

“Oh, how romantic,” Caroline squealed. “They’re holding hands.”

“So they are,” Bethany chuckled.

“Can I call them John and Bethany?” Caroline twittered.

“If you’d like.” Bethany stepped back to admire them, then realized the rest of the family was watching from the window.

“You just have to go with us to get the Christmas tree,” Caroline squealed.

The Christmas tree. Bethany swallowed a lump forming in her throat. In her childhood she and her parents created a special day for the event. At present, though, they simply pulled a white colored artificial replica from a box stored in the basement.

Bethany nodded. “I’d like that very much.”

Seeing John standing with his parents, she patted her arms and motioned to the house. “I think I’m ready to go in, I didn’t realize it was so cold.”

John greeted her with a smile. “What are you doing walking around?” she exclaimed.

“I seem to be much better.” He took her in his arms. “It looks like I’ll be able to walk down that isle whenever you want.”

She hugged him tightly. “I want a house just like this with a snowman out front and a special day to get a Christmas tree.” She couldn’t stop the snowball effect of this warm fuzzy feeling.

“Whatever you want,” he chuckled. “When do you suppose this wedding should take place? I suppose you want a big one.”

She gazed past him to the beaming faces watching them. “No, nothing big. Just special.”

“Why not Christmas Day?” Caroling screamed, jumping up and down. “Why not right here?”

Bethany began to feel a familiar trapped sensation. “I don’t know,” she said gazing back to John.

“Take your time,” John said. “They’re caught up in the excitement. You take all the time you need.”

She realized she’d been swayed by the family’s enthusiasm and perhaps by the jubilation she’d experienced all day. With all her energy, she tried to regain the common sense she’d had less than twenty four hours before. Grabbing her coat, she ran outside.

What was happening to her? Everything had changed since Mr. Chambers let her go. The happiness in a portion of her brain began

squeezing out, trying to influence her thinking. She tried to fight it by walking faster. It seemed a tiny voice inside her head was screaming at her “Let go. Let go.”

“*Let go?*” She gritted her teeth. “What is that supposed to mean? I don’t know what that means.” She grabbed her head and shook it. “What am I supposed to do?”

There was no answer. As if she were supposed to know, the voice fell silent. Gazing at the string of Christmas lights twinkling from the eaves and the snowmen holding hands, she smiled. “Okay,” she said, surrendering to, what seemed to be, forces she could not control. “I’ll enjoy all this holiday stuff, but that won’t pay the rent.”

She returned to the house and found John resting on his bed. “You overdid, didn’t you?” she asked, rushing to his side.

“I was so strong there for awhile,” he said. “Then all my strength seemed to slip away.”

Bethany studied him. “Do you think you need to go back to the hospital?”

“No,” he said quickly and squeezed her hand. “For a bit, I didn’t think I’d need any more hospital assistance. It seems to come and go.”

“Probably because you’re up and down. In bed then out of bed.” She chuckled. “That’s all. There’s no mystery to it.”

“You’re probably right, but all the same, it feels funny.” He gazed at her face and smoothed her hair. “Did you get everything solved outside?”

“I think so,” she said, kissing his hand. “I was just so full of it for awhile. It was like someone doused me with happiness dust.” She held his hand to her breast. “What do you think it means?”

“I hope it means you’re in love,” he chuckled. “They say that changes your thinking.”

“It was as though my brain was filled with silliness. I couldn’t think straight.” She smiled and kissed his forehead.

“It looked like that was very pleasant for you.” He smiled and pulled her face to his then kissed her lips.

“I don’t ever remember ever feeling so wonderful,” she said, kissing him back. “Maybe you’re right about being in love. All I ever thought about was how it would affect my job.”

“And you needn’t think about that now,” he concluded.

Sarah interrupted them and Bethany pulled herself away from John.

"It's time for John to have his therapy session," Sarah said.

"Okay." Bethany took a long breath and helped John to his feet.

"We don't have to take him to the hospital," Sarah said. "They've sent a woman to do it here."

"That's wonderful," Bethany beamed. "I'm anxious to hear how he's doing."

Bethany studied each movement the therapist made, moving John's legs this way and that then observed carefully as John worked the muscles by himself.

"He's come a long way in a very short time," the therapist said. "I don't understand it. Possibly being home worked a miracle."

"A miracle?" Bethany asked, puzzled at the woman's unscientific explanation.

"Sometimes it happens," the woman smiled. "And after all, it's Christmas."

Bethany watched her leave and shook her head. "What does Christmas have to do with anything?"

"Who knows?" John said rubbing his leg. "Strange things happen every day."

"Here, let me rub those legs for you," Bethany said. Her thoughts were on the therapist's words as she stroked his limbs.

"Feels good," he said, smiling a boyish grin.

She raised her hands as if his legs were suddenly too hot to touch. She felt heat soaring to her cheeks and stepped away from him. "Sorry," she breathed. "I didn't think what I was doing."

"Come here," he ordered. "You're to be my wife. You can touch me all you want."

Pausing a moment, she stared at his outstretched arms then rushed to the comfort and excitement they permitted.

"You're the best nurse for me," he chuckled.

She let herself be held until she tingled all over. She felt her breath equaling his, fast and deep, with passion and longing.

It was Sarah's entrance that cooled the moment. "Okay, you two," she chuckled. "I think we'd better have that wedding as quickly as possible."

Bethany jumped from the bed and pressed at her skirt. "Guess I got carried away," she said embarrassed at getting caught.

"How about finding a justice of the peace?" John laughed. "That would be the quickest."

"Not on your life." Sarah shook her finger at him. "I'm sure Bethany's mother wouldn't hear of it and I won't either." She moved the finger to Bethany. "And you'd better call your mother and get this wedding over with." With that she stomped from the room leaving Bethany and John laughing at her actions.

"Well, what do you think?" John asked. "Are you about ready to make some babies?"

Her laughter stopped and she contemplated her situation. Is this what she wanted? No more corporate ladders to climb? She sighed deeply as she studied John's beaming face. "I want it all," she finally said. "I've always wanted to go into politics because it sounds so exciting." She shook her head. "I want babies, too. I can't have both, can I?"

"Is that what's holding you back?" he asked. "Come here. Let me tell you something."

She obeyed and nestled in his arms. "What marvelous wisdom do you have to give me?"

"I know that job meant a lot to you. You're the executive type. Don't you think you can have both? I'll help with whatever comes along."

"Oh, yes," she beamed. Then she stopped short. "I don't even have a vice president position any more. I've no job at all."

"Maybe you can run for congress or something," he said nodding at her.

Visions of a political office filled her brain and she let herself ride along with his fantasy. Finally she gently slapped his arm. "Oh, you. You had me going for a minute."

"I meant it," John said seriously. "You have the makings and you know it."

Squaring her shoulders, she winked at him. "You know? You're right. I do have the makings."

"Well, what do you want first, babies or votes?" he asked.

“Do you really think I could run for office?” She began to doubt his sincerity and her own ability.

“If anybody can, you can,” he said confidently.

“It would take a lot,” she said, shaking her head.

“We have a lot,” he smiled.

“Not money. It takes money. Not just desire.”

“Let’s look into it,” he said. “You were too good for that company, anyway.”

“Yes,” she concluded. “I was.” Nodding emphatically, she faced him and glared into his eyes. “You’re not messing with my mind, are you?”

“My dear lady,” he grinned. “No one in the world can mess with your thinking. If you want it, let’s go get it.”

“I’m scared,” she said hugging herself.

“You’re just excited,” he insisted. “Now, first you must call your mother. Running for political office, you should be married. It presents a sound foundation. Gives people confidence in you.”

“Sounds like you’re the executive type, too,” she laughed.

“I’ve always told you we’d make an excellent team.”

Nodding, she gazed at his beaming face and shining blue eyes. “I’m going to call my mother right now,” she said and hurried from the room.

Her mother wasn’t altogether thrilled about a Christmas wedding. “There is so much going on,” she said. “And the expenses this time of year. I don’t know if we can handle it.”

“I’m just inviting you, Mom. If you and Dad want to attend, I’m getting married on Christmas Eve at the Simms’ house.”

“That’s so soon,” came her mother’s response.

“That’s when and where it is. It will be nothing fancy. Just a preacher and John’s family.”

“Oh, Bethany. I wanted something wonderful. Something you could remember the rest of your life.”

“I’ll remember, Mom,” Bethany said. “This is one Christmas I’ll never forget.”

“Well, whatever you want. We’ll be there. I promise.”

Bethany replaced the receiver. *I promise*. There it was again. She had promised something that first day in the hospital. What was it? She couldn’t recall, but something about those two words brought a tingling

in her arms. Shaking them roughly, she tried to remember what she'd said that awful day. Could the words have an effect on her present experience? Rubbing her arms, she shook her head.

"That's crazy thinking," she said aloud. "I have a bit of planning to do." Her heart felt larger than her chest could handle and satisfied warmth flowed through her veins. "I think this is happiness," she whispered as she rejoined the family sitting around the kitchen table.

"I've made my wedding decision," she announced. "Christmas Eve, right here."

She thought her chest would burst when they cheered.

"I knew she would," Caroline shouted.

"Then I think we'd better take a trip to a jewelry store," John said. "That empty box won't fit on your finger."

"I'll never discard that box," Bethany said. Love filled her eyes and overflowed as tears.

"You don't want to remember the accident forever," John said.

"I'll never forget it. Anyway, I don't want to forget that awful day brought this wonderful one." She chuckled. "I'd still be signing orders in that stuffy old office." She gazed at John. "I've never been happier."

"Nor have I," he said and grabbed her around the waist then waltzed her around the room.

"Okay, you two," Sarah laughed. "Go get those rings before there's no need to."

At the jeweler's Bethany studied the diamonds the sales clerk put on top of the counter. "What do you think?" she asked John.

"They're so cold looking." He rubbed his chin. "I liked the initial one I got for you. You would have, too." He shook his head. "These just look like plain old rocks."

"I wonder if we could find it." Bethany wondered. "Maybe the police have it at the station."

"It's a long shot." He shrugged. "Someone probably picked it up after the accident."

"Let's do some searching if you're up to it." She studied him. "You've been very chipper."

"I feel great and I'd love to go on our treasure hunt." He chuckled and drew her close.

“Will there be anything else?” the sales clerk asked. “If you’re through looking, I’ll put these away.”

“We might be back,” Bethany said. “If we don’t find what we’re looking for.”

“Actually,” John said, escorting her to the sidewalk. “I think I’ve found my treasure.”

“Well, I’m not rich or overly gorgeous,” she teased. “But I am a lot of fun.” She grabbed his arm. “Let’s go to the police station first. We might not have to look any further.”

As they trudged through the fallen snow, Bethany felt certain that her feet weren’t touching the ground. Were they sailing? Were they gliding above the concrete? Her heart felt so light, she knew it would pop from her chest and she’d have to catch it above her head.

The officers at the police station were busy with people coming and going. Bethany wondered why they couldn’t be as happy as she was. She wished they could be. Everyone should be joyful.

She hung onto John’s arm as a uniformed officer took them to a room filled with boxes. She held her breath as he opened a box filled with articles found at several accidents.

“Take a look,” the man said and waited for them to search through the container.

“It’s not here,” John said and sighed. “We’d better get back to that jewelry store before it closes.”

“How about your wrecked car? Could it be there?” Bethany searched John’s face. “Maybe no one found it. Maybe it’s wedged in some place in that car.” She felt her heart thumping with excitement. This treasure hunt was fun and she wanted John to return to the spirit of the game.

“We went through that wreck thoroughly, I’m sure,” the officer said, putting a damper on Bethany’s enthusiasm.

“It’s my wedding ring,” Bethany growled, losing patience with the man.

“You might go to the crash site and look around,” he suggested. “I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Let’s go,” Bethany urged John. “If we can’t find it there, we’ll have to settle for one of those awful stones in the store.”

“It sounds fruitless,” he shrugged. “But let’s give it a go.”

She pulled him from the station then followed him to the intersection where the accident took place.

"I was crossing right there." He pointed to the street. "And I think the car wound up against this lamp post."

Carefully they moved the snow from the sidewalk with their hands and searched beneath cars parked along the curb.

"This is pointless," John finally said. "It just isn't here."

"Did you lose something?" A man ringing a bell gazed at them as they rummaged in the snow.

"My wedding ring," Bethany said as she felt beneath a parked car. "It was lost in a car wreck that happened here." Panting, she stood and shook her head. "I guess it's gone forever."

"Have you looked under those decorated bushes lining the street? Could be there," the bell ringer suggested.

Bethany studied the man in the Santa Claus suit with whiskers that didn't quite fit his face and captivating blue eyes that twinkled in the late afternoon light. She had to pull her gaze from him, his presence was so powerful.

"All right," she finally said, grabbing John's arm to steady herself. "To the bushes." She followed John to the small Christmas trees adorning the sidewalk.

Feverishly she searched on hands and knees as the day's light left the sky. Then she saw something among the twinkling lights beneath the piney bough.

"John," she called. "Is this it?" Gently she pulled a twinkling object from among the array of lights.

"That's it," John shouted so everyone on the street could hear. "That's the ring."

Bethany held the gem as if afraid it would break if she squeezed it. John was right. The rings in the shop didn't compare to this one. Its diamond winked at her and the rubies on either side were tiny blazing fires warming the icy jewel.

She gazed up the street where the bell ringer had stood, but he must have moved on, for no one was there now.

With all her attention on the ring, she let John slip it on her finger. Warmth from the two rubies melted a portion of her heart which had

hardened over the years and caused tears to form and slip down her cheeks.

"I know it's probably not proper to wear your wedding ring before the wedding," he said. "But that's the safest place to put it."

She nodded, being unable to force one word from her throat and melted into John's arms. Everything was falling into its rightful place. Not one thing could dissuade her from following this path she had begun.

The day before the wedding, Bethany was given an old obstacle. A second choice was put before her as the phone rang at Sarah's house.

"It's for you, Bethany," Sarah called. "Where is that girl? Probably in the bedroom with John."

"I'm here," Bethany said. "In the bathroom washing my hair."

"Someone's on the phone for you."

"Who is it?" Bethany asked.

Sarah put the receiver back to her ear. "May I ask whose calling?" Then to Bethany. "He said his name is Ned Chambers."

Bethany stopped short then grabbed a towel as suds streamed toward her eyes. "Mr. Chambers," she said to the mirror. "What in the world would he want?" she searched through the files of her memory. Had she forgotten something at the office? Had she done something wrong? Maybe he was calling to accuse her of something.

Hurriedly she wrapped the towel around her head and rushed to the phone.

"Hello," she said.

"We've revamped our entire staff structure here, Bethany," Mr. Chambers said. "I'd really like to see you come back. I'm holding a department head position open for you. Of course that will mean a substantial raise in wages."

Bethany's breath caught in a gasp. In a second a hundred thoughts spun through her brain. As Mr. Chambers continued his sales pitch, Bethany heard his voice like the chatter of squirrels in the park. The substantial raise in pay could mean her financial worries would be over. But what about their political plans? They could be together working for the right. Might for right. Sitting at their Round Table with their trusty knights. Her thoughts flashed back to the money. The substantial raise and position offered by Mr. Chambers would surely finance their

political ambitions. But working at the office would allow no time for their aspirations. Time or money. It came down to that choice. Stuck in an office or freedom to ascend. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart began to palpitate. As she battled with the decision, she saw John standing close by, a worried expression haunting her. He held his cell phone and was trying to get her attention.

“Bethany, are you there?” Mr. Chambers asked.

“Yes, yes. I’m thinking,” she said.

She heard him chuckle. “Tell me what’s on your mind,” Mr. Chambers said.

She saw John shaking his head and waving the cell phone then took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Chambers. I’m going for a dream instead. And, no, I’m not interested in your position.” Her hand shook as she replaced the phone in its cradle and turned to John.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’ve been making some calls. The state’s attorney general is on the line. There’s an opening on the ticket for governor. Are you interested in running? He’ll help all the way.” John’s voice was high pitched with excitement.

“I—I think so,” she stammered. “Yes,” she said. “I’m definitely interested.”

“She said yes,” John said into his cell phone. “Yes, all right. We’ll be ready by the first of the year.” Clicking the phone closed, he took her in his arms. “How does Governor Bethany Simms sound to you?”

She felt her breath escape in sobs as she pressed close to John. “Sounds a bit frightening,” she said. “But wonderful. Do you think we can pull it off?”

“Bethany, my love, we can do anything together.”

“So we can,” she decided. “What do we do first?”

“Get married,” he said, kissing her passionately. “And let everything else fall into place.”

“Are you certain it will?”

“Absolutely,” he said with certainty.

On the day of the wedding, Bethany thought she heard bells as she held her father’s arm and walked down the aisle formed by rows of

folding chairs on either side of Sarah's living room. The lights twinkled on the Christmas tree as she followed Caroline and smiled at the girl tossing mistletoe onto the carpet. "There aren't any rose petals this time of year," she'd said. "Anyway it's festive." They let Caroline have her own way, so instead of roses, the girl gleefully strewed the mistletoe before Bethany.

The white floor length gown pinched at the waist and Bethany tried not to be obvious as she jerked the seam from her body. She smiled at John, waiting at the far end of the room pulling at his collar. *Thank goodness these things don't last long. No wonder couples elope*, she thought.

Forcing a smile, she continued down the aisle, the berries from the mistletoe denting the soles of her high heel shoes and her toes crying out for liberation. Glancing at her mother, she nodded and tried not to giggle at the smile her mother had apparently painted on her face.

She finally felt John reach out and take her. Certainly the pastor was saying something, for his lips were moving, but Bethany heard only a distant hum. John's mouth was moving now and Bethany knew her turn was next. Licking her dry lips, she tried to create a bit of saliva to moisten her throat. Faintly she heard do you, Bethany? Nodding until the man finished, she quickly whispered. "I do, I promise." Her heart leaped at the words. Then she smiled and gazed at John. "And I'll also keep that promise," she added.

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Spellbound At Midnight
By
Isabelle Kane and Audrey Tremaine

“Carte blanche.” Viole repeated, thoroughly astounded. “The sort of thing we’re talking about will not be inexpensive, not that I mean to dissuade you.”

“Perhaps, Grandmere, Miss Godin doesn’t feel her skills are adequate to the task.” The supercilious arch of a dark, curved brow irked her as much as the man’s words. She would make Lucien Verret swallow them before she was through.

“I can assure you, Mr. Verret, you will not find my skills lacking. It’s just that some people leap recklessly into these sorts of endeavors and end up in over their heads.” Viole felt someone step on her toe. She glanced around in consternation and encountered a glacial look from her new employer, Sabine Roy. If looks could freeze, Viole would now be an ice sculpture.

“What dear Viole is trying to say,” Sabine, a somewhat stout, but well coiffed and perfectly made up steel magnolia, offered placatingly, “is that there is a great deal of work involved in a full reconstruction. So many people just try to spit polish one of our grand old houses by applying some paint or refinishing a floor. When my father founded Belle Maison, it was his goal to bring classic southern homes back to full, complete, and historically accurate life. As you no doubt are aware, this firm strives to carry on with his vision and commitment to excellence.

“Viole, here, is one of our most talented young architectural reconstructionists, but she is from the North, you know, and hasn’t yet become accustomed to our manners and our way of doing things.”

Viole swallowed a smart reply. Despite all the flourish and trim, Sabine was effectively saying she was rude. “I’m a direct person, and I believe in letting a customer know exactly what he or she is getting into. This antebellum mansion of yours, Magnolia Place...”

“Magnolia House,” the potential client, a frail but still lovely octogenarian interrupted her smoothly. Despite Marie Verret’s delicate frame and exquisite style of dress, there was a power, an intensity to her nearly violet eyes which attested to the force of her personality.

Two of Marie’s grandsons, Lucien and Charles, sat on either side of her. The older of the two, Lucien Verret was just over six feet tall, with nearly black hair, intense blue eyes, and aristocratic features. There was something about the way he looked at Viole which discomfited her. It’s not that she’d never had men look at her before; she knew she was an attractive woman with her petite but curvy figure, long hair, and fair skin, but it was as if he was assessing her for some purpose. His cousin, Charles, was of the same elegant type, though not as tall and softer looking. And there was a shrewd spark to his shadowed eyes which belied his indolent, southern gentleman pose.

Both men had accompanied their grandmother to her meeting with the architectural restoration firm named “Belle Maison” where Viole had just started working the week before. Apparently, Mrs. Verret had personally requested Viole. She had done some good work in Philadelphia on lovely Federalist style houses about which an extensive article had been written in *Restoration Today*. She believed she owed a great deal to that article. Though she was only a few years into her career, the week it came out, Sabine Roy, one of the vice presidents of Belle Maison and now her immediate superior, had personally called and offered her a job with a salary and benefits that no sane person could refuse. She’d moved down to Louisiana two weeks before. Now, it seemed she was about to have a very extensive restoration dropped into her lap because of that same article.

“Magnolia House,” she nodded to Mrs. Verret, “will require an enormous amount of work to bring it back to its original grandeur. Do you have any specific plans for it?”

“Well, it seems you all are getting down to brass tacks,” Sabine commented as she rose to her feet. “So, if you will excuse me, there are some other matters which need my attention. I’m leaving you in very capable hands.”

Charles waited until the door had closed behind her, then remarked: “Why don’t you ask what’s really on your mind, Miss Godin? You’re no doubt wondering how much we intend to spend on this project.”

“Lucien!” Marie corrected. “Forgive my grandson, he can be impetuous.”

“Grandmere, this is all nonsense.” Charles broke in. “We would all be better off razing that house. It’s the land that’s really worth something.”

“Charles, you would destroy your family’s history? No, my boy, I can’t allow that to happen. There has to be another way for Magnolia House, and Miss Godin is going to help us find it. May I call you Viole? You’re young enough to be my granddaughter, you know?”

“Of course.”

“I went to Williamsburg, Virginia, several years ago. I thoroughly enjoyed myself.”

“Grandmere wishes to make our family home into a tourist attraction,” Lucien remarked dryly.

“And will you dress up as Rhett Butler and dance the Virginia Reel with the ladies?” The comment popped out before Viole could stop herself. She didn’t want to drive off a prospective client, particularly one with deep pockets, but there was something about Lucien that rubbed her wrong. It bothered her that her first thought on seeing him had been “Oh my.” He was sinfully handsome, lean, dark and hot. But there was something so skeptical about the way he looked at her that she found herself disliking him more with every passing moment.

“Frankly, my dear, I’ll be damned if I do.”

The way he said it, with his eyebrow arched in a manner reminiscent of Clark Gable, she had to laugh. So he was clever, that didn’t make him pleasant.

“Now my dear Lucien, you scoundrel, do behave yourself. No, I want to recreate life at Magnolia House as it was on the eve of the Civil War. And I won’t shirk from the real historical detail. I intend to have some of the slave cottages rebuilt. I want our home to be a living,

breathing portal to our family's past and the past of so many other Louisiana families."

"And how will this time machine support itself," Charles countered glumly. "Or will we continue to funnel our money into it?"

"Charles, it is my money."

"Actually," Viole asserted, wanting to diffuse the tension. "Historical attractions like Williamsburg, Monticello, or even Oak Alley are hugely popular. The trick would be to make Magnolia House unique and lovely. Perhaps you could open some of the rooms to the public, maybe even let some rooms, so your guests could relive the days of the old south. Do you have a ghost?"

"A ghost?" Marie leaned back in her chair with a soft smile on her lips. "My dear, we don't call them ghosts down here. They're spirits and they're kin, and they're very sociable at Magnolia House."

"This is ridiculous," Charles muttered.

"You may think so, but it's my prerogative to spend my money as I see fit."

"I prefer not to watch you waste it on this silly fantasy," he stood up. "if you will all excuse me. Lucien, I can't believe you're a party to this insanity."

"Sit down, Charles, and stop being so tiresome. I assure you I'm as sane as you are."

"Cousin, you've said enough." Lucien said. "Grandmere can and will do as she pleases. I'm here merely to watch out for her best interests."

"Viole, I do intend to open the house to the public somewhat, and not just to the wealthy, but I want it all to be in exquisite taste. I envision Magnolia House being open on certain dates of the year, maybe in some sort of Festival of the South. I want it to come alive on those days with everything historically accurate, of course, so students of history, like you, Lucien, will want to come here and study our way of doing things. I also intend to erect a thoroughly charming guesthouse, and there has to be a restaurant. four star, preferably. People could have their weddings there. I was married at Magnolia House. I'll never forget walking down the grand staircase. My heart was just a flutter until I saw my Etienne. He was so handsome in his morning suit. Have I ever told you children,"

here she referred to her very adult grandsons, “our reception lasted nearly a week?”

“Yes, Grandmere,” Charles ground out. “But the sort of resort you’re talking about is going to cost serious money. Do you have any other investors? Any detailed plans for this guesthouse and restaurant? Who’s going to run this facility?”

“I didn’t raise you to disrespect me so.”

“I’m not, but I think you have to consider all of these issues.”

“You know it’s my wish that one of you boys will take charge... Oh dear,” Marie dramatically pressed a heavily bejeweled hand to her chest. “I feel a spell coming on.”

Lucien immediately rose to his feet and bent over his grandmother solicitously. “Shall I carry you, Grandmere?”

“No, Lucien, that won’t be necessary. If you would just give me your arm...”

“Are you all right, Mrs. Verret?”

“I’m just overtired, dear girl, but thank you for your concern. I’m just sorry we didn’t get everything hashed out, but the specifications about the restoration work that needs to be done on Magnolia House are in the proposal there. There are also pictures, a brief history, and measurements. You read through it, and then we’ll talk.” With her grandson’s help, Marie stood and made her way slowly to the office door. Charles and Viole trailed behind.

The group had made it to the large glass doors in the well appointed waiting room, when Charles snapped his fingers. “I left my cell phone in your office, Miss Godin. Grandmere, Lucien, I’ll see you both later.”

Viole grasped the handle of a door and pulled it wide as Lucien led his grandmother cautiously through. They paused outside the door. Though it was late October, humidity and heat hung heavy in the air and cast a haze over the city of New Orleans. “Thank you for meeting with me today, Mrs. Verret.” She hesitated, she didn’t want to seem unprofessional, but it did seem odd that such a plum project should land in the lap of the newest member of the firm. “But may I ask you, Sabine Roy indicated you’d requested me personally, where you came upon my name?”

For the first time, Marie was at a loss. She opened her mouth, as if to answer, then shut it again. It was Lucien who intervened. He reached

out and took Viole's hand in his own, much larger one. His grasp was warm and dry, and he met her gaze with his own potent blue one. She was aware of his scrutiny down to the tips of her toes.

Shoot. She was down here in New Orleans to forward her career, not entangle herself in a romantic liaison with a very attractive man. It was more than his good looks or his male grace which captured her attention and fired her senses; there was an intensity about him. She could just imagine how very satisfying it would be to have his attention focused on her as they lay naked together...

"I discovered you actually, Viole. I visited an antebellum mansion in Maryland you'd restored. Knowing my grandmother's intentions with respect to Magnolia House, I contacted your former office. They indicated that you'd conveniently relocated down here."

His explanation was simple and plausible, but Viole couldn't shake the feeling something else was lurking behind his apparent sincerity. "Thank you both. I'll get back to you in a few days."

"Before you make any decisions, Viole, you must come out and see Magnolia House," Marie put in.

"I'd like that. Do you need any help getting to the car?"

"No, thank you. We'll be fine." Lucien responded.

She watched as they moved slowly away. Stepping back into the air conditioned chill of the office, she crossed her arms and shivered. Meanwhile, Lucien carefully lifted his delicate grandmother into the passenger side seat of a silver Mercedes sedan. Viole was aware of a tingle of foreboding traveling down her back. She shook it off determinedly. There was nothing odd going on here, merely an eccentric and wealthy old woman who wanted to restore her childhood home.

She made her way back to her spacious and well appointed office. It was a far cry from the cubicle in which she'd worked in Philadelphia. She'd been rather surprised that as a new and junior member of the firm, it was to be hers. But then, Sabine had explained one had to make the "right impression on clients." She'd never been a suspicious person, but now she wondered if the managing partners of Belle Maison had somehow known about Magnolia House and the Verrets' interest in securing her services. Taking it a step further, had Marie and Lucien had something to do with her employment? No, she was being silly, and she was tired, too. Her life had been so hectic lately.

Stepping inside, she found Charles had resumed his seat in front of her desk. He didn't rise upon seeing her.

"Can I help you with anything more?" She didn't like being ambushed.

"I just wanted a few more words with you."

"All right." She sat down behind her desk, appreciating the fact that there was an expanse of mahogany between them. She didn't like Cousin Charles. He struck her as a shifty character. "I hope your grandmother feels better."

"Oh, I've no doubt she will. She always has one of these spells when she's ready to make a grand exit. I wouldn't worry about her."

An odd thing to say about one's more than eighty-year-old grandmother. "What other information do you want to share with me?"

"I wouldn't take on this project if I were you, Viole. My grandmother is an old woman, not long for this world. When she's gone, Lucien and I are her primary heirs and co-executors, and we have no intention of continuing on with it."

She swallowed, seeing it all slip away. "Well, should your grandmother decide to proceed, I'm sure the firm will insist on having the terms and conditions laid out very specifically. None of us would want to invest a great deal of time and energy in a project that will not come to fruition... But let me make myself clear, if we can come to terms with your grandmother, I will work on this project to the best of my ability. I imagine she would be very chagrined to hear that you've betrayed her trust by speaking as you have with me today."

"Let me make myself clear. You will be making a grave mistake taking on any renovation of Magnolia House."

"Mr. Verret, you can leave now. I don't care for your tone. Are you threatening me?"

He laughed softly, though there was no humor in his wintry eyes. "I'm merely giving you fair warning. That house has been cursed for generations. The estate is a lodestone around my family's neck. Now is the time to cast off the burden, not further chain ourselves to it. So don't waste our money, and we won't waste your time."

"I asked you to leave, Mr. Verret."

He rose slowly, carefully smoothed the wrinkles from his trousers and stepped past her on the way out. Then, he paused. They were of a height and their eyes were on a level.

“You are quite pretty, you know. Grandmere was right about that at least. It would be a great shame if something were to happen to you out in those swamps around Magnolia House.”

Then, he was gone. She was taken aback and so surprised that she hadn’t had the presence of mind to react. The man clearly meant to intimidate her. Little did he know she was far more fearful of her employers; they were the ones who ensured she could make payments on her lovely condo in the French Quarter.

* * * *

Viole was looking over plans to restore a library in Baton Rouge when the office receptionist, Chloe, brought her in a vase of white roses. There were thirteen of them in a crystal vase.

Chloe, a single mom and romantic pragmatist with café au lait skin and green eyes, questioned: “Viole, who’d you cast a spell on so quickly?”

“I have no idea,” she answered truthfully. She plucked the card free, inhaling the sweet, dewy fragrance of the lush blooms.

“It’s too bad they aren’t red,” Chloe grinned at her cheekily, clearly waiting for an update on the sender.

Viole had no idea whom they could be from, unless her mother and father, of course. Both had been opposed to her move, but had ultimately supported her decision.

“They’re from Lucien Verret.”

“Ooh, tall, dark, and handsome. I’d like some of that.”

“He’s also a client,” Viole countered. “And he wants to have dinner with me in order to discuss his grandmother’s project. There’s nothing romantic or personal about this invitation. Maybe he, like Charles, wants to talk me out of the project and is just taking a smoother approach.” She’d told Chloe about Charles and his threats.

“A man doesn’t send a woman roses because he’s interested in ‘talking’ with her. And I saw him looking at you the way my boys look at a plate of corn bread and fried chicken.”

“The roses are white, not red. They represent friendship.”

"I don't think so. He's just being subtle. He's sending you white, but he's thinking red."

Viole chuckled. "That's definitely wishful thinking, but I'm not one to mix business with pleasure... Still, I do think I should meet with him. I need to know if this is a real deal or not. Magnolia House stands to be my first real project with Belle Maison, and I can't afford to have it blow up in my face."

"Just call the man."

"I will. I will." She hesitated before picking up the phone.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No, you can stay. I've nothing to hide. I'm telling you this is about business, and I'll prove it."

She picked up Lucien's note and dialed his number. The phone rang once, twice, three times, and Viole was dismayed to realize her heart was beating very fast and she felt warm. *It was business.*

"Hello," his voice was like rich, dark chocolate.

"Mr. Verret?"

"Lucien."

"This is Viole Godin. I received your flowers. They're beautiful. Thank you."

"I'm glad to have provided pleasure to a lovely lady."

"Dinner tonight would be fine. There are some issues we should discuss. Where would you like to meet?"

"I'll pick you up. How's eight?"

"Eight's fine, but I can drive myself." Viole shook her head in response to Chloe's suggestively raised eyebrows.

"You've just moved to New Orleans. I'm sure you're just starting to find your way around the city. So please allow me to drive you."

"Mr. Verret, I would feel more comfortable having my own means of transportation."

"I understand, chere, but the best way to get more comfortable with me is to get to know me," he practically purred at her.

"The name of the restaurant please?" Her tone was no nonsense.

"You Northern girls just don't appreciate chivalry, but I'll oblige you. Meet me at Chez Marcel at eight. It's not hard to find. It's in the French Quarter, just ask anyone."

"I'll look forward to our meeting."

“Until tonight.”

“Goodbye.”

* * * *

A few hours later, Viole stood poised outside the rather unassuming brick entrance to Chez Marcel. She'd debated what to wear for her meeting with Lucien for some time. In the end, she'd opted for the always appropriate little black dress. This one was deceptively conservative from the front, but backless and clingy with a pencil skirt. Over it, she wore a black silk shawl which was elaborately embroidered with a variety of beautiful and colorful flowers. Her long, glossy, dark locks cascaded down her back while chandelier earrings decorated with light green stones dangled saucily from her ears. A pair of strappy Manolo stilettos finished off her ensemble. The catcalls and hoots which had accompanied her passage down the road to Chez Marcel's convinced her she looked good.

She stepped forward to grasp the door handle, and it swung wide.

“Mademoiselle,” a tall, Black doorman ushered her in. “Our hostess will seat you.”

She was still moving toward the hostess desk when she glimpsed Lucien at the bar. He was clearly watching for her, for he immediately unfolded his long, lean limbs. She was aware of her body's instant carnal response to him; it was like all of her nerve endings were on high alert. As for Lucien, he took her in with one long, lazy look, and pleasure and approval were immediately apparent on his handsome features.

“Exactly on time, Miz Godin, and you look exquisite tonight.” He took her hand, and to her surprise and secret delight, he kissed it lightly.

“Mr. Verret, your table is ready now. If you and your guest will follow me...”

With his hand gently pressing the small of her back, Lucien steered her after the hostess. Viole was acutely aware of the size of his hand, the heat of his touch even through the material of her shawl. It simply wasn't fair. The man was knock-your-socks off-hot. He had a magnetism that had every woman in the room following his progress across the floor. But, to her mind, he was off limits.

When they reached their table, he drew her chair out for her.

She couldn't help smiling at him. “I don't think anyone's pulled a chair out for me since Cotillion in fourth grade.”

“Then you’ve been spending time around the wrong kind of men.” He countered smoothly.

“No, it’s just that in Philadelphia that sort of thing isn’t really done. It’s rather old fashioned, don’t you think? Especially since the sexual revolution and the women’s liberation movement?”

“I don’t believe good manners are ever out of fashion, particularly in the presence of a lovely lady.”

“You’re laying it on rather thick, don’t you think?”

“Does it make you uncomfortable to know that I think you’re beautiful?”

“Of course not,” she answered, though she was aware of a betraying blush creeping up her neck. “But we’re here to discuss your grandmother’s plan for Magnolia House. This is a business dinner.” She leveled a stern look at him.

“I agree,” he countered, leaning back in his chair. “But I’d be a fool if I didn’t let you know I appreciate your efforts tonight. You could have just come in your office clothes. Instead, you’ve made me the envy of every man in the room. But I won’t say anything else that may make you uncomfortable. We do have to discuss Magnolia House. There’s so much you don’t know.”

Grateful to be back on more solid ground, she folded her hands before her. “I’ve looked over the proposal, and I do think your grandmother’s plans are feasible, with a few modifications and adequate funding. I think the house could be the center piece of the sort of resort she has in mind.”

“Viole, I’m a professor of history at Tulane University. I understand probably better than you do exactly what Grandmere’s plantation theme park would entail.” She was surprised to hear he shared her passion for history, and that his chosen profession was thoroughly respectable.

“It wouldn’t be a theme park at all. Do you realize what a boon creating such a place could be for your students?” The vibes he gave off were definitely more sexy riverboat gambler than staid historian.

“It’ll be a major endeavor to get this project off the ground.”

“I agree, and though it’s not my area of expertise, I do think the idea has great potential. But you consulted me specifically on the prospects for restoring the house, and there’s no question in my mind, she is a

prime candidate for restoration. I can bring that old beauty back to life. She'll take your breath away."

"You're very enthusiastic about your work."

"I just think about all of the people who've lived, loved, and ultimately passed on in a house like that. Sometimes I can almost feel them around me, urging me on when I'm working on a house... But you must think I'm being fanciful." She lowered her head in some embarrassment and sought to study her now opened menu.

He reached across the small, round table and tilted up her chin. "That's probably what makes you so good at your job. I felt the same way growing up in Magnolia House. The sense of history one has in a house like that stimulated my own interest in the subject. There has been a whole lot of living done in that house, and not all of it happy. That's one reason Cousin Charles thinks we should let Magnolia House go and sell the land to a developer."

"He said something to me about a curse."

Lucien didn't address her comment, instead he said: "I know all about Charles' plans, and they're not without merit, but it's Grandmere's money and her house, and she should do what she wants with both."

"Does she live at Magnolia House?"

"No, she's lived in town ever since Grandpere died twelve years ago. She used to go out there on weekends, but no one's lived there consistently in years. As I'm sure you've seen from the photographs, the house has been in decline for a while... Please don't misunderstand me, I do care for Magnolia House, it is part of my heritage. I'm just not totally convinced that I want to commit a great deal of my own time and energies to refurbishing her and then creating an entire complex around her."

"Mademoiselle, Monsieur, welcome to Chez Marcel. Would you care for anything to drink?"

"Viole?" Lucien prompted.

"I'll have a glass of white wine... No, wait a minute, this is my first evening out in New Orleans, and I'd like to have a real Big Easy drink. What would you recommend?"

He smiled at her enthusiasm. "Hurricanes are very popular, but I would advise you to try a Sazarak. It has class and distinction, and it's one of our oldest and best loved native cocktails."

"I'll have a Sazarak, then, please."

"A Sazarak for the lovely lady, and for you, sir?"

"Another of the same... Would you be willing to allow me to order for you? As a true son of the city, I'd take great pleasure in sharing our cuisine with you."

"I'd really appreciate that. I don't even recognize half the dishes on this menu."

"It will be my pleasure... We'll start with the Oysters Rockefeller and then go with the Crayfish Etouffée. For desert, we'd like the Bananas Foster."

"Very good, sir." With a smile and an officious bow, their waiter stepped away from the table.

"This is exciting," Viole said. "Since I've been in New Orleans, things have been so hectic with work and finding a place to live. I've pretty much gone from my apartment to the office and back again, but I do want to get to know this city. It has an Old World feel to it that's unique."

"New Orleans is one of the oldest cities in this country. There are public and private buildings, like the St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square, which are more than two hundred years old and still in use. This city effortlessly blends many cultural traditions. I sound like I'm lecturing my students here, but I'm glad to know you like the Crescent City. I understand you're from Pennsylvania. Has your family been there for long?"

"That's an odd question. I don't think I've ever had anyone ask me that. To be honest, I really don't know. I think my father's family has been in Pennsylvania for a while. My mother is of Scotch-Irish descent. She's the third generation in this country."

"What about you? Did you leave someone special back home?" His eyes were dark with sensual promise.

"I don't think this is an appropriate"

"Here are two Sazaraks." The waiter set the drinks before them with a flourish.

Viole held her glass up in the candlelight, studied the amber liquid, swirled it carefully, then sipped some. The drink was smooth, tasted faintly of honey, and very potent. "I like it."

“And I like you, a lady who’s not afraid to try something new. Let’s drink to you, to your new home and your new job. May both exceed your expectations.”

“Thank you.” She drank some more. “But we really should get back on track.” Glancing at her watch, she realized it was almost nine. She intended to be on her way well before eleven. “I have my notes in my briefcase, if you’ll just give me a moment...” She was fiddling with her briefcase when she felt a warm, large, very male hand cover her own under the table.

“There’s no need to pull those out.”

“But you invited me here to discuss Magnolia House.”

“And we have discussed her. Now I want to talk about you.”

Viole had no intention of losing her head over a man with whom she was professionally involved, no matter how sexy she found him. “Let me be honest here. I do find you attractive, but I’ve no intention of getting involved with you. If that’s what this is about”

Not chagrined in the least, he laughed softly at her.

“What?”

“I invited you here to get to know you better because you may be working for my grandmother. I do what I can to look out for her. I won’t have her taken advantage of. And I also invited you because you’re a beautiful woman with skin like magnolia petals who’s also completely alluring. We share an interest in days gone by. I’ve spent a great deal of my life studying and thinking about the past. It’s invigorating to share my interest with such a lovely lady. There, I’ve laid my cards on the table. Let’s see yours.”

“I want this job. I know I can do it. I think your grandmother’s vision of a historical center is fabulous. Just think of all the possibilities.”

“And all of the potential pitfalls.”

“I really want this opportunity. Somehow, it just feels right, like destiny.”

His gaze sharpened on her. For a moment, his casual languor was gone. “You believe in destiny or fate?” His tone was serious.

“I do think some things are meant to happen, don’t you?”

“I prefer to believe in free will, but I’m beginning to accept that Grandmere was right about you.”

Feeling vaguely uneasy, she questioned: "In what way?"

"That we were destined to meet."

She cocked an eyebrow at this. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I meant all of us, not just you and me, that you are the right person to restore Magnolia House."

She hesitated before responding. "This is going to sound odd, but the house seemed rather familiar to me when I first looked at the pictures...But then I'm sure I've seen houses with similar architecture during my studies."

He was forestalled from answering by the arrival of their appetizers. "I guarantee you will be hard pressed to find an equal to Marcel's Oysters Rockefeller anywhere in this city."

The food and drink were both completely divine. From Sazaracs, they proceeded to a delicate French Bordeaux that delightfully accompanied the Crayfish Etouffée. And they didn't discuss business or any other weighty matters. Instead, Viole found herself sharing stories from her happy childhood spent with her parents and two brothers in the suburbs of Philadelphia. In turn, this charming and enigmatic man told about his own, more solitary childhood spent in New Orleans and along the banks of the Mississippi at Magnolia House. His voice was like warm molasses, and the man was a born story teller with a real feel for the history and culture of his home state. She recognized that he was probably a very fine teacher and she found herself envisioning the skin-kneed, gangly boy he'd been.

After dinner, they strolled companionably through the French Quarter. He'd again offered to drive her, but she'd explained her condo was within walking distance, so he'd accompanied her. But now, away from the intimacy of Chez Marcel, the conversation didn't flow as easily between them. Viole was acutely aware of the man beside her. She recognized he was interested in her, but would he act on his attraction to her? And how should she respond?

Finally, they passed through the wrought iron gates of the courtyard into which her front door opened. Turning to face him, she paused. "Lucien, I do want to share my thoughts with you on this. I understand I have a vested interest in your decision, but think long and hard about selling Magnolia House. It's your heritage, part of who you are. Can't you envision your own children playing there one day? Hiding in the

same places? Putting the Christmas tree where you remember it being as a child?"

He reached out and lightly touched the line of her chin. His eyes caressed her. "I never said it would be easy. I just want to do what's best for the family, and that includes my parents, two aunts, some cousins, and a handful of second cousins. I won't start a project without the heart and determination to finish it. I truly need to believe in Grandmere's dream. Then, I will lend it my complete support. If I get to that point, I will oversee the entire project.

I appreciate you meeting with me tonight. Learning about who you are has assuaged some of my concerns. I know I can trust you with Grandmere...But can I trust myself around you?"

His eyes were dark with decadent promises, and he leaned in closer to her. She caught a teasing hint of his spicy cologne, then, his full, sensual lips lightly brushed hers. Her lips parted eagerly in response. Closing her eyes, she savored every tactile impression of the kiss; the taste of him, the faint hint of Sazarac, the masterful but oh so tender action of his lips, and then the warm, wet caress of his tongue in her mouth. Oblivious to everything else around them, neither hurried the moment; rather they allowed it to draw out. Each sensed the special magic of this first kiss, the promises made, the passions recognized.

A neighbor opened her door to take her dog out, and recalled Viole to herself. Opening her eyes, she drew back from him slowly and regretfully. "I...I should go in. Thank you for everything." She had just kissed a man for whom she might soon be working. Already, she was beginning to feel awkward about it. She fumbled with her key in the lock, then inhaled sharply when she felt his hand enclose her own. With the heat and hardness of his body just behind her, pressing lightly into her, his breath, tickling her neck, his arms about her, they turned the key together.

"Um...I don't think this is a good idea. I have to work tomorrow. I'm not sure."

He stepped back away from her. "Viole, I think all of us need to have a clear understanding of what's going on before any decisions are made." *Was he talking about Magnolia House or them?* "In that spirit, I'd like to invite you to our yearly Halloween Masquerade Ball at

Magnolia House. It's on Halloween Night. The old house truly looks grand during the ball. I hope you'll come."

"A Masquerade Ball?" She repeated.

"Good night and sweet dreams, lovely lady." He drew her hand up to his lips and pressed a kiss there. Turning away from him, Viole stepped inside and shut the door firmly behind him. Only after she'd locked it and sat down on her couch did she feel safe from her own desires.

* * * *

A few days later, Viole received an oversize black envelope in the mail. It was addressed to her in a curvy, silver hand. The card inside was a riot of bold, shiny colors. Two elaborate gold and silver trimmed masks fit together to make the cover. It was, as she'd suspected, an invitation to the Verret Masquerade Ball.

She was intrigued, but who wouldn't be? There was undeniable allure to the idea of a masquerade ball hosted by a charming and seductive man at a house she eagerly anticipated seeing. It was a heady combination of factors which promised an unforgettable Halloween night. But would going be a wise thing to do? She didn't want to get entangled in the Verret family issues. She didn't precisely regret her evening with Lucien, it had been too much fun, but she didn't intend to tempt herself again.

Pulling out a small piece of stationary, she wrote out a brief note thanking Marie but graciously declining the invitation citing too many work demands. After sending it, she did her best to put the party out of her mind.

She succeeded in doing so until the day before Halloween when Sabine stormed into her office.

"Viole, I was just on the phone with Marie Verret. She told me you turned down her invitation to the Verret Masquerade Ball. I told her there must be some mistake."

"I thought given the possibility of a professional relationship between this office and the Verrets that it wouldn't be wise for me to go."

"My dear, you thought wrong! This is THE Halloween party to attend. It's famous throughout New Orleans. Why I've been trying to get an invitation for years! It would be a major coup for you to be there,

representing Belle Maison, of course. Consider all of the contacts you could make, members of so many of the old families will be there. You'll have to call her back! Tell her your plans have changed."

"But it's tomorrow night and I don't have a costume."

"Oh dear, I do wish you'd discussed this with me. There won't be anything worthwhile left at the costume shops...Let me see what I can do. I'm sure I can dig something up."

Dutifully, Viole made the required call and spoke to Marie's assistant who indicated the message would be passed on and that she would be expected on Halloween night. It was almost five and the end of the working day when Sabine bustled back into her office with a long, flat box in her arms. Her eyes were bright with excitement behind what she described as her "sexy librarian glasses." Chloe followed her in.

"Chloe had just the thing for you! Size four, right?"

"It's actually a Mardi Gras costume, but it should fit the bill," Chloe commented. "When I wore it for the parade last year Reggie couldn't keep his eyes off me."

Feeling a knot of dread hardening in her stomach, Viole began to lift the lid on the box Sabine had set before her. Truthfully, she'd hoped Sabine wouldn't be able to come up with anything. She'd planned on going in a cocktail dress with a domino mask. She didn't want to give Lucien the impression that she was pursuing him, and showing up at his door in a sexy costume was sure to do that.

Hesitantly, she opened the tissue paper then gaped.

"Isn't it wonderful," Sabine cooed.

"I can't wear this. It's a harem girl costume."

"Actually, it's Scheherazade. You know the gal who told stories for a thousand and one nights. You don't like it?" Chloe was disappointed.

Holding up the bikini top-like bodice ruefully, Viole answered: "It's beautiful, but there's just not much to it."

"That's the point," Chloe winked suggestively.

"Honey, this is New Orleans. If you've got it, flaunt it. You looking sensational in this costume will only benefit your career and our firm," Sabine announced decisively.

"I want to be taken seriously," Viole countered. "People will think I'm marketing something other than my restoration skills."

Sabine burst out laughing. “Child, I can guarantee you this costume will look downright conservative next to some of the others. And the way you look at the party may generate some interest in you, but then how you handle your potential customers will determine whether you get the jobs. Lordy, Viole, you’re young, enjoy yourself! Kick up your heels a little. I’ll admit I was hesitant about hiring you when Marie Verret showed me that article. I thought you wouldn’t be mature enough for Belle Maison, but I find you too serious minded... Oh, excuse me, I have a phone call.”

So, as she’d suspected, Marie had been behind her getting the job at Belle Maison. Viole fully intended to pursue this discussion with Sabine, but she didn’t have a chance that day. It was already dark outside, though muggy and warm, when Viole returned home with the costume in its box tucked under her arm.

* * * *

On Halloween night, Viole finally donned her Scheherazade costume in her room at a charming bed and breakfast located not far from Magnolia House. She decided to spend the night there as she imagined she would be at the party until the very early hours of the morning. Standing in front of the full length mirror studying her reflection, Viole couldn’t remember ever having felt so conspicuous or exposed. She glared down at the diaphanous material which barely covered her legs. Even though the costume was very well made with its golden and bejeweled bodice and bottoms, the pants, sleeves, and matching face scarf more than hinted at transparency. It was rather humiliating to be attending Lucien’s party dressed as a male fantasy. Only a French maid costume would have been worse. What was he likely to think? Talk about giving mixed messages. In addition, the delicate, purple butterfly tattoo just above her hip bone was exposed by the low riding, bikini-like bottom. It had been an impulsive acquisition during her teenage years, and she didn’t regret it usually, at least not enough to have it removed. For, it expressed the more whimsical, artistic side of her nature. But it was definitely not in keeping with the professional image she was attempting to cultivate. She wore her hair long and loose down her back, though it insisted on waving and curling in the warm, southern air.

There was nothing that could be done for her appearance now; she knew the driver Lucien Verret had sent for her was already waiting downstairs. For better or worse, she was Scheherazade and it was show time.

It was a short drive to Magnolia House. As they turned into the lane, she peered eagerly out the window, knowing what she would see, but excited none the less. Framing the house were enormous oak trees. Torches burned at points around the circular parking area in front of it. Their flames danced eerily in the light breeze, casting shadows on the Greek revival style house with its colonnaded front porch beyond them. The house, itself, she knew was white, but in the fire light it glowed a haunting orange, nearly the same shade as the full moon which hung low in the sky behind it. A slight mist had come up off the river, lending the entire scene a ghostly mystique.

There were already people everywhere, moving about the driveway and on both porches of the house. She was aware of Cajun music playing somewhere inside. Her driver joined the queue of cars progressing around the circular driveway. She was so busy looking around, taking it all in from the Spanish moss hanging artistically from the trees to the pond which was situated off to the right of the house glowing obsidian in the moonlight, that her door opening surprised her.

“Mademoiselle?” Taking the proffered hand, she stepped out of her car clutching her small bag. She glanced up the steps, shivering not because she was cool but because Lucien was staring down at her from the top where he was greeting his guests. He was dressed in a Napoleonic military costume which was heavily decorated with medals and topped off with a tricorne hat. He looked very handsome and very distinguished, a far cry from the dashing riverboat gambler she’d imagined him before. Her heart was pounding in her chest as she took the steps slowly, keenly aware of how the warm breeze exposed her body even more by blowing the sheer material against her.

Lucien watched her every step, not bothering to hide his interest in her or what her costume was revealing. There was a seductive half grin on his lips. “My dear,” he met her half way up. Again, he raised her hand and kissed it, and she told herself she was getting used to the chivalric greeting, ignoring the awareness which shot through her at his touch. “You’re enchanting tonight. Let me guess...Are you Salome?”

“No veils.”

“A belly dancer then?”

“Too prosaic, but along the right lines.”

“Let’s see. Are you a famous lady?”

“Yes.”

“Scherherazade?”

“Very good.”

“You could definitely keep me fascinated for a thousand nights.” As he guided her into the house, she was aware of a fingertip like touch dancing across her tattoo. “Is it real?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I was young and foolish.”

“And romantic and whimsical and completely intriguing.”

She was aware he wasn’t speaking about the teenager she’d been when she’d gotten the tattoo. “And who are you? A British officer of some sort. Very decorated and with a tricorn hat. That would place you in the eighteen hundreds. Are you Wellington?”

“It’s a naval uniform.”

“Famous British officer. To be honest, I know of only one. Are you Admiral Nelson?”

“The hero of Trafalgar. Now you go on inside and look around, get a taste of Magnolia House. She’s in her glory tonight. There’s music, food, and good company. This party has been a Verret tradition for more than seventy-five years. In fact, my grandparents met at one of them. I’ll look forward to spending more time with you after I finish greeting my other guests.”

“Where is your grandmother? I’d like to thank her for inviting me.”

“I’m afraid she hasn’t arrived yet. Earlier today, she was feeling poorly, but I’m sure she’ll be here later on. You’ll meet the entire extended Verret family tonight. You already know Cousin Charles; he’s somewhere inside. So enjoy yourself. I’ll rejoin you as soon as I can.”

She allowed the current of witches, grim reapers, and pregnant nuns to carry her into the L-shaped main hall. Inside, the candle lighting was dim and golden, and she had to look carefully to make out a crack in the wall on the stairs or the way the charming fresco of native birds in the dining room had faded. Magnolia House’s Halloween finery, which included all of the usual spooky touches like swaths of black fabric, elaborate spider webs, ghoulish disembodied hands, and a coffin on

which hor'devours were set, didn't detract from her dignity but rather gave her a rakish sort of charm.

Viole loved old homes, loved their craftsmanship, their histories, loved the feelings they evoked in her. Though she would never admit it aloud, she'd become convinced that each house had an aura all its own. In a way, they were 'alive' to her. Though she was willing to work in a house that felt unhappy or sad, perhaps in the hopes of restoring some positive energy to such an edifice, she much preferred one like Magnolia House that struck her as a happy, well loved home. She'd expected the house to have a far different feeling to it; after all, both Lucien and Charles had expressed the same opinion to her that the house was cursed.

She felt a light touch at her elbow, and looked up into charismatic, blue eyes.

"Admiral Nelson at your service."

She couldn't resist smiling back at him. "Don't you have to greet guests?"

"My father's taken over that duty."

"Your parents are here?" She hadn't realized his parents were alive.

"Fashionably late, as always, but never ones to miss a good party."

"If your parents are alive, and please forgive me if I'm prying, but why are Magnolia House and your Grandmother your responsibilities? You didn't even mention them when we spoke about your childhood the other night."

"Because I've made them so. My father is a portrait painter, my mother, a lounge singer. They're both incredibly talented people and I love them dearly, but their lifestyles were not compatible with raising a child. When I was about six, they left me with Grandmere. Charles lived with us as well after his parents divorced...Now, enough of that. It's Halloween and I intend to enjoy every moment of this night with you at my side. But you need a drink first."

They made their way through the crowd of costumed people who, despite the relatively early hour, were already rowdy. Sabine had assured her that the guests were the cream of New Orleans society, distinguished, important. But perhaps because they were wearing masks which freed them from their inhibitions or because for this one night they were someone other than themselves, there was a wild, savage air to their frivolity.

The crowd parted before Lucien and he was greeted on all sides. He introduced Viole to his father, a distinguished looking older man with gray hair who was dressed as a Roman centurion, and to his mother who was a black cat. She met many other relatives and friends of his but all of the names and connections swirled together in her mind, clouded by the gray haze now obscuring the party rooms or the Hurricanes which Lucien had obtained for her from the bar area at which an enormous black cauldron bubbled. Suddenly, there was a slender and lovely young woman before her who was dressed as a Young Queen Elizabeth. She had very fair skin and a dimple in one cheek when she smiled at Viole. Her eyes were not quite blue, nearly violet and strangely familiar. She was on the arm of a handsome Scottish laird.

“Who’s that?” Viole asked Lucien.

“Whom do you mean?”

“That girl there? Queen Elizabeth.”

“I don’t see where you’re looking.”

“She’s gone now.”

“I’m sure we’ll run into her again.”

They ate a little, mingled in the crowd, and chatted with each other. Again, Viole found Lucien to be an interesting and charming companion. He told her interesting details about the house, the different rooms, and its history. Eventually, they ended up at the end of the spacious entrance foyer where couples were dancing. The Cajun band was set up at the back of this room. Viole was feeling warm and more than a little reckless. Lucien drew her close, his voice, a seductive whisper at her ear.

“Do you dance?”

“Yes.” The band was playing an upbeat number. “I’m pretty sure I remember how to two-step.”

“But can you tango?”

“Tango? To this? I can follow just about any lead thanks to Miss Emily’s Cotillion in middle school and the lessons I had to take for my friend’s wedding, but I don’t think it would work to this music.”

“Oh ye of little faith...” With a wink, he left her standing where she was and went up to the band leader, a whip thin, sallow man with a thick mustache who nodded and grinned in response to Lucien’s request. At a signal from their leader, the musicians drew the catchy tune they were

playing to an end. Then, the fiddler let loose with a long, haunting wail which signaled the beginning of a tango.

Lucien winked again at her, took her hand, and led her out onto the dance floor as most of the other couples walked off.

She met his gaze, and was aware of a thrill of excitement coursing through her. "I should warn you, I haven't done this in years."

"Mon chere," his voice was deep and dark with desire and charm. "Just put yourself in my hands. Trust me."

He took her in his arms, and Viole found herself following him effortlessly. He was a masterful dancer who allowed the emotions of the dance and the heat in his eyes to express his desire for her. As the music ended, he swung her down into a deep dip. Then there was a smattering of applause from the other dancers, but Viole and Lucien were oblivious to everything but each other.

Releasing her very slowly, he asked to her to: "Come with me."

Without demur, she followed him. He led away from the sound and confusion of the party into a quieter, darker section of the house. He flipped on the lights and ushered her into a library. Tall shelves filled with books covered the walls on two sides.

Here, Lucien released her hand and stepped away from her. When he turned to face her again, his expression was wary. "Please, no more lies now. I don't appreciate being manipulated. Grandmere's done a remarkable job coaching you, but the game's over."

His tone and words effectively cooled her ardor. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"It's all too convenient. You're a Godin. You're beautiful. You know and like history, and you tango. You've effectively captured my attention, so let's just stop pretending. I won't be coerced or seduced into saving this estate. What did she offer you in exchange for your efforts?" Now he moved closer to her, stalking her. With his dark good looks and intent expression, he had a nearly feline, predatory grace.

Involuntarily, she took one step back, but then was irritated with herself for doing so. So, she stood her ground and glared up at him. Every inch of her petite frame expressed outrage. "What does it matter that I'm a Godin? I have no absolutely no idea what you're talking about. Yes, I like history; I restore old houses for a living. I also love to dance. Neither of these interests have anything to do with you. Let me assure

you, I have no intention whatsoever of seducing you.” She pivoted, and prepared to stalk of the room.

“Viole?” The way his voice caressed her name halted her more effectively than a touch would have done. He stepped up behind her, but still he didn’t touch her. She was aware of the heat of him at her back. “I’m sorry. Maybe I’ve been jumping to conclusions because you seem too perfect to be honest.” Delicately, oh so delicately, he drew the thick curtain of her hair away from her neck. She’d always been very sensitive there, and she nearly quivered with anticipation for his touch. His lips brushed across her, and she moaned at the pleasure. Her knees turned to jelly, but then his strong arms were around her supporting her. Next, he took her ear lobe into his mouth. Heat, warmth, and pleasure rocketed through her.

“I can’t stay away from you. I never expected this...you.” Then she turned in his arms and they were kissing each other eagerly, hungrily, desperately. She was aware of the almost branding heat of his hands on her bare back as their tongues and lips met and dallied.

Lucien’s anger and suspicion turned to passion. And she was right with him. The night, the house, and the magic between them wouldn’t permit otherwise.

Suddenly, the door swung open and Charles stood there, taking them in. He was dressed as vampire in a dark suit with a red cumber bun and his skin was whitened. His long fangs glinted at them.

“Grandmere will be so pleased,” he mocked. “And you’re supposed to be the noble one, Lucien. I never thought you’d whore yourself, but that just goes to show you what the scent of money will do to people.”

Lucien stepped towards his cousin. “That’s enough, Charles. Don’t make an ass of yourself in front of the lady.”

“Lady? I wasn’t aware I was in the presence of one.” There was a desperate gleam to his eyes.

“I’m afraid my cousin has had too much to drink. If you will excuse us for a moment? There’s a great deal we have to talk about.”

Shocked by Charles’s ire, Viole nodded slowly. *What was going on here?* “I’ll just rejoin the other guests.” She walked past Lucien and Charles, then turned to shut the door behind her. As she did so, she looked back into the parlor. There was a nearly physical tension between the two men. She wondered if they would come to blows. But there was

a restraint to Lucien which reassured her he wouldn't lose his head no matter how impetuously his cousin behaved. Then, her eyes caught on the portrait which hung over the fireplace behind them. It was of a young woman with dark, curly hair, a winsome dimple, and a pair of nearly violet eyes. It was Queen Elizabeth from the party, unless she was very mistaken. Again, she wondered at the girl's identity. Most likely, she was another cousin of Lucien's. Then, Viole closed the doors.

Outside the library, the Halloween party was still in full, albeit more frenzied swing. It now had the rapidly increasing ribaldry of a bacchanalia. Viole, who was sobering up rapidly, glanced down at her bare wrist. Of course she wasn't wearing a watch. She wondered what time it was, and how much longer she should stay. And she needed to speak with Lucien again.

Eventually, she located a grandfather clock on the lowest landing of the staircase. It was just after eleven o'clock. She wandered through the crowded rooms sipping sweet champagne but wishing she had water. Now finding the house too warm, she wandered out onto the back veranda. Here, the air was cooler, redolent with the perfumes of fall blooming flowers and just a hint of the rich, organic aroma of the swamp in the distance.

"Here you are. I was looking for you." Lucien rested his forearms on the rail as well, and stared out over the dark shadows of the formal gardens. "I'm sorry about Charles. He will apologize to you himself tomorrow. He's had too much to drink."

"I understand, and I know he wants his land deal to go through, but I'm missing a piece here, Lucien. Tell me what's going on."

"You really don't know, do you?" He exhaled slowly. "Then, please accept my apologies for my outburst earlier. I thought you and my grandmother... Well, I was wrong. You're as much fate's fool as I am in all of this. It's time you knew, before you make any decisions regarding Magnolia House or..." He didn't finish his thought, instead he led her through the boxwood parterres into the formal gardens. Oil torches which had been strategically placed throughout lit their way. Though the moon was full, a hazy mist now obscured everything. They passed several people, lovers who melted into the shadows. At the end of the gardens were more massive and ancient oak trees draped in Spanish

moss. Set amongst the trees was a small, rather decrepit building in a similar style to that of the main house.

"This is the family chapel. It's in terrible shape, not safe to enter right now. The floor boards are rotten, but that's not what I wanted to show you. Right through here." He opened the waist high, wrought iron gate, and led her around the side of the building out into the cemetery. Because the lands of Magnolia House were below sea level, the tombs in the family cemetery were above ground. Through the mist, ghostly mausoleums of different shapes and sizes were laid out in an orderly fashion under the oaks.

The place was giving Viole the creeps. She was not among the faint hearted, but a cemetery on Halloween night was definitely sending chills up her spine. "Your grandmother wants me to restore the chapel as well?"

"No," Lucien's tone was grave. "Before you see what I'm talking about, I want you to know, I went along with my grandmother's plans for you because they seemed harmless. She did suggest your name to Sabine at Belle Maison, but you earned the job on your own merits. Your move to New Orleans, I believe, will prove a good one for your career. So please don't let this," he waved one arm to encompass the graveyard and Magnolia House, "impact how you view me. I never intended to get involved with you, but from the first moment I saw you, I felt a special connection between us. Yes, I'm attracted to you, and I want to see where this thing between us could go. If that's fate, as my grandmother claims, then so be it. I just hope you feel the same way."

"I wondered if Mrs. Verret was connected somehow to my job offer, but I'm not going to begrudge her that fact. I'm very pleased with where I am now, and I like New Orleans. But why did she do it? And why me?"

"This is why." As they spoke, he'd led her through the cemetery until they stood in a very old, somewhat forgotten corner of the enclosed area. He was facing a waist high sepulcher on which a marble angel stood with arms and wings outstretched, as if she was about to take flight at any time. In the hazy moonlight, she had a very lifelike quality to her.

"Read it."

Viole stared down. It was difficult to see, she squatted down. The engraving was large, and she traced the letters with her finger. "Vi-ole G-Godin." A chill shot through her.

Lucien's warm hand stroking her arm reassured her that this wasn't all some bizarre Halloween nightmare.

"1880-1903." Viole continued. "Who was she?"

"Your great-great-grandmother. This entire corner of the cemetery is filled with Godins. Did you know your mother's family was from Louisiana?"

"I knew they were from the South somewhere. But my great grandfather was an orphan. He didn't know anything about his family. This must be some odd coincidence."

"It isn't, Viole. Your great grandfather wasn't an orphan. His father put him in an orphanage in Pennsylvania after his first wife, your namesake, died. He wasn't able to take care of his son, and then he remarried and started a new family. So, he left your great grandfather in the orphanage. He went in when he was only three, so he had no clear memories of his family. Your great-great-grandfather, Viole's husband, Claude Godin, was my one of my ancestor's business partner, as their fathers had been before them.

"After the war, the Verrets were in terrible financial straits. Claude Godin, Senior, a carpet bagger, but a kindly one, invested funds into the estate with the understanding that, henceforth, he owned forty percent of it. Claude and his wife built their home not far from this house."

"Where is that house?" Viole asked eagerly. Though she didn't entirely believe the story, it was fascinating.

"It burned down. You see, though Claude and Lucien Verret, my great-great-grandfather, managed to get along well, their sons did not. Apparently, there was always strife between them over who owned what and how to run the estate, which was now doing quite well. Then, there was a fire at the Godin House. Claude was away at the time tending to business in New Orleans. And though the nurse managed to save Claude's infant son, his wife perished. Claude blamed Lucien for the fire, swore he'd set it out of spite. Then, he cursed Lucien and Magnolia House, said he wanted nothing more to do with either of them. Afterwards, he left with your great grandfather, whom he ultimately placed in the orphanage.

"After Claude's departure, things started to fall apart at Magnolia House. It turns out, he was the better estate manager. And though my

family's other business interests continued to flourish, Magnolia House became an expensive drain on us until the present day."

"Even if all of this is true, what does it have to do with me? Are you saying part of all this is mine?"

"I can answer that for you."

Lucien and Viole turned to face Charles. He was standing between them and the house and he was pointing a gun at them.

"Grandmere believes the curse can be lifted by convincing you to accept your heritage. When he left, Claude Godin said that this land would never again flourish unless a Godin tended it. That's why she sought you out. Of course, it was an added and unexpected bonus that you and my dear cousin here haven't been able to keep your hands off each other. Oh yes, I know about your date. I followed you. Grandmere sent me. She found it all very romantic. Of course, it will destroy her when her favorite grandson, you are you know, and her protégé disappear. There will be an inquiry, but bodies decompose quickly in the swamps."

"Charles, put down the gun. This is insane."

"I don't want to kill you," there was a frantic edge to his voice. "I love you, Lucien, but I have to. I've run up gambling debts with some very unsavory characters. They'll kill me if I don't pay up."

"I can help you Charles," Lucien offered, stepping between his cousin and Viole. "Killing me won't get you any money."

"Maybe not today, but in a short while. No one else in the family will stand in the way of my plans to sell this place to developers. Only you... Why didn't you just go along with me, Lucien? There would have been plenty for all of us. Instead, you had to jump on board with Grandmere's hair-brained scheme. You've been like a brother to me, Lucien. I don't want to lose you, too."

"You don't have to, Charles. You haven't done anything yet. Put the gun down. We can work this out."

"No, it's too late." He was nearly sobbing. "Stop! Step back, right now. I'll shoot you in the legs if I have to. No one will hear. I got a silencer, see, and the music is so loud. But I don't want to hurt you. I would rather kill you as painlessly as possible. I do love you Lucien. Don't make me hurt you...I'd rather finish with her first."

Just then, a breeze blew up off the river. The leaves and branches of the trees over their heads gently shook and murmured. The mist which had hung so heavy in the still night air began to drift away and the orange disk of the moon was revealed.

Viole saw a figure dart through the cemetery gate. She saw it was a young woman, and she was running lightly towards them with her hands in her skirts. It was Queen Elizabeth from the party.

Seeing the direction of her gaze, Charles glanced over his shoulder. The young woman was now standing just behind him. He froze and stared dumbly at her. "No...Grandmere." He shrieked.

That was all the opening Lucien needed. He lunged for Charles. The gun went off. Viole hit the ground.

* * * *

Charles was screaming and sobbing hysterically as he was taken away handcuffed in a police car. Afterwards, Lieutenant Robichaux of the Baton Rouge Police Department questioned both Lucien and Viole.

"You say he was distracted, and then you took him down?"

"Yes, that's what happened. It seemed like he saw something or someone behind him, but my cousin has always been unstable. He has an extensive psychiatric history."

"I saw her, too," Viole said. "One of the guests, though she may be a member of your family."

"Can you identify this woman?"

"I don't see her here." Viole glanced around at the faces of the guests who, for the most part, had congregated outside after the arrival of the police cars. "But I know where there's a picture of her. Lucien can identify her."

Just then, a cell phone rang. "Just a moment," Lucien stepped away from them.

"Lieutenant, her picture's in the library. It's this way."

She led him up the steps, through the hall, and into the library. "That's the woman," she pointed triumphantly at the violet-eyed girl.

Lucien must have followed them in. For, he spoke from the doorway, closing his phone as he stepped inside: "That's not likely."

"I saw her. I'm sure that's the woman."

"That's a portrait of my grandmother painted more than sixty years ago."

Lieutenant Robichaux glanced between them, then flipped his notebook closed. "It's Halloween Night, miss. Many people see strange things...I'll get back to you both if I have any more questions."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

Viole and Lucien remained in the library after the police officer left the room.

"I swear that was the woman I saw, and I'm not drunk."

"I said it wasn't likely, not that it wasn't possible or that I didn't believe you. Not everything can be explained...For instance, is it a coincidence that my grandmother died several hours ago at her house on Rue Royale? That was her nurse on the phone just now. She wasn't able to get through to me earlier."

Lucien walked over to the bar. He poured bourbon into two glasses, and then approached Viole holding one of them out to her.

"It's a tradition in my family to drink a toast in honor of the deceased. Will you toast my grandmother with me?"

Viole took the glass with a trembling hand. "To Marie Verret."

"A true lady and a wonderful grandmother."

They both tossed back their bourbons. Viole closed her eyes against the warm, heady glide of it down her throat.

"I plan to see her dream for Magnolia House realized," Lucien said. "And this isn't because of what happened tonight, but because I feel it's the right thing to do, because I want to do it. I realize this probably isn't the best time to ask you, but I can't do this alone, will you consider taking this project on?" His tone was formal, but she recognized he was asking other, more personal questions as well.

"Like your grandmother, I've never been one to turn away from a man in need," she deliberately allowed the double entendre to linger in the air.

He smiled, and the jaunty river boat gambler was back.

Marguerite Turnley loves to write stories that make people think, give them hope and make them feel they are not alone. Midnight Showcase is fortunate to have Ms. Turnley as one of their authors. Check the Digests for her works, you won't want to miss any of them. She would like to receive emails with feedback.

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OUT ON A LIMB
By
Marguerite Turnley

Blake Delainy woke in the early morning with nothing on his mind except spending a restful Saturday playing his new computer game. He'd worked hard all week, designing a new ad campaign for sneakers and had looked forward to some prime time relaxation. Now his cat was howling piteously in the street outside his house.

Blake crawled out of bed and went to the ground floor window, checking in case the cat was testing him out. Slinky had done that many times before, wailed and sulked until he let her in through the window. The cat liked to rattle Blake's cage and make him furious enough to play one of her mind games, one where Slinky made the rules and Blake ran round in circles following orders. Her manipulative attitude was defined by the amount of Siamese in her blood. Queen Slinky always came out on top.

Blake opened the window and stuck his head out into the cool breeze. He shivered and wished he'd thought to put on some clothes. The cat wasn't under the window and he listened, wondering where the howling was coming from. Fred Jackson's garage roof next door was deserted. Lucy Willow's porch roof across the street was falling down and could not support a cat under any circumstances, even a little piece of fur like Slinky.

He looked towards the tree near his front gate and saw a brown and white tail, swishing angrily in the heavy tree foliage. If that tail could talk it would say, "Move it buddy, I haven't got all day." Slinky might be small and female, but she was hot on giving orders. If he neglected to follow them, he'd end up wearing her claws in his ankle and find himself saying thank you for the privilege.

Knowing he was a sucker for a sob story, Blake got dressed and

went out to get the only ladder he owned. Old and wooden, it hadn't been used for years and had been in the garage since he bought the house. Although he was terrified of heights because of an incident involving a damaged bridge and a school bus when he was a child, it was the only way Slinky was going to escape from the tree.

Remembering his terror at dangling over a deep flowing river, nothing would induce him to climb up to get the cat out of the tree. He would provide a ladder but that was as far as he could go. He'd seen Slinky climb down Fred Jackson's ladder from the man's garage roof so Blake knew she could do it. He certainly wasn't going up after her. No way.

Unfortunately, Slinky was convinced she was going to be stuck in the tree forever and starve to death. How she got up there wasn't clear. Now her pathetic wailing was drawing the attention of the neighbors and they were looking at Blake as if he was Bluebeard. "Get the cat down," urged Burt Willow from across the street. He was standing under the tree as Blake brought his ladder out and set it in place. "Poor little thing. It's not like she can climb down on her own."

"Yeah, I'm doing it," Blake growled, wishing the man would go back home and have a beer or something. Then he looked up at his howling cat and, not wanting the neighbors to hear him, he whispered, "Come down, Slinky, one foot in front of the other, you can do it, girl. It's easy." He wished he believed his own lies. The cat certainly didn't.

There was murmuring from the people who had gathered and Blake felt like a heel for not leaping from branch to branch to save such a defenseless creature. He was also embarrassed to admit publicly that he was afraid of heights.

It seemed such a wimpy thing, to be unable to climb a simple ladder and rescue a loud pathetic feline, which was clearly on the verge of jumping off into mid-air and hurting herself. That stuff put out about cats having nine lives was purely an ad campaign by cats designed to boost their standing in the community. And, he wouldn't be surprised if, like a lot of actors, they believed their own publicity.

Several pair of eyes, including Slinky's and a few other cats and dogs that had gathered at the scene, looked him over reproachfully. Guilt surged through him and he even took a step toward the ladder. At the last minute he reneged, saying to the cat, "Come on, Slinky

girl, climb down the ladder. It's like falling off a log."

Desperation was riding him hard when Dora Wise from down the street said, "If it's so easy why don't you do it? You're a big strong man. Climb up, grab that poor defenseless cat, and then climb down again. Come on Blake. Show us what you're made of."

Blake felt embarrassed heat on his face as he brushed his hair back from his face with a hand that bordered on shaky. He pushed his glasses back on his nose and tried to look confident. Putting sneakers on might have helped. He could have gone on a long run around the lake and avoided all this publicity.

Looking up at Slinky, who, tail still swishing, was now quiet and waiting, he silently promised to cut the tree down and ground the cat for the next ten years, if he or the cat lived that long.

Blake grabbed the ladder and tried, really tried, to put one foot up and climb. He wondered desperately how much he would have to pay to get Fred Jackson to get the cat down for him. If Fred agreed, Blake would have to move away because he couldn't live there with the embarrassment of knowing he'd bribed a seventy-year-old man to do his job for him.

Flexing his muscles, Blake wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve, keeping up a steady stream of confidence building words, slipping them out silently, so only he could hear.

"What are you whispering?" came a feminine voice behind him. He turned abruptly, losing his grip on the ladder and almost tripped over his own feet. It was his new, next-door neighbor, Elvina Scott. He had met her when she and her mother, Julia, had moved in the previous Saturday.

The day after she moved in, Elvina had greeted him with friendly smile and a wave before proceeding to mow her lawn and tidy up the flower garden, which had been neglected by the previous owner.

He hadn't stopped to talk that day, seeing she was busy, but had kept a surreptitious eye on how she was doing, hoping she would come and ask for a hand so he could get to know her better. It hadn't happened, and he'd forced himself to get to work cleaning up his own yard and garage. It wasn't every Sunday he had free, so that one had to count for something. It was too bad the delectable Elvina was such a distraction. And, now, here she was again, still distracting him, just as

he was about to defy gravity and perform a rescue.

"Hi, Elvina." Blake turned to her and smiled, trying to think of something to say. How could he admit he was scared enough to pass out? "I'm whispering because Beth Carpenter from down the street is standing outside my gate glaring at me and she can hear a pin drop at ten paces."

Elvina grinned. "What on earth could you be saying that she would take offence at? She lives on the other side of me and I've heard some pretty juicy things coming from her back yard, I can tell you. Her voice carries, especially at night when her boyfriend comes to visit."

He grimaced. "I've got things to say to my cat that she wouldn't want to hear, under any circumstances."

"How fascinating." Elvina drew Blake away from the ladder and did some whispering of her own. "Look, it's none of my business but I think you need to do something. Fred Jackson looks like he's going to go up after the cat and he's seventy if he's a day. It wouldn't look good if he went up and did what you're obviously having trouble with, if you get my drift."

She inclined her head toward the crowd where Fred was rolling up his sleeves and preparing to embark on a dangerous mission of rescue. His wife was pulling at his arm as if to stop him. Slinky started wailing again, and the crowd became even more agitated.

Blake wouldn't be surprised if the local paper printed the story, informing their readers of Blake's inability to perform. Blake wanted to shout, "I'm not unwilling", but something had lodged in his throat and he couldn't speak. He cleared his throat, but nothing came out, his shoulders shifting uncomfortably.

"Look, I'll do it. I'd like to help." Elvina looked confident and fit, her tall frame obviously capable of climbing any ladder and taking on any rescue without a qualm. She was like a Viking woman, standing there with her long golden hair rippling in the breeze.

Blake was suddenly picturing her in short leather skirt, with a spear and helmet. As a fantasy it was riveting, taking his mind off his immediate problem and shifting him into awareness mode. Feeling the heat, he clamped down on his libido and, with great difficulty, switched his thoughts to the task at hand, the rescue of his cat.

He was seriously tempted to disappear and let the lady take over. However, his battered pride came rushing back with a vengeance. It kick-started him into saying, "No, I'll do it. She's my responsibility." Unfortunately, he looked up at the tree and felt his stomach heave in protest. He turned away and breathed deeply so as not to deposit his lunch on the lawn. Perspiration dripped down past his collar and his hands were shaking so much it was debilitating.

Elvina's eyes widened at this phenomenon and she felt a sharp tug of sympathy for this tall, broad, obviously masculine man, standing there like he was about to be hung out to dry. She'd seen it before in life threatening situations. When she had applied to join a county fire department in New York, she had gone on to be the only female fire fighter in the district, but her natural reaction to stress had never left her. She just kept it well hidden.

Elvina was now making a new life for herself, looking after her mother who had come to live in Australia after she had become a widow. Being a fire fighter had been important to her, but her family was more so. No one here would believe she was anything other than happy to stay at home. And, if she felt too constricted, she could always join the local fire brigade as a volunteer, or work at an animal rescue organization. It was a plan for the future.

She now worked in an office at the back of her house designing computer adventure games for kids and her life was running along smoothly. Her mother was happy with her life, able to see her friends and spend time with her daughter. Elvina's being away from a life of fighting fires and working with a crowd of rowdy uncontrollable men, gave her a feeling of security.

Elvina liked men. She liked working with them. She enjoyed the physical challenge of putting her life on the line and trading insults with them as part of the team. What she hadn't liked about the job was men thinking she was too female to be a success at it. She had constantly fought to be allowed to do the work and not to be treated like she was soft or unfit. She understood her capabilities and knew she could do most things the men could do. She was tall and physically fit, with a confidence that would see her through any situation. The only thing she couldn't do well was admitting something was out of her control. That was hard and she worked to

stay away from those situations.

There was one other thing she couldn't admit to. Climbing trees made her itch. It had something to do with insects and memories of being bitten by them, but with deep breathing and tackling the problem head on she could overcome it, most of the time. That was why she recognized a problem in this man standing before her. She saw that heights were his enemy and felt his male pride crumbling. She'd seen it before when a man couldn't go into a burning building to do his job and knew it created a dangerous feeling of failure and self-condemnation. There was no doubt. Testosterone was sometimes bad for men. It made them fight to stay on top, but it also made them unable to admit their frailties.

Elvina didn't want that to happen here, so she calmed the situation by saying, "I can go up, Blake. I was trained to handle situations like this. I have been doing it for years so it's familiar stuff. I worked in a fire station back in New York so I know what I'm doing."

Blake breathed again. Elvina had worked in a fire station. He knew there was something unusual about her. His imagination passed from thinking of her in Viking gear to seeing her wearing a yellow slicker and helmet, holding a fire hose. Unfortunately, the axe she also carried in her belt killed it for him. How could he be having fantasies about a woman carrying an axe? A masochist he was not.

Hating his relief at her capabilities, but knowing he was off the hook, he swallowed his pride and said, "Thanks, you'll do a better job than me, Elvina. Slinky likes a gentle touch and my hands are too big to bring her down without hurting her. Besides, she tends to bite first when she's scared, and ask questions later."

Elvina looked at his large hands with their clean square-cut nails and smiled. She imagined all the things those delicious hands could do and felt a slow heat begin to crawl up her spine. She swallowed a sigh and said in a husky voice, "I'll bite, ah, I mean, they're nice hands, Blake. Very nice. But you're right. That little cat up there needs a gentle touch. She looks like she'd ready to fly, so I'd better get up there and bring her down. Would you hold the ladder for me?"

Blake looked into her tawny-gold eyes and felt his heart leap into his throat. She had the most expressive understanding face he had

ever seen. But even while he appreciated her help, he knew he still felt a tinge of resentment. If she could do it, surely he could too? After all, it was his ladder, and his cat. His pride was at stake. He wanted to climb that ladder, needed to climb it, but he also knew he couldn't do it safely with shaky hands and eyes blinded by apprehension. It was a no-win situation.

He smiled down at this pushy, gorgeous woman who had come to his rescue and said, "Thanks, Elvina. Slinky needs you. I bow to your expertise."

If she felt the slight sting in his words, she didn't, by a flicker of an eyelash, show it. She merely stepped around him and put one foot on the ladder as he held it steady, breathing rhythmically and deeply, concentrating on the job at hand. Up she went, slowly, giving Blake a view of jeans clad legs. He tried not to look but the knowing expression on his neighbor's faces was his undoing, Fred's wicked grin in particular. Oh, well, he thought. If I'm going to get the blame I might as well play the game. As he kept his eyes trained on her ascending figure he totally forgot about his cat, anticipation giving his imagination a total workout.

He was thankful for her expertise and willingness to give him a break, knowing how his failure had looked to everyone who had gathered like specters at the feast. It looked like what it was, a simple case of abject cowardice. He himself was the most condemning of all.

Elvina reached the stranded cat and was trying unsuccessfully to coax the little feline howler down into her arms. She was reaching out to grab her and pass her down to Blake when the ladder gave a lurch and one of the wooden rungs snapped. She lost her footing and fell sideways, leaving the cat still in the tree.

Everyone on the ground looked on as she fell, almost in slow motion, sucking in a sharp breath as she grabbed a tree branch. Mesmerized, the crowd watched and waited, mouths open, no one in motion except Blake, who shouted, "Don't worry. I'll catch you," as he leapt to her rescue.

The branch slowed her down a little as she held on and swung but she sensed her weight was too much for the slender tree limb. Hearing it crack and feeling it sag, she knew she was in trouble and hoped her medical insurance was up to date. Then she remembered another

reason she didn't climb trees. Branches break, and it was a long way to the ground. That cat had the right idea. Call for help and let someone else do the dirty work.

She also felt a renewed empathy for Blake. Lucky guy was standing on the ground when he might have been flying through the air. That showed remarkable good sense. He was also waiting for her to land in his arms. It brought, despite the circumstances, a thrill of anticipation.

She looked down as she swung and saw him stepping out to where she was most likely going to land, holding his arms ready to receive her. The crowd stood without moving, not making a sound, waiting to see if Blake would redeem himself and catch the woman who had gone up the ladder in his place. Like spectators at a basketball match, they watched to see if he would be able to catch her.

Taking a deep breath, Elvina let go of the branch before it snapped completely. When she landed in his arms he fell backwards and it was all over in seconds. The crowd clapped enthusiastically and bustled round to help the fallen. Blake was lying on the ground, and she was lying on top of him with her face buried in his chest. They were as close as two people could be. He was groaning, and the crowd loved it. They hooted and whistled, shouting praise, but when Elvina rolled to the side and sat up she saw Blake's white face and the unnatural angle of his arm. She said, "Oh no, you're hurt. Your arm looks like it's broken." Then she called out, "Somebody, help him up. He needs a doctor."

Several people came to help, saying how courageous she was for trying to rescue the cat, the same cat that had now mysteriously disappeared into the foliage of the tree.

Blake was in a lot of pain but he managed to say, "It was a nice flight, Elvina. Next time take a plane. Landings around here tend to get a bit rough."

"No problem, Blake. If you want, I'll take you to the hospital. You'll need to get that arm seen to."

"Thanks, Elvina. That would be great. I don't think I can drive right now."

She laughed, feeling shell-shocked. "No, you can't. Not today. That's what happens when something falls from the sky and lands on

top of you. It puts you out of action.”

“I’m glad it was you,” he said, trying to smile, but only managing to grimace in pain.

“So am I.” Elvina wasn’t sure what they were talking about but there wasn’t time to discuss it. Fred Jackson came back then and helped Blake to stand. He walked shakily over to his house, clinging to Elvina’s hand. Fred came with them and opened the gate. He said, “Your cat’s doing okay.” He pointed to the cat perched on the stoop, washing her face, as he helped Blake to sit down on a veranda chair.

The victim laughed shakily. “Yeah. Slinky usually manages very well. Cats are supposed to have nine lives. She has eight left after today. Thanks for your help, Fred.”

“That’s okay.” Fred grinned. “Glad to be of service.”

Elvina said, “Thanks, Fred. I’ll go get my car keys.” She went next door to her house and when she returned, stood a little to the side, brushing her tangled mane back from her flushed face. Silently waiting for Fred to leave, she thought of how she hadn’t wanted to take her arm from around Blake’s waist to let him sit down. She hadn’t realized how satisfying it would be to have a man lean on her, accepting her help. Now she knew, and she wanted more of it. The men she’d worked with in the fire department would never ask for a woman’s help. They would only turn to each other, or suffer alone, until bandaging needed to be done, or coffee made.

Slinky, in her feline ingenuity, had found her own way down from the tree and, having finished her face washing, was currently climbing around Blake’s legs vying for a stroke from one of those large hands Elvina had fantasized over. Slinky purred and rubbed her face against his jeans clad knees and generally made him acknowledge her.

Blake stroked the cat gently and scratched behind her ear, saying, “So, you found your own way down, Slinky?”

Fred Jackson laughed, saying, “Gotta go, folks. Hey, let me know if she climbs that tree again. I’ll bring my video camera. That leap of faith, Elvina, was a classic. I’d like to see you do it again. You could be on the news.” He waved as he headed for home.

Elvina laughed and came in for her share of the cat’s attention. “Well, we know where we stand now, don’t we, Blake?” she said.

"Slinky showed how easy it was, and we're sitting here, recovering from a blow to the ego instead of being happy we'd achieved something. If you feel like getting up I'll drive you down to the clinic. You'll need that arm treated as soon as possible."

Blake looked like he wanted to object, but Elvina knew when he was beaten, even if he didn't. "Don't say no," she said as he drew a breath. "It's my duty to make up for my clumsy landing."

"But it was my tree and my ladder that broke. My cat, too," he growled, looking both indulgent and cross as he stroked the cat into ecstasy with one hand.

"Forget it. You're the injured one. I'd say that makes me the only one capable of driving a car. Just wait until I tell mom where I'm going."

"So, I know you live here with your mother. Is there anyone waiting in America for you?" Blake had no intention of looking hopeful as he waited impatiently for her answer. He managed it anyway. Elvina smiled inside where he couldn't see the secret well of satisfaction his interest caused.

She looked into his deep dark eyes and felt a rush of awareness. She had picked up his glasses after he fell and now handed them to him with a feeling of anticipation. She could see he was waiting for her answer and said, "No one is waiting for me anywhere. There's just me, and my mom. We survive."

He put the glasses on and looked at her, really seeing her closely for the first time since they had landed on the ground in a tangle of arms and legs. He wanted to tell her how much he appreciated her help, how he had watched her climb that ladder in his place and how he couldn't get her out of his mind. "Good. I'm glad, that you survive, that is." Blake felt the heat on his face and knew he looked as embarrassed as he felt. If only he didn't have a broken arm, he wouldn't feel so helpless. Then he'd do something about the situation. He'd make a move in the right direction.

Seeing her every day over the past week had become exquisite torture. Collecting the mail or walking down to the store, he'd wanted to talk, to get to know her. Now he realized how difficult the situation was. How could such a strong capable woman ever want a man who couldn't even climb a tree or ladder without breaking a sweat?

He wanted a chance to start over, to climb that ladder for her and prove he was as capable as any man to provide for those he cared about. For that chance, he would even tell Slinky to get back in the tree so he could try again. Blake looked at his cat and wondered if Slinky could read his mind when she shot off the veranda and raced around the back of the house as if the cat catcher was after her.

Elvina wanted to tease Blake, telling him she loved his studious, intellectual look, but something about his gaze as it met hers kept her silent. He was saying something with his mind, but his lips were silent. He was generating heat, which could incinerate the both of them if she didn't look away. Now was not the moment to start such an adventure.

How could he look so serious and yet so appealing at the same time? Maybe it was time she started dating, instead of staying home watching TV or playing cards with her mother's friends. It wasn't that she didn't like those things, but she knew she had neglected her social life since she had left the fire department and moved to live in Australia with her mom.

She enjoyed dating, but had never wanted to get married or seek out anything more. There had never been a spark ignited with the right man and since she had moved she was too busy making a living creating games on her computer.

Of course she wanted to have children one day but she was only twenty-six and life was full of possibilities. One of them had provided a landing space for her airborne body, and was even now paying the price for it. He'd turned her into a basket case.

Feeling guilty, Elvina helped Blake up and supported him as they walked towards her car. He allowed her to slip her arm around his waist, refusing to feel guilty because he'd actually recovered enough to stand and walk on his own. He might never get another chance to hold her, or have her hold him, and he savored it while he could.

In the advertising world, it paid to grab an opportunity while it was in your face, and he knew Elvina wanted to make it up to him for breaking his arm. He also knew he would break it again, himself, if it gave him a chance with her. They might be neighbors but were still far apart. Blake suddenly wanted to close that distance as much as he wanted to go on breathing.

Her car was parked in her driveway and when they reached it she said, "Sit in the car, Blake. I'll get my keys." He climbed in, and she headed inside to tell her mother where she was going. She grabbed her keys and patted her dog, a small terrier, before heading out the door. She had only had him a week and he was still getting to know her.

Scrappy bounded down the hall after her and whined as she shut him inside. "Watch grandma, Scrap," she ordered and the little hound raced back down the hall to sit with his second favorite person.

Elvina helped Blake with his seat belt, and asked, "Is that okay?"

"I guess." He was anything but comfortable, but he wasn't going to admit it. His arm felt like knives were slicing him and his headache was a major disaster area. He wished he'd stopped for painkillers but knew that it would not have been wise. Doctors got bent out of shape when patients administered their own medication before consulting experts.

"I don't want anything else to happen to you."

He bared his teeth in a grin. "Let's go, Elvina." She could have been offended by his crusty manner but she knew it wasn't permanent. He was in pain.

They reached the clinic within ten minutes. Blake was thankful for small mercies. He was silent during the drive, trying not to jolt his arm, and when they reached the car park, he said brusquely, "Thanks, Elvina, I'm okay. I can take it from here." He didn't want her to see him pass out as they set his arm or put needles in.

Elvina shook her head. "No way. I'm taking it from here. You're on hallowed ground, now, and I'm delivering you to the proper authorities."

"Look, it's just a simple fracture. I've got legs, and I can still walk. Thanks for taking the trouble to drive me. I'll get a taxi home."

"I know you can walk. I've seen you." She remembered his long legs and his panther like tread as he came toward the tree, where his cat sat in feline splendor. She remembered thinking that he was like a wave, rolling in from the sea and conquering everything in its path, except perhaps the tree. Right now, the wave had lost some of its momentum, but she was sure it would pick up speed when it was on its way home.

He scowled ferociously. She said, "Give it up, Blake. I'm not

scared of you. I've seen you with your cat. Remember? She turns to melted chocolate in your arms." Elvina knew how the cat felt. She had melted for him, too, only he didn't know it, yet. "Anyway," she said, "you're only walking as far as the waiting room. We're going to sit there and wait for a doctor. It'll be easy."

"Easy for who?" he asked, thinking of the inevitable shot he'd get after they x-rayed his arm. He wished he could turn around and go back home where it was safe and where he could work on his social skills. They were clearly lacking when the only female who liked him was his cat, and her appreciation was dependent on what he could do for her.

Elvina grinned up at her reluctant patient as she helped him the short way to the building and opened the door. "If you're a good boy, I'll wait and take you home."

He looked startled for a moment and then a slow, wicked grin started. The dimple in his cheek made her want to put her finger in and see how deep it went.

He asked, his voice sounding as if it was composed of rough honey combs, "What if I'm not a good boy?"

Elvina was melting into the doorstep. He was hard on the nerves, this man. One minute he was vulnerable, in pain but denying it to his last breath. The next he was challenging her, making her do things she would never think of doing on her own, like climb a ladder up a tree. She wanted to promise to be there for him, whether he was a good boy or even if he was naughty.

Thinking about that, she wished she could see what naughty was like when he was trying it on for size. Bad with him would probably be taste temptingly good, breaking all the rules of civilized behavior. She knew it would be dangerous to give this man an inch, because he would almost certainly take that extra mile, and make her say thank you while he was doing it.

They reached the clinic front desk and Blake gave his name. He filled out numerous forms and, by the time he was through, he was thoroughly fed up. For a right-handed person, writing with the left hand was a pain. His arm was also tormenting him.

Elvina sat with him until his turn came to see the doctor. He didn't say much, just a comment on the number of people waiting and

the weather. They sat side by side in cramped plastic chairs, each trying to keep their knees and arms from touching.

Blake just wanted to get it over with. He hated the vulnerability of being incapacitated and wanted her to see him as strong and able to deal with anything. Apart from the pain, the only thing he was really having trouble with was sitting next to a woman whose skin looked soft and succulent and whose natural perfume sapped his strength with its overpowering sensuality. His mind was drifting in two different directions but neither was getting him anywhere.

Just thinking about it wasn't going to do it for him and anything else was impossible given his broken arm. A waiting room was the wrong place to feel his senses stirring. He could imagine what would happen if he did what he wanted to do. The papers would have a field day. 'Injured advertising man attempts seduction of fire fighter in hospital waiting room' was the heading that sprang to mind. He'd never recover.

Elvina stayed in the waiting room while Blake was treated, sensing he needed privacy. With her experience of men in pain, she knew he'd never forgive her or himself if he passed out in her presence.

His arm was scanned, manipulated and set and he came through it with nothing to show but a white face and rapidly drying plaster, hung up in a sling. Afterwards she silently drove him home. He was feeling groggy from pain medication so she helped him inside and settled him in his living room. Soothing music made conversation unnecessary as Elvina made some tea.

Slinky came in through the cat door and made herself at home in the kitchen, eating dry food already laid out. Then, she came and sat on Blake's lap, cleaning her face.

Elvina watched him stroke his cat and listening to him tell Slinky, in the softest sexiest voice, that she was a bad, bad kitty, and he was going to lock her in his bedroom until she stopped climbing trees and behaved. Elvina almost volunteered to climb a tree just to get the same treatment. The cat purred with pleasure. Elvina felt the same way.

After a while, Blake shifted Slinky away and stood up to go and lie on the sofa. Slinky climbed up beside him, as if she had the right to

go anywhere she pleased, anytime, which she did. Blake was her slave. He was asleep before he had time to drink his tea so Elvina found him a pillow, gently covered him with a blanket and went home. It was time to retreat and give him time to recover. Tomorrow was time enough to see if he'd allow her to help. She'd wait until he called, then she would be there. It was the least she could do since she was the one who had flattened him.

Elvina's mother was watching out the window the next afternoon. She said, "Elvina, that nice Blake Delainy is on his way over here. He's big isn't he? He's even taller than your father. Do you suppose he likes cards? He must be bored out of his mind with nothing to do. He can't possibly work with his arm in a sling, and the girls would love to have him play."

Elvina groaned. She'd spent the morning trying to get some work done and if her mother invited Blake for cards, she wouldn't be able to concentrate. He was a distraction she could do without. She turned off the computer and prepared to act unconcerned as the man who was haunting her thoughts knocked on the door.

She'd been thinking of him, in a purely medical way, all night, wondering whether to visit and take him chicken soup, or visit. Whatever one did to help patients recover. She'd never wanted to take care of a man's needs before and was wondering if she herself wasn't the one with a fever. Just imagining him lying alone in his bed and in need made her feel hot.

She reminded herself to check whether he was able to manage with his arm tied up. Unfortunately, she had become caught up in changes to a computer game she'd written and now, here he was, knocking on her door.

Trembling with anticipation, Elvina walked into the hallway. She could see him through the amber glass of the door and reminded herself that fire fighters were tough. She'd climbed ladders and entered burning buildings, so why couldn't she open a harmless front door?

The answer was simple. Outside the door was the most riveting man she had ever met in her life, and she was scared. What if he refused to come in, said, "Thanks for everything", then turned and went back to his cat?

Elvina opened the door. Blake took in her dark blue, stretch jeans and white tee shirt, appreciating how well they fitted. She was magnificent, tall, strong, and capable. Her long golden hair was tangled as if she had been dragging her hands through it. He wished he had been there to watch, and maybe join in. Something about that mane made his hands clench. He wanted to touch, and go on touching. To distract himself he said, "Hi. Elvina, um, is your mother home? I brought Slinky to visit."

Restraining herself from kicking him in the shins, Elvina said in a syrup-filled voice, "Hello, Slinky. Come in Blake. Mom just put coffee on. She'll be so happy to see you. She has a thing for the walking wounded. Cats and dogs too."

Something about the way he smiled made her think of soft slow nights watching the summer moon drift across the sky, nights when the most important thing was to discover each other and make some memories that would last forever. With such a warm feeling rushing through her she couldn't stay mad at him so she smiled back.

He came inside, and she turned to lead him into the kitchen. He put Slinky down to find her own way. As Elvina walked away, her determined stride showed off her feminine curvy hips. She caught her tangled mane up in a ponytail, and it was then he saw the back of her shirt. It said, in large red letters, 'I'm a computer geek. Byte Me.' He almost stopped her and said, okay, when, and where? But he was a gentleman. He could wait, but not for long. He felt his mouth water. Anticipation was heady.

Julia Scott was baking. The warmth and aroma of hot, chocolate chip cookies permeated the air. Blake sniffed appreciatively as he sat at the large pine table. She poured coffee and grilled him about his injuries while Elvina sat on the chair opposite, drank coffee and brooded. She was thinking she could easily become addicted to Blake Delainy, watching him smile and listening to him talk with his deep throaty voice.

After a while Slinky approached Elvina but went to ground when her dog came on the scene. Scrappy liked cats, but Slinky was having none of it.

Scrappy had a rejected droop to his short tail as a triumphant Slinky bathed herself, wiping away imaginary grime and figuratively

thumbing her nose at the dog.

Watching the cat preen, Blake laughed. Slinky was a female, right down to her claws and the white tip on her swishing tail. She was independent, sassy and full of spit and vinegar. Scrappy didn't stand a chance.

Elvina would have to teach him how to stand up for himself.

Blake stood up, thanked Mrs. Scott and said, "Elvina, walk me out, please. I'd like a word."

It was a plea, one she could not refuse. He could ask her to jump off a cliff in that drugging deep voice with its overtones of sensuality and she would seriously think about it. She turned toward the door and once again he was assaulted with Byte Me. Oh how he wanted to.

At the front door Blake bent and dropped a kiss on her lips, surprising her so much she jumped backward. Her lips tingled and he said, "That's to say thank you for taking me to the clinic."

"I was responsible for your injuries. It was the least I could do."

"Thank you, anyway. I'll even forgive you for leaving me alone with that needle guy. He calls himself a doctor. I call him a sadist. He really looked like he was enjoying himself."

"I'm sorry he hurt you." She wanted to offer to kiss it better, but the look in his hot dark eyes stopped her. If she kissed his arm better, he'd want to return the favor and they could go on all night each taking it in turns to find more places to kiss. Better not to start something they couldn't finish.

He slid his arm around her, kissing her again, harder, longer and much more deliciously. Elvina squirmed with heat and told herself to push him away. She couldn't. She put her arms around him, and hung on as though they were in free flight. She breathed, and he took each breath away with a satisfied groan.

Then he let her go, and she was devastated. He stepped back, breathing hard, and she asked in a husky, uncertain voice, "What was that? Another 'thank you'?"

"No. That was because you invited me."

"I did not." How dare he say she invited him? She'd never invited any man to take what he wanted. She forgot she'd been thinking of inviting him during the past couple of days to do more than just kiss her.

"Do you know what you're wearing, Elvina?"

"What are you talking about? Of course I know. I'm wearing a tee shirt and jeans. And I've got on a pair of boots I'm going to kick you with." Her tone was aggressive and she did indeed want to kick him. She hated feeling vulnerable.

"Byte me," he said, putting his one good arm around her again and curling his fingers in her hair.

"What?" She was confused. Why did he want her to bite him? Surely his cat was capable of doing that? She'd seen Slinky biting his leg and getting away with it.

"You invited me to byte you. Your shirt, remember. That's what I've been doing, gently, of course. And thank you very much. You were delicious."

Then Elvina remembered. Her tee shirt said Byte Me. How could she have forgotten? Then she lost all concentration on whether or not to bite him. The issue was settled with another long drugging kiss which only terminated when her mother came into the hallway and said, "Oh, sorry. I thought you'd gone, Blake."

He blinked as he took his arm from around Elvina and pushed his glasses up on his nose. The studious look was back in place and the man who had nearly brought her to her knees in the hallway and steamed up her own non-existent glasses was only a delicious memory.

Elvina told herself to be grateful. How could she concentrate on work when Blake Delainy was infiltrating her thoughts and emotions like wildfire? He took her over until she didn't know which end was up.

"He's just leaving," she said, opening the door. Blake sauntered outside, but not before devastating her with his deep dimple smile and a promise in his soft brown eyes. "Goodbye again, Julia," he called back. "It was a pleasure to meet you."

A pleasure for her too thought Elvina. That look said he'd be back. She could count on it. And next time he would make her forget her own name, if she hadn't already.

Julia Scott smiled at her daughter and said, "What a treat that man is. Invite him for a meal, Elvina. This evening would be a good time. We could invite the girls and play cards afterwards."

"Not tonight. I've got work to do. Anyway, he's just a neighbor, Mom. I'm not about to get involved with him."

"From what I saw he's not-'just'-anything. He's a man who knows what he wants and you're already involved." She turned back to her kitchen saying over her shoulder, "Let me know when he's coming. I'll cook something extra special. Maybe oysters. They're always good for a man. It increases his stamina in the bedroom."

"That's an old wives tale, mom. Oysters are nice, but the only thing they do is drain your wallet. Why do you want him to come to dinner anyway? I could just talk to him over the fence."

"The way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I can tell you it's true. How do you think I got your father out of his dusty law books? I cooked and he came out and stayed out. We had forty happy years together before he passed on."

"Dad loved you, Mom. This is different. Anyway, I've got work to do."

"So work. But before you start go next door and invite the man for dinner tomorrow night."

"What if he doesn't want to come?" Elvina half hoped he wouldn't. She'd have to explain why she kept looking at him and drooling. She didn't know what she could say. How do you tell a man you're fascinated by him but don't want him to know?

"I can see you're nervous, Elvina. I don't know why. He's not a savage beast. He's a gentleman." Julia looked curious. "Perhaps I'd better go myself. He won't refuse me. He already likes my cooking."

"I didn't see him eat anything this morning."

Her mother laughed. "That's because you weren't concentrating. You were too busy brooding. I know a broody hen when I see one. That's you, my darling. A mother knows these things, and I want grandchildren. So get with the program."

Elvina had nothing to say. Her mother had the last word, as usual, and when she came back from Blake's house that afternoon her grin was triumphant.

"I take it he's coming to dinner tomorrow night?" inquired Elvina, hiding her excitement in an off-hand tone.

"With bells on," said her mother, grinning like she'd just won the lottery.

Elvina groaned. That was all she needed. A gloating mother and a ravenous next door neighbor wearing a bell around his neck. If only she could forget the way he kissed her she might have a hope of surviving the night.

The next day Elvina was at her computer when she heard Blake's cat wailing. She went out to see what was going on and found some of her neighbors gathered under Blake's tree at his front gate.

Fred Jackson came over and whispered that Blake had borrowed his stepladder because his was broken. Looking up into the tree, Elvina saw her phobia-ridden neighbor reaching up for his equally phobic cat. She would have laughed if she didn't know how Blake felt about heights. Then, she remembered his broken arm.

The people gathered were silent, waiting. Blake looked down suddenly, his face as white as the sling holding his broken arm against his body. He saw her standing there and his eyes pleaded with her. Get me out of this, please, was his silent cry. She could see that he wasn't able to speak. Then his traitorous cat jumped onto another branch and leapt down onto the fence. Slinky sat washing herself as if she owned the world.

Elvina said, "Blake, your cat is waiting down here for you. Why don't you step down? Slowly? One foot at a time. Just shut your eyes and don't look down. I'll be right here to steady the ladder."

"Elvina, sorry about this. Slinky climbed up and it got a bit out of hand." Blake was shaking as he tried to maneuver around the branches and down the ladder.

"Just come down carefully. We'll talk later."

Slowly, Blake did as she suggested, one hand doing all the work, all pretense of confidence gone. He knew this was the only way to salvage his dignity. He wished everyone, except Elvina, would go away and leave him to his humiliation. Somehow he trusted her. As if she had read his mind, she asked his neighbors to please disappear while he climbed down. They were making him nervous.

Silently, they did as she asked, watching from across the road. Elvina continued to encourage him and finally, muscles taut, he reached the ground.

He was still shaking when the neighbors came back and started clapping. He turned and bowed his head, knowing they had his best

interests at heart.

Elvina smiled and said, "Thanks guys. I think he needs a drink after that, so I'll take him home."

Outside her front door, the only thing she said was, "Why did you go up the ladder?"

He looked at her ruefully. "I wanted to prove to myself, and to you, that I could do it. That's all. I didn't want you to think I was a wimp."

"I know you're not a wimp. It took real guts to climb that tree, Blake. I'm scared of trees, too," she admitted with a self-conscious sigh. "They make me itch. Just thinking about the insects crawling along the branches is scary. I know how you felt climbing that ladder to get Slinky."

Blake grinned as he put his arm around her. "She's a tricky little beast. We make a good team though, don't we? Neither of us can climb trees but we're determined to prove otherwise. Stubborn as hell. What are our children going to be like?"

Elvina looked startled for a moment and then she grinned too, saying, "They'll probably become fire fighters or advertising executives in the shoe industry. I don't know which is more dangerous."

"Definitely fire fighters," he said, and he kissed her again. The world faded to oblivion as she thought, "No, ad men are infinitely more dangerous. They promise heaven and keep your heart captive for eternity."

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Veil of Magic
By
Amanda McIntyre

“Swweeet, Aunt Sabrina! You really kicked his a—”

Sabrina DuChain cast a sharp look at her eight-year-old nephew. The young boy did not lose his awe-inspired gaze, even when reprimanded. At least she wouldn't have to suffer the added embarrassment of his pre-teen language. She had more than enough to deal with already. There was a man writhing at her feet. Not that the fantasy hadn't crossed her mind a time or two in her life.

“I'm so sorry, it's just that you startled me with that chainsaw.” Sabrina grimaced at the poor man's obvious pain. How was she to know that she was able to flip a man his size over her shoulder? She'd reacted on instinct and adrenaline, purely out of concern for her nephew's safety. That same nephew was piecing together the events in his head to tell his friends, Sabrina could see the gears spinning in his mesmerized gaze.

“Do you need a hand?” Sabrina reached down to help the man to his feet.

The man raised his hand, waving away her offer. “It's my—shoulder.”

Sabrina blinked, adjusting her eyes to the darkened hallway of the Community Haunted House. She really hated haunted house fund raising events. Particularly if they involved the ‘hack ‘em up’ variety of horror. But her nephew Aaron begged and since she could not spoil his fun by telling him no—

“No, thanks very much, I'm pretty sure you've done enough damage as it is,” the man snarled.

Sabrina's brows arched at his abrupt tone. He was awfully stubborn, not to mention unreasonable. After all, *he* was the one who'd scared the daylight out of her. She'd reacted purely on instinct.

She planted her hands on her hips and glared at the huddled figure crouched at her feet. "Well, for goodness sake. What would any self-respecting adult do, seeing a grown man come at an eight-year-old with a chainsaw?" She shook her head in disbelief, watching as he uncurled himself to stand. Good lord, how was she to know that only eight weeks of karate lessons could be so effective? His form blocked out what little light emitted from eerie strobe lights.

Her gaze continued upward as he rose. The narrow hallway and the closed-in musty smell made her gasp. He towered a good four inches over her. Granted that view *was* from the back. He turned, clutching his left hand over his bicep, and a large one it was too. He towered over her and though the shadows hid the details of his face, she guessed he was likely glaring at her. Funny, he didn't seem all that big when she threw him over her shoulder.

"It's a haunted house, lady." His voice was cool, this side of patronizing. "It's *supposed* to scare people."

"This is *your* idea of fun for little kids?" His attitude irked her even more. Sabrina raised her chin in defense of her beliefs. Part of her was glad the shadowed hallway disguised his expression. She could sense a spark of tension, but pawned it off as agitation, and nothing more. Still, there was a part of her that wondered what sort of face matched that whisky baritone voice. Given the circumstances, she was never going to find out. She shoved her curious 'still-single-and-no-date-in-two-years' thoughts away.

"It's all *fake*. The *kids* who come through here know *that*,"

Silence stretched tight as latex between them.

"And *most* of the adults know it, too."

Fine, maybe she'd over-reacted a bit. Still, good lord, this man was like the hulk. A huge specimen of the male race. You'd think he could handle being floored by a "smallish" woman. Sabrina blinked wondering if he wore a costume, those were some powerful shoulders on that guy. His silhouette boasted of a finely sculpted set of long legs and a trim waist. He had the exquisite form of someone who obviously kept himself in good shape. So, what was his problem? He could easily over power

her. The thought sent a shiver running up her spine. She rubbed her arms rationalizing it was simply the dark cold dampness of the house.

“Look, I said I was sorry. I just reacted to the potential danger I thought Aaron was in.” She turned, looked down at her adoring nephew and smiled, roughing his sandy hair.

“Yeah. Aunt Sabrina’s been taking karate lessons and she can really kick a—”

“Aaron?”

Sorry, Aunt Sabrina.”

“Karate? So *that’s* what that was?”

His curious tone captured Sabrina’s attention, and she turned toward it like a magnet. Perhaps he wasn’t as angry as she thought? Maybe he could see clearly her reasoning for using the move by instinct to protect her nephew?

“Humpf. One too many reruns of Charlie’s Angels. So, you’ll pay for my x-ray then?”

The change in his voice was icy and indifferent. Sabrina’s mouth gaped. Was he serious? “Of course, if you think you need it. That’s fine. I honestly doubt that I could have hurt you to the extent that—”

“I think my shoulder might be badly sprained lady. Maybe worse.” His voice was gruff.

She dropped her hands to her sides and stepped back, bumping against the wall behind her. “Look, I said I was sorry.”

“Yeah, well, now you’re holding up the line.” His tone smacked of disgust, mingled with pain. “Let’s just keep things moving.”

Exasperated with his surly behavior, Sabrina felt she’d attempted to apologize more than adequately. “Look, I’ll leave my insurance agent’s name and number at the booth outside, okay? Otherwise, I’d be happy to give you a lift to the hospital.”

“No thanks, I can manage,” he replied flatly.

“Again, I’m sorry about this.” She waited for him to step aside and sighed when he stood his ground. Squeezing past him, she was more than a little aware of her breasts brushing feather-light against the hard muscle of his chest. No padded disguise there. Gently, she pushed Aaron ahead of her. “Maybe if you used something other than a chainsaw...” She paused looking over her shoulder.

Her eyes widened as his bulk of a silhouette twisted toward her; it was a frightening image in the frenzied strobe lights of the darkened hallway.

“Thank you. I’ll take that into consideration.”

His foot could not have booted her out with as much efficiency. Glad to be out of the irritating man’s suffocating presence, she fished out a piece of paper from her bag. “Just a sec, Aaron. I need to leave this with that ticket man over there.”

“He was kind of a wimp, huh, Aunt Sabrina?”

She considered Aaron’s words thoughtfully. “No, Aaron. I think I just caught him by surprise. Never try that on your friends.” She tapped her finger to his chest and he nodded with a smile. “Come on, we better get moving. You know your mom’s dying to show me the costume she got for tonight’s charity benefit. She revels in making my life difficult.” Sabrina bent down and leaned in nose-to-nose with her nephew. “She didn’t happen to tell you what it was, did she?”

He smiled and shrugged his shoulder, making a point as to where his loyalty lay.

Sabrina tipped her head, her lips forming a thin line as she narrowed her gaze at her nephew. “You wouldn’t tell me even if you knew, would you?”

Aaron smiled his broad dimpled grin.

“Traitor.” She tweaked his nose as they headed for the ticket booth.

“He was a pretty big guy, wasn’t he?” Aaron sidled next to her as she pulled a pen from her coat pocket. “That was sssweet.”

The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Sabrina chuckled to herself as she jotted down the insurance information and handed it to the confused volunteer. “A little mishap inside. Big guy, you’ll notice he’s holding his shoulder. Tell him he shouldn’t go around wielding a chainsaw at small children.” She grabbed Aaron’s hand, ignoring the puzzled look on the man’s face. A big man with a sprained shoulder was nothing compared to her sister’s game plan to find her Mr. Right.

* * * *

“Brie, you look stunning.” Morgan, clapped her hands together with joyous glee.

Sabrina gave her sister a dubious glance. "This outfit is *not* me." Sabrina looked at her reflection in the oval mirror of her sister's master bedroom.

"Why in heaven's name, do I let you talk me into these ridiculous things?" Yet she knew the answer was the same for any of her family. She simply couldn't say no to any of them. "Are you sure that Rick has to leave tonight? I know I told you I'd be your date, but that was before." Sabrina's shoulders slumped and she pouted at her image like a child being forced to dress-up for dinner.

"This just isn't me, Morgan" She turned to see a flash of hurt flicker in her sister's eyes. Social events were much more suited to Morgan's personality. Sabrina frowned at her gorgeous sister. Even made up to resemble a haggardly witch, she was a knockout. Even with the giant plastic wart blobbed on the end of her nose.

"Okay, all right. Don't give me the 'hurt-sister' look. I'll go, I'll go." Sabrina raised her hands in surrender. She glanced at herself once again in the mirror. With a conceding shake of her head, she followed Morgan downstairs.

"Can I maybe wear a coat over this?" Sabrina had to raise her voice over the loud rustle of her sister's short layered taffeta skirt. It was for certain that Morgan was not your 'run-of-the-mill' witch. If there was such a term as 'chic ugly,' Morgan had it going on.

"Well, of course you can wear a coat, Sabrina," she spoke in her condescending "big sister" tone, as she glanced over her shoulder.

Sabrina's grateful heart soared. No arguments? Could it be that her sister realized how uncomfortable it was for her to be seen in such a ridiculous looking costume?

"Just until we get to the ballroom. Then it'd be awfully silly to cover up that lovely costume." Morgan stepped primly off the last step and smiled at Aaron.

Sabrina cast a weary look to the ceiling, letting out an audible sigh as her heart plummeted to reality.

"Wow, you look great, Mom." Aaron had his mother's good looks as well as her enthusiasm. He was dressed in his pirate costume, complete with eye patch and fake hook hand. His trick or treat bag dangled from its plastic, curved point.

“Aye matey, you’re looking especially wicked tonight.” Sabrina gave an exaggerated pirate swagger as she stepped from behind Morgan. Aaron’s blue eyes widened in astonishment. Sabrina held her nephew’s gaze and then defeated, turned to her sister for support. “I told you it wasn’t me.”

“We’re going to an adult costume party, you’ll fit right in. Stop fussing.”

Sabrina sighed and turned back to her nephew. “Would you please blink? Hasn’t anyone told you that if you stare with your eyes that wide, they’ll freeze that way?”

With eyes still wide, Aaron shook his head side to side and then blinked once.

“At least I know you’re alive.” Sabrina leveled a concerned face toward her nephew, clipping him under the chin.

She turned to her sister. “Are we about ready?” Sabrina suddenly felt her costume was a tad drafty. *If she could just get to her coat.*

Aaron blocked the closet door staring up at her with mischief sparkling in his blue eyes. “Wait a sec, Aunt Sabrina, please? Tommy Openheimer has *got* to see your costume. He’ll be here any sec; please, please just wait?”

It was the strangest request she’d ever received from a male. Even if the male happened to be less than five feet tall, related, and in third grade. Sabrina gave her sister a wry look, hoping she’d heard his ridiculous request. Now, maybe, she’d see why she felt so uncomfortable about the costume.

Morgan leaned closer to the hallway mirror carefully applying her black lipstick.

“Morgan, can we please go? I’m beginning to feel like the centerfold of a teen drool magazine.”

Aaron doubled over in laughter. “Your costume is swweet Aunt Sabrina.”

Sabrina tried valiantly to ignore him, keeping her gaze instead, on Morgan, apparently unfazed by the entire situation. “Are you finished yet? Because I’m about ready to shuck this costume, and go home to a nice bowl of popcorn and a good movie.”

Morgan sighed, turning to her sister with an over bright, tolerant smile. "Let's get Rick's thoughts on your costume, okay?" She turned, her skirts swishing a joyous rhythm as she walked.

Oh yes, let's endure more humiliation at my expense. Yippee.

Sabrina turned, feeling Aaron's penetrating gaze. "Don't you have some trick or treating to do?" She shifted her coat from one arm to the other, averting her eyes from his stupefied stare. "Aaron. It isn't polite to stare." She hoped her voice indicated her ability to maintain her patience and maturity level, even while she wanted to sling the coat over his head.

"I can't help it, Aunt Sabrina. You are...I mean you *look*—hot. I don't know why you haven't had a date in a long time. It's sure isn't because you're ugly."

Sabrina arched her brow as she stared at her nephew. "Well, hey, thanks, I think." It was not like she needed a reminder of her dateless existence. Maybe if she believed enough in the magic of All Hallows Eve, she might meet a welcome treat tonight.

Yeah, right.

She focused her attention toward the kitchen and yelled, "Morgan!" She gave a worried side-glance to her nephew. Clearly, she was making a complete fool of herself. How could she possibly go out in public dressed as she was, if she couldn't get past her gawking nephew?

A low whistle emitted from the direction of the kitchen. Okay, make that her nephew *and* her teasing brother-in law.

"Wow, I have to say Sabrina...I mean, look at you. That's quite the change. *Barbara Eden* doesn't hold a candle to you in that genie costume." He held his arm secure around his haggardly looking, but radiantly glowing witch...er, wife.

"Doesn't she look swweeeet, Dad?"

"Aaron." Morgan shot a stern look toward her son and smiled cheerfully at Sabrina. "Well, now, are we ready?" Morgan turned to her husband. "I'll be home late. Aaron will be at Tommy's for the night. All you need to do is lock up before you leave." Morgan glanced at Sabrina with a dubious look, mirth playing in her large blue eyes. "Rick, honey?"

“Huh? Yeah, darlin’?” He answered, but his eyes were fixed Sabrina’s costume.

“You’re drooling, love.” Morgan’s voice remained calm as she slid her finger across her husband’s lip.

Sabrina knew how much these two loved each other. Rick was more than a little under Morgan’s spell. He blinked, turned to his wife and curled his arms around her waist, pulling her close.

Aaron jabbed Sabrina in the ribs. “Aaron is at Tommy’s. You are going to be late. Have fun, and boy, do I hate missing this year.” Rick recapped her instructions and received a content smile, with a warm kiss in return. The sound of the doorbell ended the fairytale moment. Aaron raced to the door dragging poor Tommy Openheimer into the foyer. The red-haired boy’s jaw slacked open and his hazel eyes glassed over as his gaze fell on Sabrina.

“Wow, sweeeet,” he spoke in a reverent whisper. “I wish my aunt looked that hot.”

“You have to blink, or your eyes will stick open, Tommy.” Aaron leaned in and loudly whispered to Tommy.

“Ah honey, yet another fantastic creation. Every year you amaze me with what you can do. Certainly outdoes last year’s costume.” Rick slid his arm around his wife’s shoulder and the four of them stared at Sabrina, unadulterated pride reflected in their expressions.

Good lord, she felt like a new car.

“Can we please just go and get this over with?” Sabrina fisted her hand to her hip, trying to look serious. Hard to do in yards of pink chiffon, attached to a bikini top and bottom that barely covered anything. Her red ruby belly button adornment popped out, clattering to the tiled floor. Tommy rushed Aaron to retrieve it. He held it up to her with a smile. Well, perhaps if older men reacted in the same way tonight, it might be an interesting evening.

Sabrina gave him a slight smile of thanks, plucked the fake jewel from the young boy’s palm and gave her sister a pointed look.

“Morgan? I’ll be waiting in the car.”

Morgan nodded and once again, embraced her husband.

He kissed her soundly handing her a straw broom. “Have a good time, but not too good.”

He grinned as Morgan swept Tommy and Aaron out the front door. Sabrina held the door for them and glanced at Rick who stood watching the distinctive sway of his wife's skirt. "I'll keep an eye on her, Rick." Sabrina grinned, and Rick returned it with black lipstick smeared all around his mouth.

"You're going to have to watch out for yourself, Sabrina." He winked and raised his eyebrows.

"Rick, you have a reverse *Jolson* thing going there, you better take a look in the mirror." Sabrina stepped down the front porch steps, easing into her coat, already feeling better with nine pounds of wool covering her body. She looked up at the darkening October sky, with its brilliant yellow harvest moon rising over the house across the street.

Tommy and Aaron ran down the drive to the station wagon waiting like a chariot to whisk them away to their sugar-delighted adventures. "I'll bring him back around noon tomorrow." Tommy's mother yelled from the rolled down window. Morgan raised her hand in a well-practiced signal of affirmation.

Sabrina slid into the passenger seat of Morgan's car, careful not to muss her costume. Though there wasn't really a great deal to get crumpled, she thought facetiously. She decided to wait until they arrived at the ball, before attempting to replace her ruby belly jewel.

"Why, or better yet, *how* did I let you talk me into *this* costume?"

Morgan turned on the ignition, put the car in gear, and glanced briefly at her. "Because you love to appease me. Besides, you look terrific. Did you see what you did to those guys?"

"*Guys?* Two eight year olds and your husband, hardly qualify as '*guys*.'" Sabrina glanced out the window wondering briefly when, or if, her prince would ever show.

"Relax, Brie, you're going to knock them dead." Her sister grinned with a shrug of her black satin clad shoulder.

"Well, let's hope we don't have to resort to that." Sabrina gave her sister a weak smile. She sighed and glanced at the small groups of trick or treater's racing up and down the sidewalk. Sometimes she wished life was still so uncomplicated.

“I hope Tommy’s mother remembers to check the kids’ candy before they eat it.” Her sister frowned for a moment, apparently deep in thought. “It’s not like when we were young, Brie.”

So much for less complicated. As if reading her thoughts, Morgan gently touched her shoulder.

“Are you still worried about hurting that guy at the haunted house? He’s probably at home tonight being nursed by a loving devoted wife, catering to his every whim.”

For some reason, *that* thought made Sabrina even more uncomfortable than her costume. She tried to put the incident out of her mind, but after waiting all afternoon, she’d not received any word at all. She assumed from his curt behavior that he might have delivered the bill in person. Granted, it was up to him. Besides, it wasn’t as though she’d hoped to get a better look at him in the light of day—at least not too much, anyway.

Sabrina sighed. “It was one of those stupid ‘act first and think after’ moments. Who knew that I could do that much damage with a few self-defense lessons?” His ‘*Charlie’s Angel’s* statement mocked her memory. “I don’t suppose that’s ever happened to you?”

Morgan smiled, pausing to grab the ticket from the automated parking garage meter. “There are times when ‘act first, think later’ can come in handy, little sister.”

Sabrina knew that tone. It was a direct challenge to Sabrina to get out and take some risks. “Are we going to start this again?” Her defenses flared quickly. Deep inside she knew that Morgan just wanted her to be happy. Problem was, Sabrina just hadn’t met the guy she felt was her equal. Maybe she had too many expectations, too many qualifications, but she could hold out, if need be. When she found Mr. Right, she had no intention of ever letting him go.

“Wouldn’t dream of telling you what to do,” her sister said, batting her long fake eyelashes. Morgan leveled a challenging gaze to Sabrina.

Sabrina narrowed her gaze, seeing past Morgan’s feigned innocence. “Not only do you love telling me what to do, but it has become your personal life quest to find me Mr. Perfect.” She sighed seeing the steely stubbornness in Morgan’s eyes soften with concern.

Sabrina touched Morgan's cheek. "If it's supposed to happen, it will, okay Morgan? I'm not going to live my life like it's a giant shopping spree where I 'try on' a dozen or so designs before I find the one that fits." She gathered her coat around her and tugged at the door handle. "It's just not my style."

"I understand, Brie. Come on, let's have a great time," Morgan grinned wickedly. "If Mr. Right is out there, *that* outfit will flush him out."

Sabrina eyed her sister wondering what she had going on under that pointed hat of hers. It wasn't like her to give up so quickly.

Morgan bent over, adjusting the line on the back of her fishnet stockings. She giggled as she straightened, turning to Sabrina.

"I think I'll hang on to this over the weekend and see if I can entice my husband to ride on my broom." She wiggled her eyebrows.

"That's disgusting." Sabrina shook her head and crooked her arm through her sister's as they made their way to the elevator.

"Yeah, I know." Morgan grinned.

* * * *

"What do you think, Doc?" Reese Hunter sat on the exam table, eyeing the middle-aged physician as he scribbled notes on his clipboard chart.

"Well, for starters, you'll be wearing that sling for a few days." He jabbed the end of his pen at Reese's arm.

Reese shut his eyes and sighed. "Any idea how *many* is a few, Jim?" He looked at the man he'd known since childhood. Both had wanted to go into professions that helped people. Jim chose medicine and Reese went into law enforcement. He tried not to think of the woman that landed him in this predicament, yet her perfume was lodged like a bullet in his brain. Unfortunately, her less than stellar Bruce Lee moves couldn't have come at a worse time. Tonight he'd promised his sister he would be auctioned off at the Halloween Charity Ball to raise money for lights at the Little League Field.

"Maybe a week, maybe less, it depends how fast you heal. By the way, you plan on telling me how this happened?" Jim tossed the chart on the counter. "Just hold your arm close and don't move."

Reese winced, gritting his teeth at a sharp stab of pain as Jim slipped the sling into place.

With a slight adjustment to the strap, his friend stepped back to critique his work. Reese hoped that Jim wouldn't notice the fact that he'd side-stepped his question.

"So? What happened? You trip over something in the dark? Those damn haunted houses. You know how I feel about them, Reese. They're prime targets for accidents. We had two kids in here with bad sprains from tripping over each other trying to run out of that place."

Was Jim a distant relative of that woman? Reese cast a tolerant gaze to the screen where his x-rays hung in their illuminated glory. Okay, maybe they were right to a certain extent, still it was all done in fun and for a good cause.

"You can take ibuprofen to bring down the swelling. What'd you fall over?"

Reese hopped off the table and signed the form that Jim held out for him. "At least it was my left shoulder, I guess I should be grateful, huh?"

Jim smiled, nodded and returned his gaze to Reese.

Seeing the curiosity in his friend's eyes, he knew he was not going to live this one down anytime soon. "It's a funny story, really."

Jim folded his arms giving Reese a 'go-ahead-I'm-waiting' look.

"There was this woman—"

"Ah, now, it gets interesting." Doctor Jim hopped up on the exam table and grinned.

"She thought the chainsaw I was holding was dangerous."

"Well, Reese?" Jim shrugged with a frown.

"Jim, you know it's all sound. The chains come off—there's no danger. Or at least not from the chainsaw's point of view."

Jim chuckled and twirled his finger, signaling Reese to continue.

"So, when I went at her nephew. At least, that's who she said he was. She kicked the saw out of my hands, twisted my arm over her head, and next thing I know, I'm laying on the floor in the hallway."

Jim's eyebrows rose and Reese was grateful he'd at least held his raucous laughter until his story was completely finished. He waited as his friend struggled to regain his composure from laughing so hard.

"What is she a black-belt or something? Oh, that's classic." Jim coughed trying to cover his amusement to Reese's situation. "Well,

except for the shoulder. But hey, the good news is she didn't break it." Jim lapsed back into unbridled laughter.

Reese contemplated giving him a play-by-play demonstration. It wasn't as though he didn't understand karate. He'd had the training at the police academy. She just happened to catch him off-guard. Worse was how unprepared he was when she brushed past him in the hallway, barely grazing his chest and smelling like a warm tropical breeze, that threw him off-kilter a second time

Reese glanced up; afraid his expression might give way his thoughts. The woman, no matter how beautifully scented, clearly was not aware of what entertained kids these days.

"So, am I free to go?"

"Yep, but my advice is to stay away from the karate babes."

"Funny guy," Reese replied flatly. He glanced at his watch. "I've got to run. I'm already running late as it is. Are you going to the Charity ball, later? I hear lots of women are ready to bid on good-looking men. I'm sure they'd make an exception for you." Reese gave his friend a wicked grin

Jim gave him a half-smile. "You're a riot, but I'm afraid the female masses will have to be disappointed with you as second choice tonight. I'm on call."

Reese patted his shoulder. "Hey, I'll be sure to fill you in later on all the boring details."

Jim cast a weary look to the ceiling, and leveled his clipboard at his friend. "Hey, you better be careful. Little Ms. Black Belt might be out there."

Reese laughed all the way to his car. But there was a part of him that hoped she might be, if only to catch a better look at her.

* * * *

"I'm going to kill her." Reese stared at the ridiculous costume his sister had left him to wear for the charity auction. He'd been so busy this week that he hadn't the time to go to the theatrical shop and find one himself. Now he wished he'd made the time.

He gazed at his reflection with a grimace...a *desert sheik*? It wasn't what he had in mind, but technically, he shouldn't complain.

Checking his watch again, he glanced in the mirror and heaved a sigh. Not much he could do about it now, unless he wanted to wear

his police uniform, which appealed to him even less after wearing it twenty-four/seven. Besides, he considered the look that would undoubtedly be on his sister's face if he showed up in his uniform. No, for tonight, the sheik image would have to do. Besides, if he worked it right, he might just get the highest bid at the auction.

Reese gave his reflection a devilish grin as he swept the headpiece over his hair and planted his fists on his hips. A silent-movie image of Valentino standing in a desert tent with women gathered adoringly at his feet played in his head. *Yep. This could work. Those women would be throwing money at his feet.*

* * * *

The Diamond Star's massive ballroom foyer was filled wall-to-wall with every form of costume imaginable. Morgan went to check in their coats as Sabrina scanned the room. A remarkable Elvis look-alike chatted with Little Bo-Peep, and a woman dressed as Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, was trying her best to avoid a conversation with the Tin Man.

Sabrina remembered her navel jewel and began the task of repositioning it, wishing she had some glue.

A deep voice reverberated above her. "Do you need some help?"

Startled, the plastic ruby fell to the floor for the second time that night, bouncing among many pairs of legs. The gallant male, with the deep voice and particularly well-fashioned legs of his own, reached down and plucked it from the red brocade carpet.

"Uh, thanks. I'm just waiting for my sister. I think I can handle this on my own."

He grinned with glimmering white teeth that made her watch for the animated to sparkle to appear in its wake. For that matter, his entire body appeared to glow, or was that baby oil?

Sabrina was certainly mesmerized at any rate—by his smile. "Are you here for the benefit?" She asked, pulling her gaze to his gold-green eyes.

He chuckled, looking down to survey his costume, or the lack thereof, and returned her gaze. "I don't walk around like this everyday at the office."

She dropped her gaze to the rest of him and had to agree, with that broad expanse of real chest, and his six-pack abs of steel, no one

with a breath of life in her body, would be able to concentrate. She swallowed for the dryness in her throat and smiled.

“You make a very convincing Tarzan.” Sabrina toyed with the plastic ruby; it grew warm in her fingers.

“Really, you think so?” He flexed his pectoral muscles for her pleasure.

Coincidentally the gesture worked exactly as intended. Her brow arched, dutifully impressed.

“Hey, maybe I’ll see you later...inside.” He strutted through the double doors to the ballroom as Sabrina’s gaze clung to his leopard-covered hips. She sighed, chances were strong he’d be snatched up before he made it ten feet inside the door.

“You ready? I checked in our coats. Who was *that* I saw you with?” Morgan slipped her arm through Sabrina’s.

“You didn’t recognize Tarzan?” Sabrina teased her sister, and they laughed together as they entered the ballroom.

Walking beside Morgan, she took a quick survey to see if there was anyone she knew. Oddly, there were a great number of good-looking males milling around. Sabrina stopped short of running into Morgan’s back. Her gaze glued on the variety of costumes, particularly on the men. Next to her was a gorgeous man in a kilt. Her gaze traveled the length of his torso and slammed into his dark twinkling eyes. His smile solicited the same in response, but also raised questions as to what Morgan had up her sleeve.

Groping for Morgan’s arm, she stepped to her shoulder and whispered, “What’s with the hunk-of-the-month club?” Sabrina glanced over her shoulder at the Celtic lord who gave her a dazzling smile. She waved this time, feeling a bit odd that a strange man, surrounded by several other women, would be so bold in his flirtations. What the heck was going on?

“Oh, did I forget to tell you?” Morgan lifted her chin, scanning the crowd, obviously looking for someone.

“Forget to tell me what?” Sabrina tore her gaze from ‘Mr. Dental Hygiene’, and gave her sister a questioning stare.

“This is just a little idea the committee came up with to raise money for the *Little League*’s field lights.”

Sabrina checked her sister's profile, curious as to why she suddenly felt her costume didn't just *happen* to be the last one available. "Exactly what is this *little* idea?" Sabrina folded her arms across her chest in defense, shifting uncomfortably when she noticed it had the same affect as a wonder bra. Okay, so yeah, maybe it *was* the wolfish gaze of the man dressed in a fireman's costume standing next to her.

His gaze was slow; there was appreciation in his gaze. "Hi." He offered Sabrina a sexy smile.

Damn, why hadn't she thought of parading around in a harem costume years ago? Her love life, as it were, had been like walking forty days in the desert and suddenly a lot of chiffon and a little flesh had turned her social life into an oasis of men. Okay, maybe that was less chiffon, and more flesh. Still, she wasn't used to men ogling her.

"We're having an auction."

Sabrina barely heard her sister she was so enamored with how those wide suspender's fit snug over the fireman's broad chest. The heat from his gaze was enough to set her flesh up in flames.

"What'd you say?" Sabrina cooled her face down with a wave of her hand. She blinked, wondering if she could interest him later in a demonstration on mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but he was already engaged in a rapt conversation with a petite flaming redhead.

Must be the hair.

"An auction?" Sabrina found her sister's curious gaze. Not a bad idea. Of course, with Morgan at the helm, they were destined to have some interesting ideas. Heaven knows Sabrina had been the guinea pig for many of Morgan's most ingenious ideas. "Cool. So you convinced some businesses to donate some really nice items. They get the publicity and the league makes lots of money." Sabrina slapped her sister's back. "You are a genius, Morgan."

The rows of small metal coins sewn just below Sabrina's bust line jingled happily with the gesture and Sabrina looked down with a smile. She shook her shoulders, doing a little shimmy, giggling at her newfound ability.

Morgan turned to her and smiled. "You know. I guess obtaining prizes from businesses would have worked, too. Hey, keep that up girl, you're creating quite a stir."

Sabrina glanced at Morgan, stopping when she became aware that she was receiving several looks, and most of them male. It wouldn't do to let Morgan know that secretly, it did please her.

"Can we find a table?" She pushed her sister forward. "What do you mean, *that* would have worked? Morgan? What's up?" She did not mask the exasperation in her voice.

Morgan simply smiled in her well-practiced 'let's-just-wait-and-see' fashion as she scanned the room. "Oh look, there's the co-chair, she's waving at us. Come on, I want you to meet her." Morgan grabbed her hand and snaked through the candlelit tables.

"Morgan. We saved you a seat closest to the stage. Hi, you must be Morgan's sister, Sabrina?" A robust voice emerged from the woman dressed as a saloon hall madam. She was as round as she was tall.

She stuck her hand in Sabrina's, pumping it in a friendly greeting. Sabrina's costume coins jingled in her ears and she swore her teeth rattled.

"Alice Darby. Your sister's a genius."

Sabrina rescued her hand from the woman's sturdy grip. "Thanks, nice to meet you. Yeah, we're always telling her that. Close to the stage?" She looked at Morgan.

The woman then leaned across the table speaking in an animated whisper. "So we can get the best view of the goods." Alice's expression resembled a kid hovering over presents at a birthday party.

Sabrina raised her eyebrows, wondering what kind of prizes warranted this type of enthusiasm. She stood next to her chair, surveying the crowd. Was it her imagination or were there an inordinately large number of women to men in this crowd?

Sabrina turned to Morgan. "Just what *is* on the auction block tonight, Morgan?"

Alice sat back in her chair, a look of shock on her face. "You haven't told her?"

"There hasn't been time." Morgan waved her hand through the air in dismissal of her faux pas, giving her sister a devil-may-care smile.

"Well, it was *really* all your sister's idea. And she said you would just love it. Frankly, given the turnout of the candidates, I'd say that this is one of her best ideas yet." Alice patted Morgan on the arm,

smiling in adoration at her more than humbled sister. "Imagine putting men on the auction block."

* * * *

Sabrina blinked a couple of times, purely to make sure she wasn't dreaming. "Maybe I didn't hear you right? *Men?*"

Alice nodded enthusiastically.

Sabrina grabbed Morgan's chin, turning her face toward her. "Are you serious?"

Morgan raised her eyebrows and tried to smile, though it proved understandably difficult with her cheeks pressed together.

Still holding onto her sister, Sabrina turned to Alice Darby who took a sip of her wine cooler and grinned.

"Isn't it brilliant?" Alice giggled.

Sabrina felt Morgan prying her fingers loose from her face.

"And you thought I'd love this idea? Let me guess, I bet Rick doesn't have any business trip tonight, does he?"

Morgan gave her a chagrined look and shook her head no. "Are you mad?" Her sister's smile was weak.

Alice piped in defense of the idea. "We've invited all the eligible bachelors in town and all the single women within a thirty-mile radius. We'll make a fortune. Why, heavens sake, look around at what you might win tonight."

Alice wiggled her brows and laughed in uninhibited glee, producing a un-lady like snort at the end. "Oh, pardon me." Alice and Morgan collapsed in a fit of giggles.

Sabrina stared at Alice. The woman gave new meaning to the word enthusiastic.

"Oh Brie, it'll be fun. Look at all of them. I feel just like a kid in a candy store."

"You're married. You can't taste," Sabrina admonished.

Morgan smiled. "I know, that's why I brought you."

"Well, I hate to disappoint you big sis, but on my salary I sure can't afford to do much. Besides, there are plenty of young, attractive women here already." Sabrina relaxed in her chair and crossed her leg, leisurely swinging her pink taffeta slipper.

"Oh no, you don't."

Sabrina glanced at her sister. There were few times when Morgan jumped the invisible line from “hurt-sister” to plain “won’t-take-no-for-an-answer.” Apparently, this was one of them.

“Excuse me?” Sabrina was not without her own form of stubborn behavior. She crossed her arms in defiance, aware of someone staring at her. She glanced at the next table, catching the smile and nod of a muscle-clad blond Viking.

Sabrina turned slightly in her chair to avert his gaze.

“I did this all for you.”

“How thoughtful. And here I thought it was for the Little League lights.” Sabrina leaned toward her sister, trying not to make a scene.

“That’s my other purpose.”

Sabrina shook her head and smiled. “You slay me, you know that?” What makes you think I would fight a bunch of women for the opportunity of a date with a total stranger?”

Morgan glanced at Alice with a smile. “Well, I guess that largely depends on the stranger.”

Alice, who’d been sipping on an umbrella-topped concoction, stood without warning and broke into a huge grin. “Let the games begin.” She raised a hand in the air, waving it frantically.

Sabrina followed the woman’s excited gaze, checking the object of her enthusiastic response. She touched her heart to make sure it hadn’t stopped.

With a slow and easy gait, the broad shouldered man wove his way through the crowd. His face set, as though intent on his victim. Perhaps, Alice? Selfishly, Sabrina hoped that wasn’t the case.

She observed entire tables of women craning their necks to catch a glimpse of him as he walked by. He had a white cape tossed carelessly over his shoulders, held together by a giant medallion. The sheen of his bare chest glowed in the candlelight, giving way to his lean chiseled stomach.

He reminded Sabrina of a great panther, dark and powerful. His eyes glittered ebony, with dark brows and lashes adding to his mystery. Sabrina wished to be his prey. The very thought warmed her, sending smoke curling deep inside.

Sabrina leaned over to her sister. “Now, for *that* I might wrestle every woman in this room. Unfortunately, it looks as though he has his sites on Alice.”

As he approached, Sabrina cast an appreciative glance to his trim waist that disappeared into the low-riding white cotton harem pants. He carried a wicked smile and his dark eyes sparkled devilishly. One thing she knew for sure—this dark sheik was enough to clear the sand in her head. But how would he treat her heart?

Sabrina licked her lips. *Heck, given the choice, she could deal with that later.*

He rounded the table, past her and Morgan. Sabrina glanced at her sister, wiggling her eyebrows. Her lips moved in a silent, “Wow.”

Alice stood holding her arms out to Sabrina’s perfect fantasy.

“Reese. Come on now, turn around and show my friends your costume. It’s absolutely perfect, don’t you think, girls? I had to find it for him because he’s always so busy.” She squeezed his bicep playfully and Sabrina noticed his grimace. Maybe there wasn’t as much between them as she thought. *A twinge of guilt pricked at her brain.*

“Alice.” His voice held the same enthusiasm, yet Sabrina caught an edge in his undertone.

“Oh, stop it, you look great.” Alice brushed back the head covering from his shoulders and the whole thing fell off.

Sabrina was then given a privileged full view of his dark wavy hair, trimmed neat, yet still unruly enough to run fingers through. She smiled at the thought, and sobered when she saw Alice slip her arm around his waist for introductions.

“Ladies, I’d like you to meet Reese...my baby brother.”

Something inside her exhaled in relief. “Some baby,” Sabrina whispered to Morgan.

“That’s because I was born ten minutes after her. She hasn’t let me forget it.” He smiled warmly and flipped back the cape, sticking his free hand out in a friendly greeting.

“Oh? You’re twins? Well, sure I guess I can see a resem...” Sabrina’s right hand froze mid-air, inches from Reese’s fingers. She was glued to what lay beneath the cape—and it wasn’t his muscles.

Her gaze bounced back to his as she fought to recover from the shock.

His smile deepened, producing a kissable crevice near his mouth that was like icing on the cake to his handsome face. He held her confused gaze with an inquisitive expression.

“Did you run into some trouble?” Sabrina smiled weakly as she quickly switched hands to shake his. Her gut cautioned that she was in deep trouble when she saw the sling.

He carefully offered it with greater wariness.

“A little accident.”

Her discomfort was evident and she swallowed for the sudden desert dryness in her throat that had everything to do with “Valentino’s stunt double” standing before her.

Summoning her courage and hoping that he wouldn’t recognize her, she pumped his hand with exaggerated enthusiasm. “Sabrina DuChain.”

“Just an accident, nothing but a sprain.”

He stilled their joined hands, and brought it hers to his lips, brushing his lips over her knuckles.

Her heart faltered and she watched in horrified wonder as he did the same for Morgan, pausing a moment to smile at her black fingernails.

What were the odds that this desert hunk could possibly be the same man she’d thrown over her shoulder earlier in the day?

“Do you need to wear it very long?” Her voice squeaked and Sabrina knew she might be pressing the issue, afraid she may well be the cause for this man’s injury.

Alice looked at him with concern. “It was that idiotic haunted house, wasn’t it?” She placed a hand to her hip. “Every year he volunteers from the police force to man that haunted house. They try to outdo the gore from the year before. You’d think being in the business their in—”

“Don’t start, Alice.” The sheik’s tone banked on caution.

Sabrina wanted to crawl under the table and disappear. *Good lord, it was him. Did he recognize her name from the insurance card?* She felt gravity suck her self-esteem to the floor and her body wanted to follow it.

“Brie? Are you all right?” Morgan touched her shoulder and she straightened as if she'd been plugged into an outlet.

Sabrina reached for her purse on the floor by her chair. She could say she was going to the restroom and then duck outside and catch a cab. Morgan was going to have to understand.

“Morgan, I...” Sabrina grabbed her purse and started to lean towards Morgan to whisper her plan to her in private. Instead, she came face-to-face with a gorgeous set of six-pack abs. Damn, she knew that cologne. Her body reacted with utter joy to it, much the way it had earlier. Her gaze traveled up his torso, while her raging hormones pummeled her insides.

“Would you like to dance?” His voice was deep, smooth, and mellow, like a perfectly aged whiskey.

She remembered its tone. Once again it sent shivers snaking down her spine. “Me?” *Dance with you?* Her smile was forced.

“Well, that is, if you don’t mind working with me here.” He gestured with his sling and tugged his cape off, draping it leisurely over his sister’s arm.

Sabrina leaned around his waist, hoping Morgan would see the terror in her eyes and pull her out of this one.

Morgan jerked her head toward the dance floor as if to say, “Get out there you idiot.”

Sabrina sat back in her chair and stared up at him. He was grinning. It was such a nice smile and it was melting her bones.

He knows.

He held his hand to her and she half-wondered if he was going to pull a reciprocal karate move on her. *Fabulous. Guilt and paranoia all in one memorable evening.*

A swift kick under the table from Morgan jump started Sabrina back into reality. “Well sure, why not?” She was afraid her legs might not hold her, so she feigned straightening the slits of her harem pants. The coincidence of their costumes was uncanny. She glanced at Morgan one last time, hoping to hear her yell “*Trick or Treat*” and wake her from this nightmare. Still, if it was a nightmare and he was the ghoul, then what a way to go.

His gaze swept over her and her body rushed with goose bumps. With a smile and a slight bow, he ushered her to the dance floor.

It did occur to her once or twice to tell him who she was. He'd probably be surprised, they'd have a good laugh, then he'd simply pick her up and toss her across the room.

Why did he have to be so adorable on top of everything else? It will make things that much more painful when he finds out, and gets mad all over again.

The thought suddenly occurred to her that he well may have lost the insurance note, or never in fact, received it at all. With any luck, he had no idea who she was.

That hope alone stopped her from revealing her identity. That, and the gentle warmth of his hand on the small of her back as he guided her through the crowded dance floor.

His fingers reached further around her waist pulling back, gently stopping her in her tracks. "It's kind of crowded here, isn't it?" His breath was hot on her cheek as he leaned forward near her ear to speak.

She turned to face him and immediately the gyrating humans around them pressed them solidly together.

He smiled, sending her already roller coaster emotions into a tailspin, causing her to imagine seeing that face first thing every morning

"Maybe we should find you somewhere with a little more room." She rose on her toes, leaning forward to speak into his ear, but he shook his head, bending down closer until his nose nearly rested on her...coins.

She curled her shoulders, turning as best as she could and grabbed his free hand, tugging him to the edge of the crowd.

When she reached a small clearing, she quickly dropped his hand and faced him. The smoldering gaze he gave her set her heart tripping and the guilt factor skyrocketing.

"Sabrina? Wasn't that the name of that witch on TV?" He barely touched her cheek, narrowing his eyes as though studying her.

Her conscience taunted her. Sabrina cleared her throat nervously, averting his steady gaze. "It was my grandmother's n-name," she stuttered, giving a weak shrug. Already her brain was in sensory overload with the simple touch of his fingertip. A shudder ran through her as thoughts of his hands roaming anywhere on her body.

“Oh and I thought it was because you are so bewitchingly beautiful. Are you cold?” A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Charming as hell. He had to know. Confess it all now. Tell him and get it over with.

The pulsating beat of Latin rock music matched the pace of her heart. She wondered how much he could read on her face.

“Do I make you uncomfortable?” The back of his hand slid like a feather down her arm, his palm easing gingerly around her waist.

Slowly, she began to sway with him to the music. He held her gaze in steamy silence and she closed her eyes releasing herself to the sensuous rhythm.

Her bare flesh under his palm warmed as they danced, setting off a flash fire through her blood.

“You didn’t answer, Sabrina. Do I make you uncomfortable?”

She felt his breath close to her ear and she thought she was going to faint. *He’s doing this on purpose. He’s seducing you, and then he’ll drop you like a hot potato, quite possibly in the literal sense and walk away laughing.*

“Yes...I mean, no.” Sabrina’s eyes popped open and she stared at the muscular shoulder inches from her nose.

She suppressed the urge to lean forward and press her lips against his flesh.

The music stopped and he stepped away slightly, still holding her close enough that she could feel the heat of his body. He gave her a smile that would melt steel.

A voice boomed over the PA system. “Okay, before we break to prepare for tonight’s auction, here’s one to send you into the arms of that special someone.”

A hushed excitement settled over the ballroom as the giant mirrored ball in the center of the ceiling began to twirl. That had to have been Morgan’s idea. The crowd applauded their approval.

Sabrina smiled, thinking of her genius sister.

“You have a great smile.” He drew her close, her body pressed against his sling.

“Uh, thanks.” Sabrina’s nervousness made her chatty. She focused on his injury. “Does it hurt much?” Sabrina touched his sling gingerly, feeling a pang of guilt.

“No, not much. Honest? It was probably my pride that suffered more than anything.” He chuckled. “You think maybe you could—”

He tipped his head to his shoulder indicating for her to reciprocate the customary stance for slow dancing. “May I have this dance?”

“Oh, right, sure.” She grinned embarrassed that she was thinking more of his statement than of the music.

Nervous as a first date, she tried putting her arms around his neck, which forced him to lean forward. She heard him moan and though it was certainly from the pain of his shoulder, other thoughts danced wickedly in her mind.

He straightened and she saw the pain etched in the lines of his face.

“Maybe this would work.” Sabrina stepped slightly off center and slid her arms around his waist, so that his sling rested comfortably over her arm. She pressed against him, placing her cheek against his chest, hearing the steady beat of his heart. Sabrina closed her eyes imagining what it would be like to tell him who she was. Of course they’d laugh and then he would ask to see her again.

Not in this lifetime, sister. Her doubt and guilt simultaneously taunted.

“Is this really working for you?” She leaned back, looking up into his face.

“Definitely. How about you?”

His voice was husky as he adjusted his left arm around her, pulling her close. “I’m fine.”

They moved together silently to the band’s rendition of *REO Speedwagon’s ‘Can’t Fight This Feeling’*. She was held captive by the scent and texture of his skin next to her cheek. Sabrina licked her lips to moisten them unaware of how close she was to his nipple.

He straightened with a soft chuckle and gazed down at her shocked expression. “Would you like to take this somewhere more private?”

Sabrina wanted to fall to the floor and crawl out of the room. She’d not meant for her tongue to flick briefly against his skin. Not at this moment anyway. Not that she hadn’t toyed with the concept more than once as they danced. “It was my throat, I mean, my lips were dry

as a desert—” She laughed at her joke. “As a desert, get it.” Oh lord, it was lame. She felt the heat of her embarrassment in her cheeks.

“I understand, it happens to me all the time.” He tipped her chin to his steady gaze.

The thought sent her stomach to the basement floor and her nipples to tighten just thinking of his tongue flicking across—

There was no doubt about it, she needed a diversion.

“So, why was your pride damaged?” She looked up at him, keeping as much distance from his chest as possible.

He chuckled, making a wonderful reverberation against her chest. “There was this woman.”

Here it comes, he is going to confess that he knows who I am.

“Ah.”

“You say that like it’s going to be some macho-driven tale.”

“Is it?” She asked, scanning his chest, refusing to meet his eyes.

“You tell me.”

Sabrina’s breathing stopped. *Dare she ask him to go on?*

Thankfully, he continued. “I threw this woman off-kilter, she reacted with a half-baked karate maneuver. It was an accident. But admittedly, the woman was pretty gutsy.”

“Why’s that?” She pressed him. *Gutsy could be good, couldn’t it?*

“Well, she wasn’t very big, for one.” He paused as though sizing her up. “Probably close to your height. And well, look at me. Had I been ready I might have reacted differently. I surmise she might have been the one who’d gotten hurt.”

He paused a second time. “She really needs to be careful, because she may never know who she’s dealing with.”

Sabrina felt his words like the smack of a ruler on the back of her hands. *What does he mean ‘half-baked?’ She’d graduated with top honors from her defense class.*

“So, did you do anything to precipitate this woman’s actions?” She stepped back, carefully removing one arm from around his waist. Glancing up, she caught his curious expression.

“Is our dance over?” He stared down at her.

She wondered if he already knew who she was, and was just toying with her. “No, I just wondered why this woman reacted as she

did, with, how did you describe it, a *half-baked* maneuver” Sabrina checked his face, wondering how she could have mistaken ego, for gorgeous.

His brows furrowed as he stared at her.

“Why do you—”

“Will the candidates for the auction please come to the side of the stage for further instruction?” The emcee interrupted their conversation and Sabrina stepped gingerly from his arms.

“I think that includes you. Thanks for the dance and hey, good luck with the auction.” She didn’t wait for a reply, but snaked off through the crowd wondering if she’d ever find a man who didn’t carry around a puffed-up ego.

* * * *

“How’d it go? That’s *him*, isn’t it?” Morgan grabbed Sabrina’s hand as she sat down. She was bouncing in her chair like a new puppy.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Morgan. The sooner we get this over with the better.” Sabrina crossed her arms and stared at the emcee. She’d had enough of tricks and treats for one night.

“Is this almost over?” Sabrina leaned her elbow on the table, propping her chin in her hand. She’d had one too many wine coolers and the inevitable truth that Reese was not going to be in her immediate future was beginning to take its toll. She wanted to go home and wallow in her well-deserved self-pity.

“It’s getting close, Brie, and you haven’t even placed one single bid on anyone.” Morgan’s tone was surly.

“I told you I’m not interested.”

Another howl went up from the crowd as yet another bachelor was claimed as a prize.

Sabrina cast a bored look to the ceiling.

“Okay, folks. We’re nearly finished, but we’ve saved the best for last. Two more candidates remain, so let’s get those bids going with Reese Hunter. Reese is a part of our local good guys in blue. He’s very involved in community affairs, loves men’s league baseball, sailing, rock-climbing and carries a Black belt in karate.”

Sabrina sat up straight and stared at the man on stage. The room had gone instantly quiet.

Did they all know him? The emcee smiled.

“Let’s start the bidding at thirty dollars.” Silence followed and the emcee coaxed the crowd. “Come on ladies.” Again, there was nothing but silence.

“Forty!” Alice yelled out, and then she turned to Morgan. “It’s his arm.”

Morgan patted Alice’s arm and turned slapping Sabrina’s hand.

“Ouch!” Sabrina rubbed the spot, frowning at Morgan.

“Bid.” Morgan’s voice was flat and direct.

“No. I’m not interested in this one. I’ll bid on the next one.”

Sabrina frowned at her sister and cast a worried glance at Alice, who had a worried look on her face.

Oh brother...fine. “Forty-five.” Sabrina said raising her voice, but not her enthusiasm.

Another voice sounded from the back of the room. “Fifty!”

“All right ladies, that’s what we like to hear—do I have fifty-five?” The emcee scanned the audience, casting a weak smile at Reese.

Sabrina did feel a little sorry for him. He looked awfully uncomfortable up there. *Sort of like the last item at a farm auction that looks so used, nobody really wants it.*

“Eighty!”

Sabrina whipped her gaze to Morgan, who was lowering her hand, a smile of satisfaction on her face.

“You’re married, Morgan! Remember that guy you left at home?”

Alice stood and hugged Morgan, wiping away a tear as she sat down.

From the depths of the room came a new voice. “One-hundred and ten!”

Sabrina raised her eyebrows and gave Alice a smug look. *At this rate, someone would snatch up Mr. Hunter in no time.* That thought suddenly made her edgy.

“One-hundred and twenty!” Yet, another bid came from near the stage.

“Great ladies, and let’s remember what this is for? Now who of us, wouldn’t love to offer this desert sheik a little TLC?” She wrapped her arm around his waist and he smiled into the crowd.

“One twenty-five!”

“One-fifty!”

“One-seventy five!”

Morgan’s hand shot into the air, one black nail glittering in the spotlight. Sabrina shook her head and looked at the floor. “Two hundred!”

“Two-hundred and ten.” The slow-spoken southern drawl came from the back of the room.

“Oh for goodness sake...who’s the idiot?” Sabrina twisted in her chair, peering through the dusky glow of candlelight. A blue-wigged punk rocker gave her a jaunty wave with a satisfied grin. For some reason, it served as a gauntlet to Sabrina. Her eyes narrowed.

“We have two-ten. Do I hear two-fifteen?” The emcee waited and something idiotic snapped inside Sabrina. In all good conscience, she could not allow him to go off with some sadomasochistic rocker, even if it was a costume.

“Two-fifty.” Sabrina clamped her hand over her mouth the minute the words came out.

Alice squealed with glee.

Morgan hugged her as though she’d announced her betrothal.

“Two-seventy-five.” The southern voice boomed in challenge over the tittering crowd.

Sabrina saw Morgan’s back stiffen. She wasn’t sure which woman was more determined.

“Three-hundred.” Morgan’s bid brought the room to a frozen silence.

Sabrina smacked her sister, shaking her head ‘no’.

“Three-ten.”

Sabrina didn’t have to look to know where it came from. *Okay, witch-queen—you want to play? Let’s play. No one messes with the DuChéin sisters.*

“Three-fifty.” Sabrina shot her pink chiffon arm into the air, like she’d won a crusade for short dark-haired women everywhere.

A gasp came from somewhere and she wasn’t too sure it wasn’t from Reese himself.

“Three-hundred and fifty-five!” Alice piped up.

Sabrina's jaw dropped open in shock. "You bid against me?" Exasperated Sabrina raised her hands in the air as she yelled across the table at Alice. Unfortunately, in the confusion and roar of applause, she'd also not heard the emcee up the bid to four-hundred dollars.

"We now have four-hundred dollars, ladies! The highest bid of the evening!" Applause broke out around Sabrina as she shook her head 'no'.

Morgan hugged her again and Sabrina felt queasy. As her sister mauled her, she chanced a look to the stage and saw Reese grinning her way. In that moment, she calculated the probable cost of the exam and x-rays. Maybe she was coming out ahead in the long run. She gave him a smile in return.

"Unless there are more bids?" The emcee posed the question to the group.

Sabrina, Morgan and Alice, all turned towards the punk rocker in a silent challenge.

"Okay, going, going and gone. To the pretty little "*I Dream of Jeanie*" at table one! Come on up here, honey, and claim your sheik." She motioned Sabrina to the stage.

"While she's making her way up here, let's see what the judges have selected as the dream date for these two. Oh, and look ladies, their costumes match. If that isn't kismet." Sabrina froze en route to the stage, and turned to Morgan.

"I don't remember the others having dates planned..."

Morgan shooed her with her hands, and Sabrina covered her face, certain her luck had run out.

The emcee ushered them to the both of them to join her under the bright lights of the stage.

With a thin smile and her insides quivering like Jello, Sabrina sauntered to Reese's side, folding her hands in front of her.

If his smile had not been so devastatingly delicious, she might have heard what the judges had declared as their 'date.' By the time she realized the prize had been announced, the applause and roar of laughter drowned out her request to have it repeated.

Reese grabbed her hand spontaneously and walked quickly toward the stairs.

“Where are we going? I missed what they said.” The air whistled through the slits in her harem pants, but the shivers skating over her skin were from the firm warm grip of Reese’s hand. He let it drop as they reached the bottom step and she chided herself for being foolish enough to miss it.

Alice threw her arms around her brother’s neck, and Morgan hugged Sabrina tight.

“I’m so happy for you, what a wonderful idea.”

Morgan smiled teary-eyed at Sabrina and she thought she might go crazy. What was their prize? Maybe it was a Caribbean weekend, or a quick day-trip to Vegas?

Picking up a full glass of wine, she tipped it back, and drank it in one gulp. She stared at the gorgeous man she’d just plunked down an entire paycheck for. This idea might definitely have possibilities.

“Where are we going?” *And it better be fantastic, buddy!* Sabrina set the glass down with a flourish and turned to him. Already the wine and his gaze were warming her body.

“You didn’t hear?” Morgan looked at her with a puzzled expression.

Caught up in the enthusiasm and the effects of the wine, Sabrina giggled.

Morgan and Alice looked at each other, and then collapsed in a fit of laughter.

Reese smiled. It was really a most charming smile. So much so, that she could only imagine him telling her that they were going to spend a weekend on a private, tropical beach. He reached for her hand, raising it gently to his lips and kissing her fingertips.

Swoon. She’d never really understood the term before now. The man was making her swoon.

“The judges decided because of my condition that you should take care of me for one week.”

Sabrina heard the squeal of brakes as reality slammed headlong into her fantasy.

“What? *That’s* our date?” She jerked her hand back, staring at him accusingly. He scratched his chin, admirable as it was, and peered down at her.

“At the end of the week, providing we meet all the conditions of the agreement, we are treated to dinner at the ‘Cloud Nine’ restaurant.”

Sabrina’s eyebrows rose with her ire. “You mean to tell me that I have to take care of you all week to have the privilege of eating at a rotating restaurant two floors from where I am now?”

Reese’s expression remained neutral. “I don’t know. It might be more fun than you think.” His velvety dark voice entered her thoughts, shattering her complaints, as did his flippant gesture of toying with the coins sewn to her waistband.

Sabrina swallowed, staring into his dark eyes. They seemed to sparkle with danger. *She could do with a bit of danger in her life.*

Wasn’t this the least she should do? Wasn’t she, after all, responsible for his current dilemma? Because of his damaged state, hadn’t he suffered through nearly not having any bids? *Except for the four hundred that she still needed to write a check for, of course.*

Sabrina glanced at her sister’s expectant gaze. Seeing the ‘don’t-blow-this-one’ look on her face. *How could she say no to that?*

“All right, Mr. Hunter. We’ll do this their way. But for four hundred dollars, I better have a whole lot of fun this week.” Sabrina jabbed a finger to his chest.

Between the wine and his grin, she had a hard time deciding which was more intoxicating.

* * * *

Reese wanted to blurt out he knew who she was the minute he walked past the table. Even before his sister formally introduced them, he knew. He’d caught the unmistakable scent of her perfume as he’d passed by and wasn’t oblivious either to her inspection of his costume.

The memory of her eyebrow arching sent an unexpected pleasure through Reese’s system. All night he’d tossed and turned, unable to block out the sensation of her body pressed to his as they danced. The pain in his arm was bad, but nothing in comparison to the torture of his erotic dreams.

He straightened books and rapidly wiped the dust on the shelves with his sling. Tonight was the first of their ‘date week’ and she was

going to cook supper for him. If he had his way, maybe it would be the first in a long number of nights together.

With a grimace, he reached behind the couch and pulled out a stray T-shirt from the shadows, dragging a cluster of dusty debris with it.

A shudder ran over his shoulders as he reached back into the abyss, a second, then a third time, amazed at the long lost articles. His brows rose as he discovered a lost sock wadded in the bottom of a missing coffee cup.

His stomach lurched as he surveyed what looked to be a green sock, yet he knew he'd never owned a pair of green socks in his life. Thankfully, the knock on the door saved him for further adventures to the back of the couch.

"Coming. Just a sec," he bellowed as he sprinted to the galley kitchen. Stealing a quick, inquisitive glance into the cup, he made a quick decision and dropped the whole thing into the wastebasket.

He gave his hand a quick rinse under the faucet, wiping it on his jeans as he made his way to the door.

Reese stopped before opening the door. With a deep breath, he cleared his head and reminded himself this was just a gag. He'd have some innocent fun with her head, then tell her the truth.

What he didn't expect was the sensual freight train that hit him when he pulled open the door. He clamped his mouth shut so it wouldn't gape.

Sabrina grinned openly as he pulled back the door. His gaze took her in, lapping up her wide-eyed innocence like a man dying of thirst. She peeked at him over a bag of groceries, and smiled as her purse slid down to the crook in her arm. The movement caused her loose fitting shirt to gap, revealing a smooth tan shoulder. His previous thoughts of her uptight cloistered existence went right out the window.

The concerned expression on her face jarred him from his mesmerized stare.

"Are you okay?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. I've been...napping." He reached for the sack with one arm.

"Don't be silly, I've carried it this far. You need to rest that arm."

Her jeans were well-worn with slits in the knees and the crisp white men's shirt she wore tied at her waist was unbuttoned revealing a lacy white camisole beneath. Reese's fingers itched to touch the soft bronzed skin at the base of her neck.

"Lookin' good, Hunter."

Reese glanced up and caught his nosy neighbor scoping out Sabrina's backside.

"Do you intend for me to fix your dinner out here?" She raised her brows, apparently ignoring the comment of his pesky neighbor.

Good lord, the woman has the most bewitching blue eyes.

"Oh hey, I'm sorry. It's these pain pills, I guess they make me a bit dense. Please come in." He stepped aside and ushered her in, taking one last look at the smirk on his neighbors face. His attention however, was immediately drawn, to the swish of her dark ponytail swaying back and forth with her confident gait. His gaze narrowed to the slit on her back pocket wondering if pink had anything to do with what lay beneath.

"You may want to close the door." She called over her shoulder as she headed toward his kitchen.

"Right," he muttered slapping himself mentally for his lustful thoughts. He kicked the door shut as he turned to follow her.

Sabrina scanned the living room, kitchen, and entry, as she placed the sack on the kitchen table. "It's much cleaner than I expected."

She glanced around as she unpacked the contents from the grocery sack.

"I hope you don't mind, I brought us my favorite meal."

Reese was still on the 'cleaner-than-expected' statement, trying to figure out if that was good or bad. Good, she thought he was clean, bad, she thought he was obsessive and uptight. Exactly what did she think of him? He was about to ask when she pulled out a video from the depths of the sack.

"Do you like scary movies?"

She smiled up at him, busy with the task of unpacking the delectable food. The scent of roasted chicken filled his humble kitchen with the aroma of home cooking.

"Sure, there's nothing that I love more than cleaning and scary movies." He wondered why a woman who hated haunted houses

would suggest a horror video. Still, she didn't realize who he was, did she? And if she did, was she just messing with his head? Reese was becoming more confused by the minute.

"I can see your life is as exciting as mine." She offered him a sweet, lopsided grin.

Reese wasn't sure he agreed. But up to the night when he met her in the haunted house, his life had taken a decided turn toward the exciting. He realized he was staring at her. There was something comfortably familiar in seeing her unpacking groceries in his kitchen. Not that any guy wouldn't notice a great looking woman and good food, if it was in the privacy of his home. Privacy being the operative word here.

He blinked from his fantasy thoughts, deciding to ask, rather than offer what few suggestions he had in mind of how to spend their evening. "Um, is there something I can do?"

She glanced at him with a sweet smile. Reese realized that if he allowed himself to be bamboozled by her magical charm that this charade was going to be revealed sooner than he'd planned.

Diversionary tactics were in order.

"So, were you really trying to win me? Or just trying to appease my sister?" Reese peered into the sack, waiting for her response.

"Oh, you have a sister like that too, huh? Forever the matchmaker, always trying to set you up with Mr. Right?"

"Well, Ms. Right," he responded with a grin.

"Oh, sure." She grinned without looking at him.

Reese's gaze held to the dangling earring that tapped gently against her neck. He glanced up and met her sparkling gaze. That just plain scared him. He swallowed—hard. "Yeah, it's kind of a pain in the butt. Those blind dates with people you barely know—"

It hit him square between the eyes the damage he'd created when the sparkle in her eyes waned a bit before she recovered with a bright smile.

"Hey, but *you* did promise me this week would be fun." She wagged her finger at him as she set to the task of removing lids on the containers. "We'll just make the best of it, right? I mean, it is all for charity. That's a good thing."

Reese hated seeing the glimpse of sadness in her eyes. They were much too beautiful and besides, Reese understood too clearly what the struggles of single life were like. Everyone wondering what was wrong with you that you couldn't find the right person to settle down with. For some inexplicable reason, he wanted to see that spark of playfulness in her eyes again.

He took a step closer and brushed his hand lightly down her arm. "I know what that is like, so just to appease our sister's, let's just get this one thing out of the way, so we can cut the tension." He raised his hand to cup her cheek. "And because I've been thinking about this ever since the auction."

Reese lowered his head, holding her blue gaze, watching it soften as her mouth drew near.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea." Her voice hitched in nervousness.

The uncertainty mixed with his desire made the moment all the more sensual. "I'm not sure either, Sabrina. But I do feel something magical between us. Maybe we should stop analyzing and just go with it." He brushed his lips over hers, relishing in the taste of her, unprepared for the impact of his emotions.

Reese cupped her face in his hands, angling her chin so their mouths fused in perfect harmony. What began with experimental nips, immersed into something greater than he expected. Her kisses made him breathless, giving as much as taking, opening to him with a passionate freedom. She was a heady mixture of seduction and innocence.

A purr-like satisfaction emitted from her as she tangled his fingers in his hair, drawing him close, encouraging a deeper kiss. Pressed against him as much as the sling would allow, she matched his fervor until he thought he would take her right on the kitchen table.

Reality that this week was *supposed* to be a charade hit him like a two-by-four between the eyes. Lord, he knew he should pull away, but his every sense was on overload and he had no idea at what point he'd lost control.

Her tongue teased with his in joyous abandon and the random thought that he'd wanted to do that in the haunted house occurred to

him. Later, when talking to his sister, he found out who she was and between Alice and Sabrina's sister his turnabout plan to trick Sabrina fell quite nicely into place. That, and a hefty donation to pad the outcome of the auction in his favor. It wouldn't have mattered how much she bid, but to his surprise she was tenacious in making sure she won. That absurdly pleased his ego if nothing else, but he set it aside in lieu of his plan. Right now with her mouth melted against his, he was having a hard time remembering that this was a ruse, a joke and nothing more.

"Hmm, that was nice."

She glanced up at him briefly, not masking the hunger in her eyes. Reese knew it was ridiculous to believe that what began as a joke could take on a fire of such consuming proportion. God yes, he wanted to kiss her again. He brushed her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb, asking for more with his eyes.

She nodded, drawn easily into his embrace, melting against his mouth. Her warm breasts pressed against his t-shirt as she curled her arms around his neck. He lifted her to the table not breaking the heat of their kiss.

What if she finds out the truth?

Reality slapped his conscience and Reese took a step back, taking a deep breath to clear his smoking senses. He raked a hand through his hair and scratched the back of his neck, unsure what it was he'd hoped to gain out of this charade in the first place. With a swipe across his mouth and the taste of her still on his tongue, he gave her a chagrined look. "So, what's for dinner?" There was purpose in his flippant dismissal, though for the life of him he couldn't think of what it was.

Her smoky gaze held his for a moment. Reese could see the questions in her eyes and he averted his gaze to the food instead. She slid off the table, turning her attention toward the food without a single reference to what had just happened.

"Well, since it's our first night. I thought we'd stay simple. Maybe picnic on the floor? What do you think?" She tucked her hands in her back pockets, the gesture naturally jutting her breasts through the thin fabric. He could see their firm pebbled tips beneath strained against the cotton and was pleased she'd apparently been as turned on by that kiss as he.

“Sounds great.” The idea that he might have difficulty keeping up this charade crossed Reese’s mind. He didn’t want to hurt her certainly, just play a little joke on her. Maybe if he came clean now and told her the truth, she might find the humor in it. Either that, or she’d go for the other arm. To manage the façade shouldn’t be too difficult really. It was one week out of his life and besides she owed him, in a way. He doubted she would ever concede to doing so on her own, and he’d made a bargain with his sister and Morgan. Certainly he was man enough to handle the heat for a few days.

“Do you have an old blanket or quilt that we can use?”

She turned to look at him with an expectation in her gaze that made him think for a fleeting moment that they’d known each other for a very long time.

“Sure. I’ll go get it.” Reese walked on rubbery legs to his bedroom closet, grateful for the chance to calm himself and his erection down.

They dined on crackers stacked with roast chicken and Monterey Jack cheese, sliced green apples and caramel dip. He discovered their similar taste in movies, among other things.

She lay on her stomach beside him on the floor as they watched "horror flick. It was the typical plot of most modern movies. More gore than he figured she would be able to tolerate. Reese’s gaze slipped from the television to Sabrina on the floor beside him. His gaze focused on a small rip in the denim covering her heart-shaped butt. He wondered if she was a bikini, or thong type of girl.

Get your mind out of her pants, this is a joke, remember?

“You know that’s what I have trouble with. In these movies, you never find out who the good guys are and who the bad guys are until the very end. It’s kind of like dating these days, isn’t it?” She popped a Junior Mint candy in her mouth, totally unaware he’d been assessing her ass.

Guilt gnawed at Reese’s brain and he sat up with his back firm against the couch, distancing himself from her contemplating how to tell her the truth...

She excused herself from the room and while she was gone as he tried to focus on the movie, but his mind wandered from the tormented screams of the killers’ victims on screen, to how the heck

he was going to explain himself and get out of this charade without any damage to anyone—physical or otherwise.

Engulfed in his thoughts, her breath tickling his ear startled him.

“Did they suggest therapy?” She sat behind him on the couch, leaning over his shoulder. The scent of sunshine and roses wafted past his nose. How could a woman smell so delectable?

Reese swallowed and closed his eyes. He’d not expected her to be so gentle, so caring, so damn hard to resist. A low moan escaped his lips as her fingers gently massaged his neck, wishing her lips would follow suit. They did, much to his delighted surprise.

“What are you doing, Sabrina?” His thoughts grew hazy.

“Bewitching you, of course. How am I doing?”

“Very well.” He grabbed her with his good arm, and pulled her to his lap. “So tell me, are you the good guy or the bad guy?”

“I don’t know, maybe I should ask you the same question?”

Her gaze held his in defiance. She was challenging him—again. It amazed him how wrong he’d been about her, pegging her as the quiet, little conservative type. She was nothing of the sort and his plan to poke fun at her conservative lifestyle was beginning to crumble.

Reese captured her mouth, frenzied in his exploration, insane with wanting to feel her legs wrapped around him as he buried himself within her.

Much to his surprise, she untied her shirt, letting it fall at her waist allowing him the freedom to slid the skinny camisole straps over her silky soft shoulders. He leaned forward nuzzling the warmth below her ear, letting his fingers trail along the gentle slope of her neck. Reese held her gaze as he slipped the thin camisole below her unencumbered breasts.

For an instant, he had to wonder if she’d expected, maybe even wanted this to happen. God knows he’d not expected it and the thought she may have set out to seduce him made him harden.

“So soft,” he whispered, leaning his forehead to hers. “Tell me if you want me to stop, Sabrina.” Reese cupped her breast, squeezing gently with his good hand, teasing her bud to a stiff peak between his fingers. With a low moan she pressed against his hand and tipped up his chin, kissing him gently, savoring his mouth and his touch.

Her soft willingness mesmerized him; her mouth drove him crazy with wanting more. She held nothing back Reese knew that things were spinning out of control and he had to stop before things got completely out of hand.

Unsure of who pulled back at first, he stared at her, startled by his behavior, yet more frightened by the powerful spell between them.

Suddenly, he wanted to tell her the truth. This was no longer a simple game. But to do so might cost him what he stood on the threshold of discovering for the first time in his life. He could see his questions mirrored in her eyes.

“I’m sorry.” He swallowed hard.

“I’m not. I wish you weren’t.” She pushed from his lap, re-dressing quickly and setting to the task of clearing away the picnic remnants.

“There should be enough leftovers for your lunch tomorrow. I’ll stop by later, after work, with supper. Is seven okay?”

Reese wasn’t sure if he could walk, but he pushed himself to stand, sure that there was a cold shower in his immediate future.

“Listen Sabrina. You don’t have to—”

She turned with a grin intact. Whatever happened between them, disappeared with the bright smile she plastered on her face.

“Don’t have to what?”

“I just mean, you don’t have to go to so much trouble. This—tonight, was wonderful, but I feel badly that I didn’t help.” He stumbled over his words, confused by his own feelings and her apparent apathy.

Her grin widened. “Well, than that’s no problem. Tomorrow we’ll cook together.” She gave him a wicked grin as she poked his chest. “Oh, and you really ought to clean out behind your couch. Good night.”

He stood, silent, staring where she’d been seconds before. *What the heck happened here tonight?* It was like someone pulled the blinds open and he saw something of the future for the first time in his life. One day a happy bachelor, the next day, a woman body slams him to the floor and he finds himself falling in love. *Falling in love?* Maybe he was bewitched, maybe not. More importantly, how’d she know

what was behind his couch? Too many questions swirled in his brain, and above them all he knew tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

* * * *

Sabrina stepped into the brisk autumn evening and sucked the cold air into her heated body. She glanced up at the yellow moon winking at her through the branches of the tree limbs. Was this plan of hers going to work? She'd not anticipated the fire that ignited when they were close. Sabrina slid into her tiny Volkswagen, pausing to look up at the lights still shining in the third floor apartment. A few more minutes and she'd have awakened there, she felt sure. At least she'd managed to dissipate any contrived thoughts that she was not able to handle herself. "Trick-or-Treat, Mr. Hunter." She put the car into gear and smiled.

* * * *

She'd get it out of him tonight. Sabrina looked at herself in the mirror, wishing she didn't have to go through this masquerade. But before she would allow her heart to love, she was going to understand what type of man she was giving her heart to. Sabrina had long since decided she would have a certain feeling about Mr. Right when he came along. There was no doubt in her mind of what she felt for Reese Hunter, but she had to find out if he was playing her for a fool, or his actions were sincere.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Morgan's voice did not mask her concern.

Sabrina sat on the edge of the bed, considering her sister's words. Was it worth it to find out how he really felt about her?

"If I don't, I'll not be able to move on with, or without him, Morgan. There are too many questions I have, even though I know that he talked to you and Alice about doing this. I need to find out if what I felt the other night was real, or just part of his plan to get back at me for embarrassing him in the haunted house."

"Be careful, Brie. I never intended for you to get hurt. I know Alice, and she loves her brother dearly. He seems like an honorable man, and I can't imagine he would do anything that he didn't put his whole heart into."

Sabrina smiled into the phone. "That's what I'm counting on. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know what happened."

“We love you, Brie and no matter what happens”

Hopefully in that third floor apartment, Sabrina added mentally. “Love you guys, talk to you soon.”

She adjusted the bodice of the harem outfit, the same one she’d worn to the auction. If this didn’t get garner a complete confession from him, she wasn’t sure what would and maybe she would have to come to grips with the fact that he was just having some harmless fun at her expense. Not a pleasant thought, but one she certainly had to consider. The passion they shared had admittedly thrown her for a loop, but she wondered if it was a ploy to throw her off balance from the truth.

One more glance in the mirror as she tucked the ruby into place. Phase Two of her game plan was underway.

* * * *

Reese had a hard time sleeping, between his guilt and images of her abandoning herself to his pleasure. The difficulty in being on a forced leave of absence from the station was to find ways to spend time. Add to that a pronounced lack of sleep and his entire day of solitude was about to drive him up the wall.

After lunch, he showered hoping that the cold water would rejuvenate him, instead it did the opposite and while reading a magazine, he fell asleep only to be jarred sometime later by an intense pounding on the door. Reese sat up, the magazine sliding from his chest. He looked around squinting toward the clock on his bookcase, realizing with sleep-induced grogginess, that it was seven-fifteen.

“Yeah. I’m coming. Keep your shirt on.” He staggered from a deep sleep toward the knocking. Reese cleared his dry throat as he rubbed his eyes and yanked open the door. His poor eyes nearly fell from their sockets.

The thin veil Sabrina wore covered her luscious mouth, but the azure eyes staring back at him suppressed no veil of any kind. The woman was on the hunt and he was the prey.

Reese scanned her outfit from stem to stern in sincere appreciation. How many times had he dreamed of her in this outfit? “Is this a theme night, then?” Damn, the woman was one surprise after another. How could he have seen her as a timid and straight-laced?

He took her arm gently leading her inside. The scent of moonlit sea breezes wrapped around him as she walked past and once again he was caught in her spell. Logically, before the night went any further, he should confess to her that he knew all along who she was and that the whole week was a harmless scam.

She sat down her bag and turned, unbuttoning the veil. "I thought I should get my money's worth. After all, the league certainly got more than they'd bargained for." She trailed her finger along his jaw, sliding it down his bare chest as she turned to pick up the grocery sack.

He reached for her hand and she paused, staring at him.

"Shall I change into my sheik outfit?" He followed her to the kitchen. What was going on? Did she already know? Was she baiting him? Maybe if he called her bluff, they could stop this silly game they were playing.

Reese stood behind her, staring at the gentle slope of her shoulders, eyeing the dark corkscrew-like tendrils along the back of her neck. He touched one and ran his finger over the thin strap on her shoulder, pleased when he saw her shiver.

"If you'd like."

She began to pull groceries from the sack.

"Great." He placed a lingering kiss on her shoulder. "I'll be right back. I hope you'll be pleasantly surprised, Sabrina, with what I have in mind for tonight."

He fought a grin as he whispered the words in her ear, watching her shoulders stiffen for a fraction of an instant. "Be right back."

Reese knew it was now or never. After this, nothing would be the same. His identity was about to be revealed to her and hers to him. From there, they'd have to see if the magic was for real.

Barefoot, wearing only the sheik pants and headpiece, he checked the one piece of equipment that was not only going to make or break this night, but quite possibly his entire future with Sabrina.

Ready to reveal the "real" *him*, he stepped into the hall. Hanging at his side, like a gunslinger's colt 45, was the familiar item that brought them together in the first place.

She had her back turned, reaching for plates in his cabinet when he entered the kitchen. He raised the great, bladeless chainsaw into the air and yanked the cord, urging a roar of life from the engine.

Sabrina whirled on him, her eyes wide with shock and uncertainty.

Her reaction was not at all what Reese expected. He flipped off the switch, laid the tool on the table and turned to her opening his mouth to explain everything.

“Half-baked? You called me half-baked?”

Obviously, the cat was out of the bag. There was barely enough time to qualify his earlier statement, much less to react.

She dropped to the floor, swung her leg out, and caught his ankle.

Once again, she’d brought him to the floor and once again he found himself staring up at her. However, for a man who’d envisioned looking down at her several times in the past twenty-four hours, she was no match.

He saw her smile diminish as he withdrew his arm from his sling and in one fluid motion turned her beneath him on the kitchen floor. He slung his leg over hers, trapping her between his legs.

“You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?” She lay still, gazing up at him in challenge.

He held her hands clamped over her head. Technically, he should have felt in control, but the look on her face was unreadable. Besides, control was the furthest thing from his mind.

“You’re the one to talk. How long have you known?”

“Since the auction, when you made fun of my karate. How long have you known?” She stared back, a fierce glint in her eyes. If possible, it made her all the more desirable.

“Since the dance. Your perfume, I recognized it immediately.” He couldn’t suppress the desire to lower his face to the warmth of her neck, nuzzling her soft skin, breathing in her scent. Her body relaxed, making his grow more tense.

“You remembered my perfume?” she eyed him skeptically. “A million women wear this perfume.” This woman was fishing to see if what was happening between them was real. The joyful realization dawned in Reese’s brain and his libido.

He grinned, unafraid to clear the air and hopefully move forward in a true relationship with this fiery woman “No other woman wearing that perfume has laid me flat on my back against my will. Twice, I might add.” He tore his gaze from hers and let it travel the length of her costume. “But if you’d been wearing this, I assure you I’d have remembered this, too.”

He returned to her gaze, detecting the sparkle in her eyes, though she did not smile.

“Your arm is much better. It’s a miracle.” Her gaze narrowed.

“Well kind of, I guess. I checked back with my doctor and he said that it wasn’t as bad as he first thought. I guess I heal quick.” Reese gave her a weak grin and sighed. There was whole more he needed to confess. With any luck, the magic between them was real. That, he guessed, remained to be seen.

“We need to talk. There is more you need to know.” He stood and pulled her to her feet. She stumbled slightly and landed against his chest. He held her close, unwilling to give up how warm and right she felt pressed to him.

“More?”

Reese blinked from her captivating gaze. “Yeah, but maybe we should sit down.” He ushered her to take a seat on the couch and stood before her, his hands clasped behind him. With a sigh, he frowned at the floor. Confessions had never been easy for him, even as a kid, they made him nervous. He also paced when he was nervous.

“You kind of look like Yul Brenner.”

The reference to the *‘King and I’* actor made Reese smile. At least if she still had her humor, there was a chance they could work things out. He pulled off his headpiece, and tossed it to the couch.

“Okay, I’ll try to explain. You know I told you that I recognized you at the auction?”

She nodded.

“Well, after that I asked my sister to bribe the judges to set up your prize—you know to take care of me. I guess it was wrong to get your sister involved, but she seemed really receptive to the idea.”

“I bet, “Sabrina muttered.

“It was supposed to be a joke. Eventually, I planned to tell you who I was and that my arm was just fine.” He paused, glancing up for her reaction. “But, I didn’t expect *this*, Sabrina.”

She looked like Mona Lisa’s twin sister. “What do you mean? What didn’t you expect?”

As if he knew what love looked like. Reese raked both hands through his hair and began to pace once again. “To be honest, I’m not sure what it is. All I know is that I can’t sleep, I talked to myself this morning.” He glanced at her expression which remained unchanged. “I thought about you a million times today. Is that weird?”

“Maybe in a stalker kind of way.” She smiled. “Or maybe you’ve had too much time on your hands lately?”

Could she be right? Reese shook his head. There was more here than that, he’d felt it that afternoon at the haunted house and later as they danced. Still before he laid his heart out on the table, he wanted to make damn sure she wasn’t going to stomp it like a fly.

Reese swallowed hard, throwing caution to the wind. It wasn’t as though he didn’t understand what a risk was in his line of work. Granted, they usually didn’t involve his heart. “I don’t know about you, Sabrina, but I’m more inclined to think that I’ve met my match. Someone that will challenge me, laugh with me, love with me. Is that possible in such a short time?”

“Anything is possible, Reese.” She patted the seat beside her. “Sit down, I have a confession of my own to make.”

He grinned as he sat beside her.

“I guess we’re both guilty of playing tricks on each other, Reese.”

She held up a hand when he started to talk. “The funny thing is, after we danced, I paid the emcee to place you at the end of the auction. I wanted to be sure I had a fighting chance to get you. Naturally, I didn’t take into account that your sister would bid against me.” She laughed and her expression softened. “It seems we both went to a lot of trouble to mask our true feelings.”

“Then maybe its time we remove the masks and reveal those feelings, Sabrina.” Reese grinned, reached out and pulled her to his lap. “Besides, it sounds the Little League committee made-out pretty well.”

“I like the way you talk, Hunter. It’s inspiring.”

He nuzzled the area beneath her jaw. "You mean making out?" It was entirely possible he could get used to this on a regular basis.

She settled more comfortably in his lap and cupped his face. "I do hope however, that I've changed your mind about those *half-baked* moves."

"I don't know, you may have to show me a few more times." His hands slid over the thin chiffon covering her thighs. "I can be dense."

She smiled, lowering her mouth teasing his lips with hers. "When we want to be, right?"

"Right." He captured her mouth, reveling in the warmth of her kiss. If the passion was good between them before their confessions, how much better could it get? He was more than willing to find out.

"I don't mind having to show you over and over how I feel about you, Hunter." She pulled him with her to the couch, holding her gaze to his. This was no trick, this was real and he needed her to know.

"I'm not sure I'll ever get enough of you, Sabrina." Reese wanted the magic to last forever.

"How long did you have in mind, Oh, great desert sheik? Or did you plan to have your way with me, and toss me out with the camels?" Her eyes danced in mischief.

Reese searched her sweet face. Oh yeah, he knew he wanted it all—the whole package—choosing paint for the walls, picking out contact paper, two toothbrushes in the bathroom. Now all he needed to find out was if she felt the same.

"I was thinking of something more permanent. I think maybe it might take a lifetime to learn, and appreciate, those moves of yours"

"Is that a proposal, Officer Hunter?" She raked her fingers through his hair, teasing the curls at the base of his neck. The sensation about unglued him.

"I have to tell you Sabrina, this is no trick here. I want you to understand clearly what I want." There was no doubt that they were attracted to each other on a physical level. His body burned for her, but he had to know where she was coming from, that this wasn't transitory thing. "That's an official proposal."

She smiled up at him. "Then I suggest that we stay very close as we plan our future. There's no telling what our sisters would do if we are separated"

“Separation is the last thing on my mind.” He grinned.

“Then I accept. How about a year from now? Does next autumn sound good to you?”

Reese frowned. He hoped to marry her sooner than that. A Justice of the Peace came to mind. “Sure, I guess. You sure you want to wait that long? I mean what are we going to do in the meantime?”

“Did I ever show you how I can make these coins jingle?” she whispered as she gently pulled his face toward hers “You’ll soon discover—” She kissed him once. “That I don’t do anything half-baked” She kissed him lingering against his mouth. “It will take me four months to decide on a wedding dress. But once I make up my mind about something, I am very tenacious.”

“I like a woman who’s thorough.” Reese was just as happy to stay there on the couch, content but to his surprise, she moved out from under him and held out her hand.

“Are you familiar with the dance of the seven veils?”

“Are you going to show me some more of your moves?” He grinned as he allowed her to tug him toward his bedroom. “Hey, you aren’t checking to see if my bedroom is in order, are you?”

“I’ll be gentle, Hunter.” She smiled over her shoulder.

Jennifer D. Bokal is a new author that is seeing her dream come true for Christmas. Here at Midnight Showcase, we hope this is only the first of many stories from Jennifer.

ALL I WANT

By

Jennifer D. Bokal

December 22

My hands trembled as I took the small box from the UPS man. I knew exactly what was inside. My husband Jake wanted this for as long as I had known him. It was something I was never willing to give. But, this Christmas was different. Ten years of marriage and three kids had changed a lot of things about me. Change was a good thing, right?

“We’ll see,” I thought while opening the brown cardboard box. Packed in tissue paper was a red velvet bag. The bag felt heavier than I had imagined. When I opened the drawstring a small scream of surprise escaped my throat. I stopped short. My internal Mommy Radar tuned into the Baby Napping frequency. Not hearing the yowl of a cranky 2 year-old, I reached for the phone.

After two rings my best friend and neighbor Eva answered. “Hello,” she breathed heavily into the receiver.

“Eva? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m just trying to move the Christmas tree and clean underneath.”

“Clean, UNDER the tree,” I asked incredulously sitting down at the kitchen table. “Why on earth would you do that?”

“Captain Sparks ate fruitcake and then threw up under the tree.”

“EWWW. This is why I will never have a dog. They are nasty creatures.” The word “nasty” brought me back to the reason I called. “Hey! They came in!”

“Really? What do they look like?”

Taking the silver steel bands out of the bag, I studied them. They were cold and hard. The black velvet on the inside made them look more cheap and sleazy than I expected.

“Like handcuffs,” I replied trying to hide my anxiety. Did I really want to do this? “They have keys and everything,” I said as I deposited two shiny metal keys beside the red bag.

“Sarah, my friend, this really is a whole new you! When you said you wanted to bring excitement back in your life you weren’t kidding.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Maybe I should have gotten my shoulder length chestnut hair cut short. All the other thirty-something mommies who wanted to get back into the groove seemed to be doing just that. Trying to change the subject I added, “I cannot believe how long it took for these handcuffs to get here. I ordered them right after Thanksgiving. Do you think I should send an e-mail and complain?”

“Do you recall the name of the web site where you ordered your handcuffs?”

“Yeah, it was Sex Fifth Avenue.” What was she getting at?

“Yes Dahling,” Eva drawled. “SEX Fifth Avenue, not Sax. You should be thankful your computer didn’t crash.”

“You’re right, they probably have a different meaning for customer service anyway,” I added with a smile.

The rumble of the garage door opener told me Jake was home from the university where he teaches Biochemistry. Even though the semester was over he always had a research project to keep him busy.

Far from the pencil-necked geeks that made up most of faculty at Hudson Valley University, Jake looked like he belonged on the cover of GQ. His broad shoulders tapered down to a thin waist with tight abs and even tighter butt. Jake followed the workout schedule he had from our days at HVU when he was captain of the baseball team. His boyish smile, sandy blonde hair and green eyes made my husband, Dr. Jacob Ivanovich, one of the most popular professors at school. All the female students have a huge crush on Jake.

“He’s here. I’ve got to go.”

“Details,” Eva sang “I want details.”

* * * *

Jake threw his jacket on the table, greeted me with a kiss and asked, “Are you ready for the insurgents?” No we weren’t having militants over for the holidays. It was something much worse: our family.

Every year at the end of December people we are related to invade our house. When they show up we smile and say, “Make yourself at home.” Then we stand by helplessly and watch while they do just that. My father-in-law, Frank, basically moves into the bathroom with the newspaper. I spend most of my “vacation” trying to avoid chatting with my mother-in-law, Trudy. She insists on giving me bad advice about things that will never be important to me. That is why New Year’s Day is my favorite holiday. All the relatives have gone home by then.

“Yep. My sister should be here with Seth in an hour. Greg is driving up Saturday evening. Rachel sounded oh so peeved at Greg since he won’t leave work and come with her today. She hates driving by herself with baby Seth.”

“Rachel needs to give Greg a break. He’s the manager of a KidsNToys for crying out loud. He can’t leave on December 22. What is your sister thinking? Wait a minute. I am giving her too much credit. Your sister never thinks,” Jake blew out a long breath.

“Jake,” I said giving him a dirty look. “Don’t get upset now. I am sure Rachel will give you lots of reasons to be mad later. But, until then just try to be happy.”

I had spent my entire life trying to make everything nice for Rachel. And even though I wouldn’t say it, I completely agreed with Jake. Rachel was a teensy bit hard on her husband. I thought when my baby sister had her own children she would change. Unfortunately, I was wrong. Like a spoiled kid, Rachel wants to be the center of attention and always right. Only now she had Seth to use. From the beginning she had decided he was going to be a little genius. In true Rachel style, she had gone over the top.

“My parents?” he asked.

“They are due in this evening.”

Jake’s eyes fell on the black velvet lined handcuffs. His expression changed from confusion to wonder as it dawned on him. For Christmas I had decided to fulfill his fantasy.

“So,” Jake’s voice dropped an octave, “your sister won’t be here for another hour?” He walked up behind me and started to knead my aching shoulders.

“No,” I let his strong fingers ease away my tension.

“When do the girls get home?”

“The bus drops Riley and Kirby off at half past three. Emma should sleep until then.” I glanced at the clock on the microwave. A quarter past two, plenty of time to put some spice in my life.

Jake’s strong fingers slid over my shoulders and onto my breasts. His hands knew just how to touch me. Through the fabric of my sweater he lightly pinched my nipples. They instantly hardened, sending a shiver through my body.

I tilted my head back. His dark green eyes were filled with passion.

“Come here,” he growled.

Jake led me out of my chair and lifted me to the kitchen counter. I could feel how aroused he had become as he stood between my legs.

With one hand he grabbed the back of my ponytail and pulled my face to him. Our mouths met. Wet and hot, our tongues started a dance of their own.

Jake’s other hand made its way down to the waist of my pants. He slid his fingers between my silky panties and the thatch of dark hair that covered my sweet spot. Expertly, he found the mound and started to rub in a slow circular motion. I groaned as the pressure built. In my excitement I arched my back and gave Jake the full access to my body.

The wave of my pleasure started to rise. Jake slid his finger deep inside me. Rhythmically he pushed in and out. My hips responded to his manipulations. All my muscles were poised to contract. I was on the edge of the sweet release of climax.

“Knock-knock.” A sing-songy voice floated in from the entryway.

Utterly dejected, I groaned. Jake’s parents had arrived early. GREAT. Just GREAT. I wondered if things could get better as I slid off the counter and pasted a smile to my face.

“Mom, Dad. We didn’t expect to see you so soon.” Jake said while he tried to arrange his pants and hide his enormous bulge.

The pitter-patter of four little feet on my wood floor told me things did in fact get better. “Yipe-yipe-yipe-yipe,” Frenchy-the-rotten-dog announced his presence.

“Come here and say hello to your mommy, Jake.” My mother-in-law insisted. Jake gave his mother a sideways hug and quickly moved to shake his father’s hand. Full body contact needed to be avoided at all costs. “ I have wonderful news,” she added brightly. “I brought everything I need to make my famous Holiday Cheese Spread. You know everyone raves about it. We can enjoy it on Christmas Eve.”

I had always had serious doubts that anyone enjoys the Holiday-Cheese-Spread-Everyone-Raves-About. But, I kept them to myself. No need to make Trudy angry. Using a slight of hand that would make a practiced magician proud, Jake scooped the handcuffs and the bag under his jacket.

For the moment, our secret was safe.

* * * *

A few hours later the entire family sat amiably around the dining room table eating spaghetti and meatballs. The tangy scent of my homemade tomato sauce mixed with the fresh, woodsy smell of pine wafting in from the Christmas tree. The low murmur of conversation could be heard over the clinking of forks on china. Maybe this Christmas would be fine after all.

My younger sister, Rachel, sat next to Jake, a dangerous move. She was cutting pasta into miniscule pieces and placing them on the high chair tray in front of her 9 month-old son, Seth.

“More?” asked Rachel as she taped the tips of her fingers together.

Seth dutifully imitated his mother and tapped the tips of his pudgy fingers together, giving his mother the baby sign language for “more”. “Oh wook at Mommy’s smart widdle man,” crooned Rachel while she spooned a teensy bit of pasta on the tray.

Jake opened his mouth to say something. His mind changed when he saw my, “Don’t You Dare!” look. Ever watchful, Rachel saw Jake and decided to press her advantage.

“See Jake,” said Rachel, “by using sign language Seth and I can communicate even though he is not verbal yet. He can tell me when he is still hungry and when he is finished.”

“You know Rachel,” said my husband in an irritated tone, “before our kids could talk they let us know when they were finished by not eating anymore.”

“Well, Seth can communicate more than that,” said Rachel, exasperated. “Being able to use baby sign language is a sign of superior intellect.”

“Really?” asked Jake pointing to Seth. “What does it mean when he sticks pasta up his nose? I’ve got a full scholarship to Harvard?”

Rachel let out a shriek and began explaining to Seth the error of his ways. “No nose, Seth. Eat. Yummy. Dinner.” Rachel’s hands were flying around her head while she made all sorts of gestures. I knew she was trying to explain to Seth that pasta was for his mouth not his nose. But Rachel looked like Joe Torre, manager for the Yankees, telling his base runner to steal second. I had to bite my lip to keep myself from laughing out loud.

With that, the easy atmosphere was broken. Jake’s dad cleared his throat and asked, “What is Santa going to bring you girls for Christmas?”

Riley, our five year-old, could not contain her excitement. She bounced out of her seat, brown pigtails flying behind her and called over her shoulder as she ran to her room, “I’ve got a list Grandpa and I will show it to you!”

“List! List! List!” cried Emma as she threw handfuls of spaghetti in the air.

Pitter-patter Frenchy-the-rotten-dog came running into the dining room and snarfed up the spaghetti as soon as it landed. Yuck. Dog spit on my floor seemed to bother no one else. GREAT. Just great.

“Well, Kirby,” asked her grandfather, “what is Santa going to bring you?”

She let out a long sigh. “There is no Santa, Grandpa,” she answered with her best eight going on eighteen tone.

Unfazed, Frank continued, “Yes there is. In fact, he is a good friend of mine.”

Kirby rolled her eyes, “Grandpa, even you can’t be so stupid to think there really is a Santa.”

“Kirby!” I scolded, “you never call your Grandfather stupid!”

“Why not, you do all the time?” Kirby retorted pushing pasta around her plate.

The silence that followed was deafening. I opened and closed my mouth several times, looking more like a bass than a mature woman. Looking at my husband across the table I knew I was defeated. Jake was

not about to help. His face had turned beet red and tears were running out of the corners of his eyes. I could not believe him! He was laughing! At Me!

The thumping of feet on the wooden floor announced Riley's return a second before she came through the door. "Here it is! Here it is!" she cried while waving several sheets of paper in the air. "Here Grandpa, look at my list!" as she made her way into her grandfather's lap.

"Well, lookee here," said Frank while taking reading glasses out of his shirt pocket. "This is quite a list. Let me look, how many pages is this list Sweetie? Four? Five?"

"It's SIX pages Grandpa. I wrote them all out by myself too!" said Riley, proud of her newest accomplishment.

"Girls, take Grandpa and Grandma up to your room and show them Lassie." I suggested.

"Oh Lassie? Your mom finally got you a puppy?" Trudy asked.

"No," said Kirby sullenly, "Lassie is a hamster."

Riley lead the parade upstairs while Trudy shot a tut-tut look over her shoulder as if to say, these poor children have to name a hamster Lassie. I fought the urge to stick my tongue out at the woman.

Jake disappeared to check on his latest project at the university leaving Rachel and I time to chat.

"So," Rachel teased while bringing a forkful of brownie to her mouth. "You bought your kids a vermin and call it a pet."

"Kirby came home from school about three weeks ago and told me she was the only child in her class without a pet," I said filling the sink with hot, soapy water.

"Kirby has a flair for the dramatic," Rachel noted.

"Yeah," I sighed. "But, the sad thing is, she really was the only kid in the second grade that didn't have a pet. So, I caved. Lassie stays in her cage. She's a little yucky, but, we have to sacrifice for the ones we love. Right?"

"I couldn't agree more. I feel like all I ever do is sacrifice." Rachel grumbled.

"Speaking of a flair for the dramatic," I said, hoping humor would derail Rachel and keep her from going into all the details about how badly she thinks her husband treats her.

“I can’t believe Greg wouldn’t drive up here with me,” she whined, while twirling a piece of chestnut hair the same color as mine around her finger. “It wasn’t a complete waste. I was able to play Mozart all the way to aid Seth’s cognitive development.”

I tried to make a sympathetic grunting noise while I put the dirty pot in the sink. Grabbing a sponge and scrubbing gave me something to do other than telling Rachel how crazy I thought she was acting.

Rachel continued, while she helped herself to another brownie, “You know Greg really should be more interested in what is going on at home. All he ever does is work, work, work. He leaves the house at 7:00 in the morning and doesn’t get home until after dark. I feel so alone and isolated.”

I examined the clean pot then decided to throw caution to the wind and give Rachel some sisterly advice, “Try being nicer to Greg when he is home. He might be gone a lot because you are so critical.”

“I am not critical!” she practically yelled, her blue eyes flashing. “Greg is a rat bastard who doesn’t want to take care of his family.”

Emma started to bang the lid of a pan on the kitchen floor in time with her chant, “Rhat Basturd, Rhat Basturd, Rhat Basturd.”

“Slick Rachel,” I said.

For once in my sister’s life she was speechless. Red faced, she grabbed Seth and mumbled something about going to bed.

* * * *

December 23

“Come on!” bellowed Jake from the entryway, unable to contain his anxiety. “I am not going to wait in line for hours!”

“Jake, honey. This is for the kids. Don’t you remember going to see Santa when you were little? It was fun, right?” I asked hopefully.

I noticed Frank standing by the door in his coat and hat looking almost as annoyed as his son. I guessed visiting Santa was not one of his favorite things to do either. “Get them together, boy. It is going to be a nightmare crowd if we are late,” said Frank.

I opened my mouth to ask if the nightmare crowd that worried him was perhaps zombies or some other form of the undead. But, wisely I kept the thought to myself. Frank had been extremely understanding about Kirby’s “stupid” comment from the night before.

Thankfully everyone was ready and we were pulling into the parking lot of the Upstate Mall 10 minutes before it opened. There were a few other hardy individuals in line before us. But, Jake and Frank seemed pleased to have beaten the evil nightmare crowd.

“Okay Emma. What do you say to Santa?” I quizzed.

“I wuv you Santa,” she said. It had taken me several long weeks of working with Emma to get her to repeat the phrase. Years ago I wished I had the foresight to get a video with Kirby or Riley and Santa when they were toddlers. After Emma was born I vowed to not let the chance escape me again.

In my mind, I could see the video I would treasure forever. My precious angel sitting on Santa’s lap with the light hitting her blonde hair just right and giving it a warm glow. Then Emma would look at Santa, green eyes full of wonder and say, “I wuv you Santa.” Jake and I would save this video and show it to our own grandchildren.

“Ohh! Mommy’s so proud,” I said while snuggling my baby tighter in my arms. “You have the video camera, right Jake?”

“Yes dear,” he answered tonelessly.

“Look girls, it’s our turn. Kirby, why don’t you go first.”

“Mom, I have told you before. There is no such thing as Santa,” she said loud enough so people in the next county could hear her. The little boy behind us burst into tears, wailing about the lack of a real Santa.

I smiled apologetically over my shoulder. The mother greeted me with an icy stare. She must be part of that nightmare crowd we were so worried about.

“Kirby, why do you think there is no such thing as Santa?” I asked hoping to restore some Christmas magic to the child behind us.

“Well, Jamie McAllen said so,” she replied a little unsure of herself.

“Oh really, is that all?” I challenged.

“No, for two years I have asked Santa for a puppy and he has never given me one.”

What was I supposed to say about that? I hate dogs. My house is a canine free zone. Should I tell her the truth or cave for the sake of a few more years of holiday wonder? I hate it when there is no easy answer. So, I avoided the situation by prompting my next daughter with, “Alright Riley, you can go sit on Santa’s lap.”

Riley bounced happily up to the big guy and plopped right in the middle of his lap.

“Ho-ho-ho, what do you want for Christmas little girl?”

She fished in the pocket of her coat and pulled out several sheets folded paper, “I brought a list.” Ten minutes later Santa’s eyes had glazed over. No longer was the man in red pretending to be interested in why purple ballet slippers are better than pink. To give credit where credit is due, he did pay attention for the first few minutes of Riley’s monologue about bikes, horns and helmets.

“Okay, Riley,” snapped Jake, “you are done with Santa.” Taking her little hand he led her away from the bringer of joy.

“I wasn’t finished,” she whimpered.

“Emma honey, what do you want to tell Santa?” I asked while placing Emma on Santa’s lap. In her red velvet Christmas dress they made the perfect Kodak moment. One chubby little hand reached up to touch the fluffy white beard. Too cute, but very risky.

“Emma, what do you want to tell Santa,” I coaxed again.

“Santa,” she began. Anxiously, I looked over my shoulder. Jake was looking through the viewfinder of the video camera. He was getting this moment on film.

“Santa, you are a Rhat Basturd,” Emma concluded.

The line became silent. Noticing all eyes on her, Emma clapped her hands and sang, “Rhat Basturd, Rhat Basturd, Rhat Basturd.”

Faster than an Olympic sprinter, I grabbed Emma and headed for the exit.

* * * *

“Well, that was fun,” said Frank as we walk through the front door of our house. Rachel, Trudy and I headed for the kitchen. Java, I needed strong, hot coffee and something for my pounding headache.

Trudy started rummaging through my refrigerator in search of all the ingredients for her Holiday-cheese-spread-everyone-raves-about. Thankfully, she considered it so special she only makes it once a year. Then she expects everyone to spread the vile orange concoction on crackers and eat it! When we are done we all have to declare it is the tastiest thing EVER. Anyone not wise enough to follow the exact routine has to deal with the wrath of Trudy.

Harry Connick, Jr. crooned White Christmas in the background. The caffeine started to work its magic. Maybe the day will be fine after all, I hoped. That fantasy wasn't kept alive for long before screams flooded the kitchen. Taking the stairs two at a time, I headed for Kirby's room. Half way up, I jumped over Frenchy-the-rotten-dog as he ran the other way shaking some nasty dog toy in his mouth.

I found Kirby in tears. "Mommy! I opened the cage to get Lassie out and Frenchy...Frenchy came in and grabbed Lassie and ran away." She held onto my waist and sobbed harder. "It was awful. Poor Lassie!"

What was found of Poor Lassie was not pretty. Her remains were wrapped in a napkin ready for their final resting-place. We were packed shoulder to shoulder in the half bath waiting respectfully for Kirby to say a few words about her beloved pet of less than a month. "You were so cute and brown. I will miss your stubby tail and your whiskers tickling my face when I gave you a kiss. Your exercise wheel may be silent. But, we will never forget you. We love you so much Lassie," Kirby's shoulders shook as she shed more tears.

"Amen. Let's give the rat its burial at sea. Grandpa wants to check the football scores and he needs privacy," said Frank as he gave his thigh a slap with the paper.

Flush.

So ended the brief life of Lassie the hamster. As we filed out of the loo, Kirby leaned into me and looked up. Her blue eyes were filled with tears. "Mommy," she asked. "If I write Santa a note and apologize about today, do you think he will get me a puppy?"

A Puppy? GREAT. Just Great.

* * * *

The shutters rattled as a cold wind blew around the outside of the house. Trees that long ago lost their lively fall colors stood black against small pools of light cast by street lamps. The wind and shadows worked together, I mused. Branches turned into long spindly arms ready to tear apart anyone unlucky enough to get close. The only thing darker than the world outside the house was my mood.

"Sarah, get in bed," Jake invited, pulling back the covers.

Frown in place, I stomped away from the window, flopped on the bed and jerked the covers up to my chin.

"Okay," said Jake hesitantly, "what's wrong?"

“Nothing,” I grouched.

“We have been married for ten years. I know when you say ‘nothing is wrong’ it really means ‘something is very wrong’ and it’s usually something I did.”

Ignoring my husband, I thumped my pillow a few times and rolled over, showing him my back. Jake slid next to me. Our bodies fit together perfectly. He brushed back my chestnut hair and softly kissed the back of my ear.

“You know,” Jake breathed on my neck, “we haven’t played with my new toy yet.”

Slowly I rolled over. Shooting fire from my eyes I questioned, “WHAT?”

“You know, we were interrupted yesterday. Now everyone is asleep. You look so sexy...” his thoughts trailed off.

The look on my face said loud and clear, “Stop while you are behind.”

“Are you kidding me?” I yelled. “Today is not the day Jacob Ivanovich. NOT. AT. ALL. The only thing I have been doing is cooking and cleaning for a bunch of people who don’t appreciate my hard work. Next time everyone should just stay at a Holiday Inn. To add to the fun, Kirby’s rat was eaten and Emma has increased her vocabulary with curse words!”

“Hamster,” Jake said.

“What?”

“Lassie was a hamster, not a rat.”

My eyes narrowed into slits. I tried in vain to set Jake’s hair on fire with my anger alone. “Whatever,” I continued my rant. “Now you want me to handcuff you to the bed and give you a blow-job?”

Always the optimist, Jake said, “Yes, that is exactly what I was hoping for.”

Clipping my words so Jake would understand this very simple concept, I said, “NO. Jake. Not. Tonight. Besides, I don’t really think I will like it. Being in charge, completely? How is that supposed to be a turn on for me? In fact, I think it’s kind of naughty. Don’t you?”

Nodding his head enthusiastically, Jake agreed, “Yes, it is naughty.”

“Come on Jake, give me a break. Not tonight, okay?”

“Alright,” he said, snuggling up against me. “Is anything else wrong?”

“Yes, the weather sucks,” I whined. “There is no snow. Don’t we live in upstate New York? I thought one of the perks of living here was always getting to have a white Christmas. Last time I looked at the calendar tomorrow is CHRISTMAS EVE.”

I’ll see what I can do about the snow,” said Jake.

I grunted and snuggled deeper under the covers.

“Well, Merry Christmas to you to, Ebenezer Scrooge.”

“Bah-Humbug,” I said and turned out the light.

* * * *

December 24. Christmas Eve

Warm and cozy under my goose-down comforter the smell of sizzling bacon and coffee brewing brought me to my senses. I stretched luxuriously and enjoyed the thought of someone else making breakfast for me. Slipping on my old red bathrobe and white fuzzy slippers, I shuffled down the stairs, wiping sleep from my eyes.

“Morning Mommy,” Riley cried from behind a stack of pancakes dripping with butter and syrup.

“Hi Pun’kin,” I said while placing a kiss on the top of her head.

The entire household was gathered around the kitchen table gobbling pancakes, eggs and bacon. They were eating with such gusto I worried they thought food was not going to be served after today. Jake handed me a cup of coffee and said, “Morning, Sleepyhead,” while he kissed me on the cheek.

“Guess what Mommy?” Kirby asked while bouncing up and down in her seat. “Grandma and Grandpa promised to take us sledding.”

“I know they said they would take you. But, we really need snow for sledding.” I said hoping we didn’t have melt down from disappointment.

“Look Mommy!” she said pointing her fork toward the window. “SNOW! Lots and lots of snow!”

For the first time, my eyes focused outside. Mother Nature had taken out a white blanket and laid it on the ground. Overnight, the dripping gray world had been replaced by a winter wonderland. Snow stuck to every surface. Leafless trees looked magical. Their bare black branches supported pristine white. Cars were little more than hills dotting driveways and the roadside. Breathing in the warm scent of the kitchen I

felt an ease and contentment I been missing for days. At that moment, finding the holiday spirit became very easy.

Heavy flakes continued to fall lazily from fat gray clouds, promising a few more inches of snow before the storm passed. Perfect weather for sledding.

“Be careful,” Frank warned while taking Kirby’s mittened hand in his. “It’s slick here.”

Jake’s parents and our children had invited us to join them on their sledding trip. Nobody really seemed disappointed when we declined. Five sets of footprints, two large and three small, made a path in the snow. The elder and the younger trudged to the sledding hill in our neighborhood. Standing in the doorway, I waved until the little group disappeared around the corner.

I entered the kitchen as my sister folded a wash cloth over the steel divider in my sink. She gave me a quick hug as she breezed out the door with Seth, telling me of last minute gifts she wanted to find. Taking in the unusual sparkling clean of my kitchen I felt sad and abandoned for a moment.

Renewed by the thought of some time to myself I made plans for a long hot bath as I climbed the stairs to my bedroom. Jake greeted me with a devilish grin as I walked into our room, his hands behind his back.

“Pick a hand,” he teased. “If you guess right, you win a prize.”

“Umm, this one,” I said pointing to the right.

“Okay. Guess again,” he said, not showing what he was hiding behind his back.

Rolling my eyes, I continued to play his silly little game. “Alright then. The other one.”

“Right! You win,” he announced dangling two metal bands from his index finger. My mind raced for a second trying to process what gift Jake was giving me. Then I saw the links attaching the two bands and black velvet lining them both.

Ut-oh. Handcuffs.

Jake dropped the handcuffs on the nightstand. With the grace and power of a lion on the Serengeti, he crossed the room and grabbed both sides of my face and pulled me to him. He placed his hungry mouth on mine. My lips burned from his desire. Matching his

intensity, my hand slid between us. Finding him already hard, I ran my hand down his length. A groan escaped from the pit of his soul.

Self-conscious of my furry robe and slippers I shed them quickly, leaving me in my black silk gown.

Now, it was time to get Jake undressed.

Slowly I pulled Jake's sweater over his head. Pink nipples peaked through a mat of sandy blonde hair. I lowered my head and flicked each nipple with my wet tongue. Blowing softly made each nipple rigid. "Sarah," he moaned.

Running my nails lightly down his hard stomach I stopped at the waist of his jeans. With a quick jerk of my hand, the button and zipper gave way, releasing my husband. He quickly stepped out of his pants. Each breath he took was ragged with anticipation.

Kneeling in front of Jake, my teeth caught the waistband of his boxer shorts. Tugging gently, I lowered them to the ground. He grabbed the back of my hair to pull me to him.

"Not yet," I said huskily.

Jake's green eyes flashed with lust as he grabbed me. Searing hot, he drove his tongue into my mouth. Every cell in my body was alive and dancing.

Grabbing a handful of silky fabric Jake tore off the gown. Skin to skin, intense heat poured off our bodies

Jake carried me the short distance to our bed and laid me down. His hands spread my legs apart. His seeking mouth found my sweet spot. Wet and hot his tongue dove in deep. His skilled fingers found the core of my being. He rubbed in a hard circular motion that matched the urgency I felt. Jake's tongue kept me wet, while his hand brought me to the crest. Like a wave crashing on the beach, my senses exploded. Every thought left my mind. All I could do was feel Jake and my need to have him inside me. My thighs were slick from wanting all of my husband. Opening my legs further I invited him in with a throaty, "I love you Jake."

"Not yet," he said. Using my own words against me. He fumbled on the nightstand for a minute until he found what he wanted. The handcuffs.

Once Jake's wrists were securely fastened to the headboard of our bed I took in the sight of my husband. Even though he was so vulnerable

he looked magnificent. Jake was all male. Complete power over someone so strong made me lightheaded. I decided to teach Jake about anticipation. I was going to enjoy making him wait. And I knew he was going to want me more because of it.

Taking my time, my pink tongue made its way up Jake's calf. His body involuntarily shuddered. Slower still, my mouth made a lazy trip up his thigh. I gently nipped the inside of his leg. Jake gave a cry of alarm.

"Sarah," Jake moaned while I circled the end of his rigid manhood with my tongue. Using my tongue again, I flicked the sensitive underside of his shaft before taking him entirely in my mouth. My brain reeled. I never would have imagine how turned on being in complete control would make me. My taunt breast skimmed his legs. My nipples became harder with each stroke of contact with his rough skin.

Without Jake touching me, my thighs became wetter. I ached to have Jake deep inside me. With one fluid movement I was on top of my husband. I thrust my tongue in his mouth as I straddled him.

"I love you Sarah," he groaned.

The sound of stampeding Clydesdales made me stop short.

"Knock-knock," said the all too familiar sing-songy voice. Trudy.

"SHIT! They are back," I said stating the obvious.

"Sarah? Knock-knock," said my mother-in-law as she began pushing open the door.

"WAIT!" I shrieked. "I'm not dressed yet," I added thinking quickly.

"Uh, okay," she said brightly. The door closed giving a reassuring click as the latch engaged.

Wild eyed, Jake said, "Unlock me!" Panic had turned his cheeks bright red.

"Where are the keys?" I asked while slipping back into my robe.

"What do you mean, 'Where are the keys'," asked Jake.

Unbelieving I froze. "You didn't bring the keys?"

The bright red in Jake's cheeks faded leaving him a horrid shade of green.

"Sarah? Is Jake in there with you?" Came the voice from the other side of my door.

"She is standing in the hallway! LISTENING!" I hissed.

"Are you decent? I'm coming in."

Not knowing what else to do, I grabbed the dirty laundry basket and dumped the contents on Jake. Thankfully the laundry had reached monumental proportions and my naked, bound husband was fully hidden.

The door swung open as I arranged a dirty sleeper over Jake's exposed hands.

"Ohh! Laundry!" Trudy squealed with delight. "I can help with that," she said while scooping up an armload.

JAKE'S FOOT!

"Trudy! NO!" I screamed while grabbing back my dirty unmentionables. Her shocked look quickly changed to one of pure evil. I actually saw devil horns starting to poke through her forehead.

Hastily, I backtracked, "You are a guest. It is so wonderful of you to offer. But I really can't impose." Changing the subject, I asked, "You are back early, what happened?"

"It's raining now. Very messy," she added with a wrinkle of her nose.

Trudy took a seat on the edge of the bed, smiled blandly, and patted a spot beside her. "Sit down Sarah. You seem jumpy and tense. I think I know what's bothering you."

My eyes widened with horror. The clothes slipped off of Jake leaving his stomach exposed.

"You do," I croaked, while sweeping a shirt over my husband's torso.

"Yes, I do. I remember when Frank and I had been married about 10 years. Our marriage had lost its' spark. It had become, I don't know, flat."

Mouth agape, I nodded. How could this woman with Frenchy-the-rotten-dog and her vile cheese spread know exactly how I felt?

"Now if you want to keep your marriage alive, you need to spice things up a bit," she offered helpfully.

"Trudy, thank you. I completely agr..."

She held up her hands for silence, totally cutting me off. "Now, one afternoon while Frank was seeing patients I snuck into his office. I wore sexy panties and bra under a trench coat with nothing else. He came in and said 'What the hell are you doing here?' I did not say one word. I

just grabbed him and kissed him. Then right there on his desk,” she giggled like a schoolgirl at the memory of her afternoon tryst.

I jumped when Jake’s leg became tense beside me. Trudy’s story was so engrossing I had forgotten he was even in the room!

“Then there was another time. Jake was a senior in High School. His baseball team was playing it the state championship game. All the parents rented a big van and rode together. Well, Frank and I snuck off during the 4th inning. I didn’t think we would miss anything, but, Jake hit a homerun.” Trudy added with a laugh, “his father did too, I guess. Well, to this day Jake still thinks we were in the stands.”

A loud gasp escaped my husband’s throat.

Thankfully Trudy thought I was horrified she had missed Jake’s big play. “I know. It was bad of us. But, sometimes being bad is good. Even now, Frank and I have sex two times a week.”

Speechless. I was speechless and amazed. Honestly, I had a new respect for my mother-in-law.

“Well, I know this is a lot to take in, Sarah. But, you think about it,” she said while giving my leg a little pat. “I’ve got to get started on the cheese spread or it won’t be ready in time.” Trudy bounced brightly out of the room and shut the door behind her.

“Is knowing your parents have sex two times a week a sign of the Apocalypse?” I asked my dirty laundry.

Jake gave a loud sob. “Just get the keys. They are in the kitchen on the counter,” he said, emotion thick in his throat.

Entering the kitchen, I passed Frank heading the other direction, toward the bathroom. He saluted me with the newspaper he held in one hand as his other hand merrily jingled something shiny. What were those? Bells? Doing a double take, I gasped. They weren’t bells; they were keys. Keys to the handcuffs. The universe screeched to a halt as I watched Frank slowly put the keys into the pocket of his sweater and close the bathroom door.

Heart pounding, I raced back to my room. “Jake! Your dad has the keys and he went into the bathroom with the PAPER!”

“SHIT!” Jake cursed

“What do you want me to do?”

“There’s nothing you can do. We just have to wait until he’s done,” he said, logically. “Has he had any of my mom’s cheese spread yet?”

“Knock-knock Sarah.” I jumped a foot in the air at the sound of my mother-in-law’s sing-songy voice, again.

“Yes Trudy,” I said while blocking her view of my husband with my own body.

“Where’s Jake? His car is still in the drive way?”

“Rachel,” Jake whispered from behind me. You have to love a man who can think fast while he is tied up, literally.

“He’s, uh, with Rachel. They went shopping.” I added with a smile.

“Yes, well the trip to the mall yesterday wasn’t very long,” she said with a pout. “With Emma and her unfortunate name calling.”

Thanks ever so much of reminding me, Trudy. I really, really wished I could add sarcastically.

“Get in the shower. I’ll watch the girls. I’m teaching them to make my Holiday Cheese Spread. You know, everyone raves about it.”

“How wonderful. Now Riley and Kirby will know how to make your cheese spread,” I said, the appropriate lie easily rolling off my tongue.

I waited a full minute before I moved a muscle.

“I’m going to get ready,” I told Jake.

“WHAT? And leave me HERE?” He shook his bound wrists to emphasize his point.

“You are supposed to be at the mall, remember? Besides, I can lock the door and get rid of the dirty laundry. I’ll turn on the TV.” I offered the TV like I would a piece of candy to a child whom didn’t want to do an unpleasant chore.

“Okay,” he pouted “But, turn on ESPN.”

“Done,” I kissed his forehead and raced to the bathroom. There was not enough hot water in the world to wash away the morning. But, I did my best.

* * * *

Freshly showered, I resumed my search for my father-in-law and the all-important keys. As luck would have it, we bumped into each other as he left the downstairs bath.

“Hey Frank, you look awfully toasty in that sweater. Let me put it in your room for you.” I quickly said a prayer to any higher power that getting the keys would be so easy.

Frank was apparently not a religious man. “No thanks,” he said. “I’m fine.”

While trying to come up with a plan B, Rachel and Seth came through the front door. Trudy, hoping to find her son, immediately pounced. Not seeing him with my sister she asked, “Where’s Jake?”

Rushing to Rachel’s side I quickly said, “He went to work.” Then I added more details to my fib “Yep, Rachel dropped him off and he will get a ride home later.” Rachel raised her eyebrow at me but thankfully said nothing to Jake’s mom.

“Oh, too bad,” said Trudy, sticking out her bottom lip. But, she quickly rallied. “The Holiday Cheese Spread is ready,” she proclaimed with the same gusto as the woman who announces the winning lottery numbers.

Looking at the pasty orange slop made my stomach turn. I couldn’t do it? Could I? There was no other choice. I had to.

“Here, let me help you,” I offered, grabbing the tray of the holiday-cheese-spread-everyone-raves-about and some crackers.

“Frank,” I said, “I bet you are a hungry man.”

The look he gave me could freeze lava. But, I was desperate. I ignored the hate that rolled off my father-in-law in waves and crossed the room with orange indigestion on a plate.

Hearing the word “hungry” brought the pitter-patter, pitter-patter of doggie toenails on the floor.

“Yipe. Yipe. Yipe,” Frenchy barked while running around my legs at the speed of sound. Keeping myself steady was next impossible and the tray almost slipped and landed on Frank’s chest. Instinctively, I balanced the tray to keep it from falling. Silently I cursed. But I quickly decided to take advantage of the chaos caused by Frenchy and simply dropped my burden the rest of the way.

SPLAT! Frank’s white sweater was covered in sticky orange globs of cheese.

“Oh Frank! I am so sorry,” I lied. “Let me get your sweater and I’ll wash it before the stain sets in.”

Holding the sweater and its precious cargo to my chest, I rushed out of the room. Sparks flew off my heels as I passed Trudy. She made a small choking sound as I ran up the stairs and pushed open my bedroom door.

* * * *

"Well, Jake," I said to my very disgruntled husband as I unlocked the handcuffs, "I have good news and bad news. The good news is, you are free. The bad news is, I dumped your mom's cheese spread on your dad to get the keys."

Jake sat up slowly, shaking his hands that had turned an odd shade of yellow and said, "It may have been easier if you left me handcuffed."

Jake's walk was stiff when he came downstairs a few minutes later. His hands had changed to a mottled red. That was a better color than yellow. Right? Kirby and Riley were playing with Frenchy, who seemed a little less rotten at the moment. Rachel sat on the floor and read Christmas stories to Emma and Seth. Carols could be heard, playing softly on the stereo. The Christmas spirit seemed to have come back to join us once again.

Rubbing his right wrist, Jake said weakly, "I have to run out. I'll be back in a minute."

Like a good detective, Trudy started to question Jake. "Where are you going?"

"I need to get a last minute gift," Jake said.

Not wanting to let go of her suspect, Trudy continued. "But, you just went shopping."

Jake looked at the ceiling and let out a long breath, "No Mom, I was at work."

I couldn't resist, so I added, "They practically chain him to the lab."

Jake gave me a stony look and said, "Well, I'm off then."

"Wait one minute" said Trudy. "Let me give you a list, dear. You can get the ingredients for my Holiday Cheese Spread. It is all gone and no one was able to enjoy it."

"Trudy don't make the boy pick up stuff to make that crap. Nobody likes your holiday cheese spread," called Frank from the living room.

Trudy's jaw dropped. "Frenchy loves it!" She said defiantly.

"That's because it tastes like dog food. Nobody in their right mind eats it."

Trudy looked around the room for support. Finding none, she said, "The ladies in my bridge club simply cannot get enough."

"I rest my case," with a snap of the sports section Frank disappeared behind the paper. End of discussion.

* * * *

Jake hobbled out of the house as fast as his legs would carry him with promises of returning within the hour. The rain that had so rudely ruined our morning romp was gone. In its place were more fat, white flakes. The snow falling did look magical, but driving was dangerous. I wondered what could be so important to make Jake leave in treacherous weather and on Christmas Eve, no less.

Rachel had become antsy and paced back and forth in the kitchen. She took turns staring out the window and glancing at her watch. Watching my sister worry was terrible. But, her angst showed she really cared about her husband. I stood quietly beside her and we watched snow pile up on already icy roads.

"Greg will be fine Rachel," I said giving her arm a reassuring squeeze.

"I hope so," she said in small voice.

BANG! The front door flew open.

"Hey everybody! Look who I dug out of the snow," Jake's voice carried to every corner of the house.

"Uncle Greg," Kirby screamed. My three girls jumped up to give their favorite uncle a hug. Seth, no longer content to sit in his high chair, struggled to get out and see his father.

"Well, well, well. The returning hero," I teased, giving my brother-in-law a peck on the cheek. "How many casualties at the store today?"

"Not many," he laughed. "But, I do feel like I've been hit by a truck." He released Seth from his straps and held him close murmuring, "Hey fella, did you miss your daddy?"

"Where the hell have you been?" Rachel yelled, swooping down on her husband. "I have been worried sick about you and all you can do is ask Seth if he missed you"

"I'm not late. Why would you worry?" asked Greg, totally confused.

"You really are dense, aren't you? Didn't you notice the weather? Maybe I was worried you were in an accident. You could have called."

"Yes Rachel," said Greg using a sharp tone. "I did notice the weather. Calling while driving a car on slick, icy roads would have been dangerous."

"Didn't you think about stopping to call?" asked Rachel who was not willing to give an inch.

“No, I didn’t,” admitted Greg. “But, stopping to call would have made me late.”

Rachel grabbed hold of Seth and said through gritted teeth, “Give me my baby.”

Seth wanted to stay with his father. His little hands clung to the front of Greg’s shirt as he cried “Da-da-da.”

“Oh this is just f’ing splendid,” Rachel snarled. “He finally speaks. And what does he say? He says your name. You. The guy who is never home.”

“Rachel, that’s enough,” I interrupted. This little drama had gone on too long and in my kitchen, no less.

“Sarah, you aren’t Mom. So don’t go there,” she said turning on me.

Taking a deep breath I calmed down enough to say, “Why don’t you go lie down. Things will seem better after you take a nap.”

“What? Are you sending me to my room like I’m eight?” she challenged.

“No, Rachel, she is not sending you to your room like you are eight. Eight year olds tend to act more mature than you do. Sarah is sending you to your room like you are three,” said Jake.

After glaring at Jake, Greg and I, Rachel stomped up the stairs and slammed the door. Pictures on the wall rattled. White faced, my children clung to my legs. Trudy and Frank tried to smooth over the outburst by offering hot chocolate and cookies.

Greg looked like he aged a decade in the 10 minutes since he walked through our front door. He held Seth close and walked around the room softly humming a lullaby.

Greg reminded me not a father singing to his son, but of a drowning man clinging to a life preserver.

* * * *

After dinner Rachel sulked downstairs and joined the rest of us as we sat around the Christmas tree. A fire popped in the fireplace sending a warm glow around the room. The lights on the tree happily twinkled in red, blue and gold. The decorations were minimal and I loved each one of them. A faded green and red paper chain Kirby made last year drooped around the boughs. Cotton ball snowmen Riley brought home from Kindergarten last week peaked out from in between the branches. Other ornaments adorned the tree. But, each had a special meaning.

There was one that announced “Baby’s First Christmas” from when Kirby was an infant and another that said “Christmas in our New Home.” Eva had given that to us when we first moved into the neighborhood.

“Daddy, tell us again about the Christmas when you were seven,” asked Riley, her blue eyes brighter than the lights on the tree.

“Well, when I was seven I really wanted to be a baseball player. So I asked Santa to bring me a special bat called a Louisville Slugger. For months I was good, just so I could get that bat on Christmas morning. And guess what,” he said.

“What?” the girls asked, barely able to contain their excitement.

“On Christmas morning I came downstairs and under the tree was the LOUISVILLE SLUGGER. I was so excited I wanted to play with it right away. So, I grabbed the bat and stood like I would at home plate.” Jake stood and stuck his butt out behind him while holding an imaginary bat.

“Then I swung that bat as hard as I could,” he said pivoting around. “Only too bad for me. Because the TV was in the way.”

“CRASH,” Kirby yelled.

“And you know what happened then?”

“Grandma took away your bat and wouldn’t give it back until Easter,” said Kirby. Her bright smile showed the space left after she lost her two front teeth.

Breaking up the party Jake announced, “Alright if Santa is going to come tonight I know lots of little girls and one little boy that need to be in bed.”

Exhausted Grandparents and children made their way upstairs. Greg, Rachel, Jake and I were also tired. But, we had too much to do before we could go to sleep ourselves.

“I’ve got some stuff in the car for under the tree,” Greg said.

“I’ll help bring it in,” I offered.

“No, you stay here with Attila the Sister. I’ll help,” Jake said quickly.

I settled on the sofa with Rachel as Greg and Jake brought in a bounty of toys for Christmas morning.

“I feel like a jerk,” said Rachel miserably.

As I had done so many times in the past, I opened my mouth to say, “Oh don’t worry about it.” After that I would hope Rachel felt better

about herself. Since change was supposed to be good I tried something new with my sister. "You really were a jerk," I said instead. I nudged her playfully and added, "But, admitting you have a problem is the first step to recovery."

She smiled weakly and wiped away a tear. "I don't know why I act the way I do. I wish I could roll with the punches more. Just be more laid back, like you."

My face burned when I remembered how I raved like a lunatic at Jake the previous evening. "Don't worry about not living up to my high standards. Last night I yelled at Jake because there was no snow."

"Really?" she giggled. "My confidence is shattered."

"Greg is a nice guy. He loves you and Seth both so much. He was really devastated after you yelled at him today."

Rachel let out a long sigh. We watched for a few minutes while Jake and Greg assembled Riley's bike. Finally she said, "You're right. He really is a nice guy. Thanks for the talk."

Rachel joined her husband and started helping put the bike together. Greg held up the directions and pointed to the page. Rachel reached up and gently touched Greg's hand. For a moment, their eyes locked.

"Greg, I'm really sorry about the way I acted. Earlier today, I mean," said Rachel biting her bottom lip.

"I just wish I knew what you wanted from me," said Greg.

Jake motioned for me to leave them alone. I tiptoed upstairs. The reassuring murmurs of Greg and Rachel talking followed me to my room.

"They'll be okay," I said to Jake as I changed into my gown.

"I think you're right," he agreed while taking off his shirt.

Enveloping Jake in my arms I breathed in his manly scent.

"So," I began. "I know where the keys are."

"I can barely feel my fingers now," Jake confessed. "Being handcuffed wasn't as sexy as I thought it would be."

Really, I asked innocently. "Your mother walking in on us wasn't part of the fantasy?"

"Ugh," he groaned, "you had to bring that up?"

Suddenly a thought hit me. "Jake I am so sorry. I didn't get you anything else for Christmas. Doing this fantasy was so big for me, I guess I kind of forgot."

“Don’t worry,” he said while kissing my lips softly. “You are the only present I will ever need. Besides,” he added, “I have a present for the whole family.”

“Really?” my curiosity piqued. “What is it?”

“I’m not telling,” he replied, giving me his devilish grin.

“Hmm, something for everyone?” I asked getting in bed.

“Yep,” he said.

Thinking for a moment the only reasonable answer came to me, a VACATION!

“Is it s trip?”

He laughed. “I’m not telling. I’m going to go lock up and make sure Rachel and Greg are okay.”

I snuggled under the blankets. I could really use a vacation from Christmas vacation. Jake would take us some place warm. Florida maybe? No! I bet he had planned a trip to Hawaii. A second honeymoon, with the kids of course. That has to be it, I thought. Swaying palm trees and white sandy beaches filled my mind as I drifted off to sleep.

“Mommy,” Kirby squealed, waking me from my luau. “Guess what? TherereallyisaSANTA.”

“Huh?” my blurry mind could not comprehend what she was babbling about. “Slow down honey. I cannot understand a word you are saying.”

“Mommy, there really is a Santa! I went downstairs and look what I found under the tree!” She held out her arms. There was her gift from Santa. Four furry paws attached to two floppy ears with a wet nose and a big tag that read, “To Kirby; Love, Santa.” The handwriting, amazingly enough, looked just like Jake’s. “A PUPPY!” she sang while hugging the dog close to her chest. “I love her already!”

“I’m sure you do,” said Jake. “She’s really for the whole family, I bet,” he added with a devilish grin.

“I’m going to go show Riley and Emma!” Kirby announced excitedly as she left to find her sisters.

“What? A dog? You know I hate dogs. Then you bring it home. You should have at least asked me.”

“I knew you would say no,” Jake interjected.

Raising my voice I continued to vent over my husband’s pathetic excuse, “Then you try to pass the mutt off as a gift. Jake are you telling

me there is no Hawaiian vacation.” I was not in the mood to have my Hawaiian vacation ruined before I ever left New York.

“Hey, I never said I had planned a vacation to Hawaii. You made that up on your own,” Jake snapped. “But yesterday I did get you something I think you will like,” he continued, handing me a long white envelope with a red bow on top. “Merry Christmas Sarah.”

My mind started to organize the jumble of words on the page. Reservation, Waldorf–Astoria, Manhattan, December 28-January 2.

“My parents agreed to stay here with the girls while we are gone.”

“Oh Jake this is wonderful,” I said excitement bubbling up inside my chest. “There is so much we can do. We can go see a show on Broadway. Oh! We can see the ball drop in Time Square. Maybe we could even ice skate at Rockefeller Center!”

“You know what I think would be fun,” Jake purred. “Remember I told you about my fantasy from the movie Risky Business?”

“Sure, the one where Tom Cruise has sex on the subway with the blonde.”

“Well,” he asked devilish grin in place.

A subway? Great. Just Great.