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Rose

Love and Lights

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Chapter One

The snow was falling heavily and getting thicker by the minute and traffic was moving at a snail's pace, but Rachel did not care. Christmas in Manhattan was going to keep her in a good mood. The sounds and smells of the bustling city had elevated her spirits as soon as she had gotten out of JFK airport. The smell of nuts and cashews roasting with honey from the vendors on the streets, the way the wind bit into you, burning your nose and giving you an instant head rush, was glorious to her. She had come home for the holidays at the request of her parents. They had said they missed her and had even gotten her the flight at the last minute

For a struggling artist-slash-physical therapist, the opportunity had been too good to pass up, so she had packed up and left the mild climate of Atlanta to come to the blistering cold of New York. Now she was passing the decorated Christmas windows of Barney's, Sak's Fifth Avenue, and Macy's. The people all moved quickly, trying to get their shopping done and get in out of the cold. In New York nothing, not even a blizzard kept them from getting outside and getting things done. God! She had missed it, she thought, and a huge grin spread across her face. She paid the cabby and stood for a moment looking up at the stone structure, the big wet snowflakes hitting her face. She ran up to the building, bursting through the glass doors. The doorman looked up from his paper with surprise then a beaming smile passed across his face.

"Miss Rachel, how are you ma'am? Are you home for the holidays?"

“Charlie, it’s good to see you,” she kissed the old man’s leathery cheek, “and yes, I am home for Christmas.”

“No place like it for this time of year.”

“You got that right. I’ll just go up; I still have my keys, Charlie you don’t have to buzz.”

“But Miss...” he stammered, but got no further. Rachel was already around the corner going to the elevators. Charlie shrugged and went back to his paper. She would find out soon enough, he thought with a grin, and if he were correct he would hear the explosion from down here.

The elevator took only a moment to get her to the seventh floor. She walked down the carpeted hallway looking at the different door ornaments that the neighbors had. On her parents’ door was the wreath she had made when she was twelve. A coat hanger wrapped with different kinds of tinsel, red ribbons, and pinecones decorated with glue and glitter. She was twenty-nine now and her mother still had it. It was sweet and it melted her heart to know her mom still used it, even though she had not been home for Christmas in three years. She unlocked the door expecting to find her dad watching the History channel and to smell the mouthwatering scents coming from the kitchen, the norm when her mother was in there for the holidays. Instead she saw the Christmas tree and the apartment decorated, but not plugged in. The house was empty and quiet, no smell of ham or homemade pound cake and sweet breads coming from the oven.

“Mama? Daddy?” She called as she walked around the apartment. She went to the kitchen to check the message board to see if there were any messages saying they went shopping or something and they would be back later. Their bedroom was immaculate, her mother’s work she thought, but her dad always had a shoe or shirt thrown somewhere just to make her mother a little miffed. There was nothing as she walked back through the empty apartment to the kitchen. Rachel was beginning to worry when she heard footsteps and the front door opening. *Thank God!* She ran out of the kitchen

ready to throw her arms around her parents in a big hug. Her feet came to an abrupt stop as she saw who was closing the door to her parent's apartment.

"You!" She spat the word out like it was a bitter taste in her mouth. Her gaze met the gray eyes of her ex-boyfriend.

"Rachel," he said nodding in her direction, but his eyes looked her over from top to bottom, taking in her hair. *She let it grow out*, he thought. It was now a little past her shoulders and the same black waves, now with copper streaks. Her skin still glowed and was still the color of caramel. Her tight jeans showed off those generous curves he remembered, and she still did not dress for the weather. A small, tight t-shirt that had "bitch" written across the front was all she wore under the leather coat. Charlie had warned him as he came in that she was there already. He had hoped he would be there before her and could get his nerves settled before seeing her, it was not every day a man tried to win back the girl he never stopped loving with the help of her parents.

"What are you doing here Victor?"

"Good to see you too, Rachel. How am I? Well fine, thanks for asking."

"Spare me," she said through gritted teeth, "I asked you a question."

"Your parents invited me for the holidays and to recuperate for a few weeks."

"Recuperate from what?"

"I got hurt on the job a few weeks ago, my apartment is too small and has too many stairs, your parents didn't want me to spend the holidays alone and they invited me since they are closer to my doctor. It's an easier cab ride than from Brooklyn."

"Well that's the breaks when you're a cop." Rachel said coldly.

"Damn, who made you such a cold hearted bitch?"

"You did, remember?" She took a good look at him. He was still tall and handsome.

His gray eyes had always captivated her and those lips could melt her in seconds. His shoulders were always wide, but he was a bit thinner. Then she noticed the cane. Rachel was instantly concerned, but she firmed her shoulders and pretended not to care; she would not care for him again, not now, not ever.

"My parents invited me so you can't stay."

"My, aren't we pleasant? I thought that Atlanta would have made a southern belle out of you." He had seen the concern in her eyes when she found out he had been hurt and it stung that she put it aside so quickly.

She paid no heed to his remark. "My parents aren't here. Anyway, they probably went out to shop for the holidays or something."

"Nope."

"What? What do you mean nope?"

"They left."

"Left? Left for where?"

"They called me last night and said they were going on a cruise, impromptu of course, and left a key with Charlie for me."

Rachel saw red and tried to calm down, she inhaled, taking deep breaths and counting, trying to be calm. "Do you mean to tell me that they left knowing I was coming and didn't tell me you would be here?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"Well, I'm here you can't stay, go back to Brooklyn."

"Can't, I need to be closer to my doctor and physical therapy." he said calmly.

"Well, I'm not staying. I'm going back to Atlanta." She snatched up her handbag and her suitcase. There was no way she was going to spend a week with him, Christmas or no Christmas.

"Uh, you can't, the airports are closed because of the blizzard."

"I'll get a freaking hotel then," she retorted.

"Come on Rae, you know that it's hard enough to get a hotel in this town on a normal day but during the holidays and a blizzard? Where are you going to go? To one of those seedy hotels where even the rats that live there aren't safe?"

She loosened her tongue then let loose with a stream of colorful curses. Victor winced, remembering quickly that when she was in a temper she had the mouth of a pirate, after her tirade she turned on him, her eyes burning with anger.

"Jesus, Rae..."

"Don't call me that. Don't you dare!" She exploded at the situation, seeing him, and having all these feeling come up after so long. She thought she was past him, but she was not. It hurt just as much as the day she left New York. "I don't want you here! I can't stay here with you."

"You have no other choice," he said softly and she knew he was right.

He finally moved from his spot by the front door, she could see his limp as he moved towards her, "Rachel..."

"No, don't you come near me Victor. I may have to stay here, but God knows I don't have to be nice to you or like it."

"We can be friends, Rachel."

"Never! You didn't want to be anything. You are the one who left me, who said goodbye to me on Christmas Eve." Her voice rose with every word. "Three years ago in Rockefeller Center, did it slip your mind, Vic? Is that how you can say friends after that? I put you out of my life and intend for you to stay out, so don't talk to me and when I leave I will go back to pretending I never even met you!"

With that she whirled and stormed down the hallway to the room her parents let her use and slammed the door. Victor stood in the middle of the room and stared after her. He longed to feel her in his arms again. Even after three years and a few states between them, she still affected him the same way. He was never able to get her out of his mind; he still loved her, now he had a week to show her she still loved him. He slowly walked over to the other bedroom. He was tired and his leg throbbed. He stared down the hall once more before he closed the door with a silent click.

Chapter 2

Rachel threw herself on the bed. Victor here on the one holiday she tried to get away from three years ago. *Why did her parents do this to her!* Her mother always believed that to cleanse the soul you had to revisit the past. Great! Now she was practicing her Zen mentality on her, well she did not have to stay. As soon as the airports opened again she was gone, there was no way in hell she was spending a week in this apartment with him!

On the other side of the hallway Victor sat heavily on the bed. He leg was aching miserably now and he hated to take the pills that he was prescribed. They made him drowsy and he hated to feel weak. Rachel looked better than he remembered, and her temper... His smile turned to a grimace as he felt a pain shoot through his leg. After he had gotten hurt he knew that time for playing was over, it took a near death experience to show him he had made a mistake by pushing her out of his life. Now he had his second chance, with the help of her parents. He would not let it pass this time. It was Friday now, and he knew Rachel... As soon as the storm passed she would try to hightail it out of the city. One day until Christmas...he could find away to keep her here. He slowly kicked off his shoes and laid on the bed fully dressed. He just needed a minute for the pain to subside, but she was here.

* * * *

Rachel sat up suddenly, when had it turned dark? The shadows had fallen across her room and the lights of the city beckoned outside her window. She had fallen asleep and for a minute her mind was a complete blank. She looked at the glowing digital number blinking at her from the table next to the bed, seven p.m. She had gotten to her parents place around two in the afternoon. Then it came flooding back to her, the afternoon surprise; *he* was still down the hall. She tried to hear if he was moving around, but all she got was silence. Her stomach rumbled reminding her that she had not eaten all day. Since her parents knew she was coming, and obviously him, she knew the refrigerator would be stocked. It sounded easier than going out to try to find a place to eat, but remembering her favorite Chinese place, she promised herself to get to that very soon. She swung her legs off the bed, went out into the hall and walked into the darkness of the living room. It seemed a waste that the apartment was decorated and not being used. So she walked around plugging in the Christmas tree and the lights that hung all around the room and in the hallway. She was in there fixing the last of the lights when she heard a noise, from the other guest bedroom. She shrugged it off as nothing, but then she heard it again, a low moan. She walked to the door and pressed her ear against it. The sound came again and Rachel grew concerned, she hated him for what he had done but she could not help but be worried. She knocked on the door softly calling his name.

"Go away." Was the mumbled response. His voice was low and she could hear the pain in his words. This time she did not wait for an answer she just opened the door.

"Damn it, Rachel, I said go away!"

"I heard you the first time."

"Then do it. Listen to me for once," he pleaded.

She sighed as she came closer, "When have I ever listened to you? You're obviously in pain. Let me help."

"I don't want you to see me like this," he pleaded once again.

She felt a tug on her heart at the tone of his voice. He always had to be the strong one never wanting to show any weakness, even now. But he needed help and she was

going to give it to him whether he wanted it or not, even though being close to him was going to be so hard. Even after the years that had past, her wounds had yet to heal.

"You overdid it, Victor. I'm going to help you get undressed and into bed. Where are your meds?"

"I don't want to take them," he said stubbornly.

"Listen dope, you need them. When did you get hurt?"

"A little over two weeks ago."

She nodded, "Right then, you're taking them." She rummaged through his bag and found his medication. It was some strong stuff and she immediately knew that it would make him sleepy. That was why his reaction was to refuse them.

She took the two pills and went to the bathroom and filled a glass with water, she stood over him and held them out to him. "Here," she said simply.

"No."

"You'll take them or I'll force them down your throat and in your condition do you think you could stop me?"

He looked at her and had no doubt she would do it, so he unwillingly took the pills and swallowed them. She watched him with those cat eyes she had, he lifted his tongue so she could see he had not tricked her.

"See? There, are you happy now?" He asked.

"No, not until we get you undressed and comfortable."

"Trying to get me in bed already, Rachel?" he teased with a pain-filled smile.

"Yeah, in your condition you couldn't handle it," she retorted.

He grabbed her hand and looked her directly in her eyes, "I always could, don't you remember?" She felt the heat of his touch run through her body and she could not tear her gaze away. He felt her pull her hand away breaking the connection that sizzled between them. It was still there, he knew it from that one touch, she still had the power to turn him inside out.

"Let's get this done and I'll see what I can make for dinner," Rachel said as she began unzipping his slacks. She tried to move efficiently and think of him as one of her

patients. The movements of her trying to remove his pants and the motion of the bed caused Victor to grit his teeth in pain. Rachel's eyes were not on him but on the jagged scar that ran down his thigh starting from his hip. The wound was still red and it cut an ugly swath down his skin, around the wound the flesh was healing, but she could see he had been burned as well.

"My God, what happened to you!?" She asked in a horrified voice.

Victor interpreted her tone as disgust and tried to cover himself. Her gaze traveled to his face and saw his shame and embarrassment.

"I told you to leave, I can handle it," he said through gritted teeth.

"I've seen worse, Vic."

"Yeah right, you shoulda seen your face."

"I was amazed, with a wound like that you shouldn't even be out of the hospital. "

"That's what they told me when I left," he replied with dry humor. "You know how I hate hospitals."

Rachel's face softened as she looked at him, "What happened to cause this, Victor? How did you get injured?"

"Disarming a bomb about three weeks ago. I was the bomb tech on call with my SWAT team. They sent me in to get a bomb out of a bank. I disarmed it, or so I thought, got it outside just as the secondary switch triggered it. I was in my protection suit, but the blast was too close. It tore through my leg and I had some embedded shrapnel," he sighed. "They did the surgery and this is the result."

With every word of the story she felt a chill work through her body; he spoke like he was giving an update to his captain in a squad room. But she was staring the damage from his work right in the face. Was this the reason why he left her? Because he knew she would have to face something like this eventually? Or did he not think she had the strength to handle it?

"How much damage was there?" She asked, her voice soft as her hands stroked lightly over the red, angry skin of his wound. She felt his body spasm as he winced in pain.

"Enough," was his reply.

"How much time do you get to heal and recover?" That question from her caused him to give a harsh laugh filled with anger and misery. Her head shot up to look at him, and she was staring at hurt and torment.

"I don't get to go back Rachel. This is it; I'm going to have a permanent limp. I couldn't go behind a desk after this. They gave me early retirement with a full pension. I couldn't stand being there watching the guys go off to a call and being stuck behind a damn desk.

Rachel heard his words and each one was punctuated with his pain, from the wound and the loss of the job he loved. She knew he thought this was the only thing he was good at, that the job was all he had; to lose that must be killing him.

"I'm so sorry, Victor."

"Sure you are. Those are the breaks when you are a cop right?" His sarcastic remark went straight to her old wounds, rubbing salt into her already raw emotions.

"Believe me or not, I'm sorry and I'm sure is hell past caring what you think! But I'm not one to see anyone suffer so I'll help you get comfortable and feed your ass. Guaranteed when I can leave I'm outta here. You can go back to wallowing in self pity."

The rest of his pants came down with an angry tug that caused him to wince; he couldn't stop the moan that slipped out.

"Sorry." She muttered and stalked off. She came back carrying an ice pack and a bowl filled with water. The silence was deafening, and Victor needed to get her past this anger that stood between them. This was not going to work if she was mad at him or if he kept baiting her.

"What's all that for?"

That earned him a withering look "It's for your leg, it's obviously inflamed."

"How long have the stitches been out?"

"About four days." He muttered under his breath, hoping she would not hear what he said.

"Damn it Vic, you should still be in the freaking hospital."

"Watch that potty mouth of yours," he said amused, her personality could be so sweet and submissive sometimes, but then the switch could turn to boil in an instant, the combination of the two was something he could not resist in her.

"I said freaking, nothing bad." Rachel replied.

"Yeah, but I know how foul your mouth can be."

"I've learned to control that part of my personality."

"Must I remind you of a few hours ago when you were streaming curses at me with the flair of a sea captain?"

"You bring that out in me."

"That's not all I bring..."

She batted her eyes sweetly at him, cutting him off and in her best sugary sweet southern accent said, "Victor, shut up. Before I hurt you."

With that said she began to tend to his leg, alternating between hot and cold compresses. He could feel it soothing him, the pills were kicking in as well, and soon the throbbing in his leg had dulled immensely.

"I think I have some cocoa butter in my things that will soothe your leg," she remarked. "Shall I get it?"

A mumbled noise came from his throat and Rachel took that as a yes. He was almost asleep from the pain medication and if he could sleep he was not hurting as much as before. She left the hot compress on his leg and came back carrying a small jar. It was cocoa butter in its purest form. It was thick and would not be absorbed quickly into his skin. But in that form it was also the best to use on scars and sore skin. She worked quickly, drying off his injured leg and gently rubbing the cool cream on the red, angry marks on his thigh. His murmur of contentment made Rachel smile; he was always the one who would purr in his sleep like a contented cat when he was comfortable. She shook away those memories of past happiness with Vic. Thinking about it would only stir up feelings she was determined to keep at bay. Rachel placed a towel over his injury so he would not get the cocoa butter all over. She then covered him with a blanket, and left him to sleep. Padding silently into the kitchen, Rachel

looked around to see what was there, trying to decide what to make for dinner by the time he woke up.

Chapter 3

A blaring horn outside the building startled Victor out of his sleep. He opened his eyes groggily and tried to orient himself to the room. He had fallen asleep while she was taking care of his leg. He tried moving it gingerly finding the movements less painful than the last couple of days. The pain had subsided considerably, to a very dull throb; he moved the blanket and saw she had placed a towel over his injury. Victor moved the towel and he saw she had rubbed something on the red sore skin.

He sniffed at the cream, *Cocoa butter*, he thought wrinkling his nose at the smell, if any of the guys at the station knew he had that on him, they would give him shit for a month. The smile that curved his lips died instantly. No more joking around at the station with the guys, no more late night stakeouts or raids, he was going to miss it, miss the guys. But if his new plan worked out he would have a little of everything, the excitement of a cop life, a wife who would not have to worry if he was safe and a job he could excel at. He was keeping his fingers crossed at the wife part of the plan.

Victor swung his injured leg slowly off the bed and tested its strength as he sat on the edge of the mattress. It felt good, well, as good as it was going to get until he was completely healed. He took his time and pulled on a pair of sweats. Rachel had left his cane in easy reach so he took it and went out to see what she was doing. He found her sitting in an overstuffed chair watching the eleven o' clock news.

She looked up as he walked into the living room, "Hey, I thought you'd sleep straight through until morning."

It was no use asking him why he was out of bed, Rachel knew him well enough to understand that he hated to depend on anyone. That was why she had left his cane close by.

"Damn horn woke me up."

She grinned broadly, "I don't have to deal with that in Georgia."

"But you miss it. "

"Yeah, I do," she admitted, "So you hungry? I made some stuff when you were asleep."

"I could eat," he limped over to go to the kitchen.

Rachel knew it would be extra stress on his injury so she jumped up from the chair.

"Ok, I made a simple one, two, three pasta, sit on the couch, I'll get you some." She rushed into the kitchen before he could reply and Victor watched her go. She had pulled her hair into a ponytail and changed her clothes, opting for long pajamas. Rachel had also turned on all the Christmas lights and the tree. The apartment looked festive and with the blizzard outside, he felt that Christmas in New York feeling pass over him. He had to admit, he felt more upbeat than he had been in a long while.

"Here you go Vic," she called as she walked out of the kitchen. She saw he had gotten settled on the couch, his injured leg straightened out and his other leg on the floor. She gave him the steaming bowl of food, with a cloth under it so as not to burn his hands. "How's your leg feeling?"

"Better than it did a couple of hours ago," he took his first bite of the pasta and sighed in pleasure, he had missed her cooking. The pasta with chicken, vegetables, and her spices was a treat to his taste buds. Too many meals from takeout chicken places, and then hospital food made him appreciate the taste of the meal. She sat down in the chair she had vacated a few minutes before and they watched the news in silence. The weather report came on and one of the more famous weathermen in the tri-state area let them know that the snowstorm was going to get worse before it got any better.

"Looks like your going to be stuck here a few days, Rae," he commented around a mouthful of food.

"Not if I can help it."

"Rae, we can stay here and be civil to each other you know."

"It's Rachel and I already made plans to stay somewhere else until I can leave for Atlanta."

"Really, where?" He asked curiously.

"I'm going to stay with Louis, when I can take a cab to the Bronx." She threw out the name and waited for his response.

Louis, the name set his teeth on edge, another cop who had been vying for Rachel's affection. Victor had won the battle, but now it seemed like Louis was going to finish and win the war.

"Louis, as in Louis Tomzyck?" He asked, "You kept in touch with him?"

"Why yes," she said sweetly, "we kept in touch over that past three years, he has always been asking me to come back to New York. So when I called him up he was very eager to have me come and stay with him for a few days."

"I can't believe you kept in touch with him and there has not even been a hello to me since you left." Victor hissed out, slightly offended that Louis had received the occasional call and he had not.

"You broke it off, Victor. Louis never did anything to me." She continued on, knowing she was baiting him, but not able to stop herself from doing it. "Oh, he is so excited to see me. He said he redid his place and now it has a huge fireplace. We can sit and have wine, watch the fire and catch up, who knows I might have a reason to stay in the city after all."

"Watch it, Rae," he growled the warning, his blood was beginning to boil and he knew he would say something he would regret afterwards.

"What do you mean, Vic?" She asked innocently, "I'm just talking about having a good time by a roaring fire, who knows what might happen."

"If he touches you, I'll break both his arms."

"You have no say on who touches me anymore."

"How many have touched you since me?" His hands itched to touch her now and to break any man who has dared touch her in the years that had passed...

"That is none of your beeswax," she said primly.

His eyes narrowed, "Let me make this perfectly clear Rachel, you will not be staying with Louis Tomzyck, I won't have it."

Her eyes shot daggers at him, her temper also rising; they could always rub each other the wrong way. That was what made their relationship so volatile and the making up after those arguments so passionate.

"Well let me make this perfectly clear to you Victor Leland Cantrell, you don't tell me what I can and cannot do, who I can or cannot see or stay with, you don't tell me anything! I will do as I freaking please and if you think otherwise, I'll drop you in hell before I give you that opportunity again!"

With that outburst she jumped out of the chair and tried to walk past him on the sofa. Forgetting about his injury Victor's hand snaked out and grabbed hers, pulling her down on his lap. He felt the jarring pain run up his leg but he paid it no attention, his hands delved deep into her hair and he pulled her in taking her lips in a fierce kiss. Fire shot through them both instantly, turning Rachel's insides to liquid and causing Victor's body to harden against her. His tongue licked her lips then penetrated her mouth like he wanted to do with her body. She took his tongue in, sucking gently at first then with more force, Victor groaned low in his throat taking the kiss deeper. He had missed her taste and the way she kissed, it was always as if it was going to be the last kiss she would ever have. All of the pent up passion and sexuality Rachel had came out in that kiss. She took what he offered and gave in return. He always had the power to kiss her and make her forget reason. The kiss ended with small little nips on her lips, then Victor laid his forehead against hers, their breathing heavy and passion thick in the air.

"Do you think Louis could do that to you? Could make you feel like that?" He asked fiercely.

Her head came up sharply, anger flashing to the surface again; she pushed off him ignoring his groan of pain.

"I never said you weren't a good fuck Victor, just bad at the relationship part," her voice was cold and angry. Angry at herself for falling into his arms as if she was starving for his kiss.

"You know you still want me and I want you, too," his voice cocky as he said it.

"I want candy, doesn't mean it's good for me. This won't happen again." She continued on, "Who knows, Louis might be good at both."

"You can be such a bitch, Rachel." Victor threw the words out at her, hoping they could be some defense against the hurt he felt at what she said.

"And you Victor are a first class bastard." With that she walked away down the hallway leaving him there, sitting alone.

"He'll never make you feel like you do with me," he called after her. The only response was the slamming of the door to the bedroom, the second time in less than twenty-four hours. *Just great Vic, pissed her off again* he thought with a long sigh. Victor laid his head back against the arm of the sofa, *God!* The woman could drive him insane, make him completely jealous, and want to throttle her all at once. He sighed again, he had just wanted to tell her to stay, how did he get off that point so quickly? The bowl filled with pasta was empty and he put it on the coffee table next to him. He would just sit here for a minute and think about the best way to approach her in the morning.

* * * *

Victor was stirred awake again, this time by the ringing of a phone. Light was coming through the window. Not much, he could see it was still snowing, or maybe the snow blowing around since they were on one of the upper floors of the building. It seems he had fallen asleep on the sofa with the TV on. The time on the cable box said seven forty-five a.m. The ringing persisted and he reached over to take the cordless phone from its base. He pressed the button and while trying to get the sleep from his voice said a scratchy, "Hello?"

"Victor! I thought she'd already killed you!" the laughing voice on the other end of the line was Rachel's mother.

"Marcella, hi, and no. No murder has been committed in your home," he replied with humor in his voice.

Marcella Hinds was a sweet woman with a little Caribbean spice. Rachel's parents had moved from the island of St Lucia to NY long ago, but she still retained a slight piece of her French Creole accent. In some ways she had become his second mother. His parents were long passed away and even after the break up he had visited often and she made him feel like family.

"How is operation reunite going? Where's Rachel?" Marcella asked.

"She's in her room sulking, sleeping, I don't know. The other thing is not going so well. She is angry and hurt and we always were able to get under each other's skin."

A sad sigh came over the telephone, "Poor both of you, I hope it works out, but if she says no Victor, I have to respect my daughter's wishes. I'm pulling for you too honey. I wouldn't have gone away if I didn't think this was going to work," she added hurriedly.

"I know Marcella and thank you." Victor replied rubbing his hand over his face, he needed a shave. The voice at the other end of the phone brought his attention back to the conversation.

"Keep your chin up, you are both stubborn as hell, good luck."

"Thanks, where's Henry?" Victor asked inquiring about Rachel's father.

"He's on the deck playing shuffle board, he's found that he's good at it," her laughter was infectious and Victor found himself with a wide smile on his face.

"Well, you go join him and don't let any cabin boys steal you away from me." Victor replied.

She laughed even louder at this remark, "You're fresh Victor and I'll try not to, good luck and bye."

"Bye." He put the phone back on the base feeling better than he had a few minutes earlier. He had a doctor's appointment he had to get to and it was Christmas Eve. Victor

had a special present in mind and not a lot of time. *Time to get to work Buddy*, he thought. He moved his leg slowly off the couch, it was a little stiff since he had slept that way all night, but the pain was manageable today. He took his time getting to his room, got showered and dressed and was out the door thirty minutes later. Downstairs Charlie the doorman looked at him with a question in his eyes. He gave him a thumbs up and the old man's face broke out into a smile as he passed him to go on to the street. The snow had not stopped as he thought, and he watched the fat flakes fall from the sky.

Victor hailed a cab and got in; because of the weather it moved at a snail's pace. It gave him time to think how he was going to approach Rachel when he got back. He knew what he wanted to say, but for some reason his words leapt from his head every time he was near her, so he decided on the direct approach. Tell her straight out what he wanted and offer her a challenge. She never could resist a challenge, especially one from him, so now he had to change the rules of the game and not go for subtlety. Everything was at stake. His heart was on the line.

Chapter 4

An empty apartment again, Rachel thought as she walked out to the kitchen, there was no sign of Victor, she would peek in his room just to see if he was asleep, not that she cared one way or the other. She made a pot of coffee and took a cup with her back to her room. Pulling out a beige cropped sweater and a pair of black jeans; she laid them on the bed and went into the shower. Standing under the hot spray of water she thought about last night, his kisses. Just the thought made her body flush with heat. She wanted to kiss her way down his body until she could... *Whoa, bad place to go thought-wise.* She shook her head as if to clear the invading thought. "Girl you have been in the shallow side of the dating pool way to long," she said out loud to no one but herself. She continued with her shower and tried not to think about Vic. Rachel's next step was going to be shopping and trying to figure out what to do. She could always think clearly in a shoe sale. The Louis Tomzyck story was a lie, she talked to him yes, but she would not be staying with him. He was married now and had a baby on the way. She had used it because she knew it would get under Victor's skin. All her friends were either out of town or had big plans for the holiday. She had not told anyone she was going to be in the city, so she was solo for her shopping spree. *She could always change her flight and go home earlier than expected* she mused to herself, but she shook her head in a silent refusal. The cost to change her ticket to an earlier flight was over a hundred dollars because of the holiday. Honestly, she really did not want to go back to Atlanta until after her week's vacation, she wanted to shop and enjoy the city she loved and

missed. She would think on it while she saw what the lovely department stores had to offer. An hour later she breezed out the doors of the building. Charlie hailed her a cab and she kissed the cheek of the doorman. He immediately flushed beet red and wished her a good day, with a wave she was off into the city and her day of fun. *Shopping here I come*, she thought with a grin.

* * * *

Three hours later Victor was walking through the door to the Hinds' home once again. His doctor's appointment and therapy had gone well, they now thought his limp would not be as bad as first predicted. After a somewhat painful therapy session he had soaked in the hospital whirlpool for a half an hour to relieve tension in the injured muscles. His plans were in place and in his pocket sat the Christmas surprise he had for Rachel. He wanted to give it to her at midnight. Victor could tell she was gone; the rooms were too quiet. If she was there, there would be music blaring and she would be shaking her body along to the beat. As he turned on the Christmas lights and the tree, there was a knock on the door and the other part of his surprise arrived.

"Hey boys, you can set up next to the Christmas tree by the window." The men who came worked quickly, hardly making a sound while he watched and in about fifteen minutes everything was set. They left just as quietly as they came, with only a simple nod at his thanks. He looked around and everything was perfect, it was just a matter of waiting until she came home. Victor changed in the bedroom and laid across the bed, he decided to take a little nap until she arrived.

Rachel walked in around five in the evening, the sky had already gone dark and the city lights were gleaming like its own sparkling decorations for the holiday. Her face was flushed from the cold and the exhilaration of the day. She came inside the warm apartment with her hands full of packages. She had bought presents for her parents, which she intended to leave under the tree when she left. She had hit three shoe sales and acquired some great boots that she bought in three different colors.

Sweaters at Barney's, more sexy tops, flirty skirts, four dresses, and hot jeans were all in her packages. Atlanta was a great town but nothing beat New York sales. Rachel was feeling on top of the world and in the holiday spirit, she was feeling so good she had even bought Victor a gift, it was the season of giving after all. All the wonderful thoughts fled when she saw the living room. She dropped all her packages and stared with her mouth open in surprise. By the window right next to the Christmas tree a table was set up, with a poinsettia centerpiece that held candles. The tablecloth was champagne colored with red edging. An ice bucket with champagne was set in a stand next to it and two dishes on a warmer sat at each place setting. She read the covers on the meals "Portifino's", one of the city's most exclusive restaurants.

A smile took over her face and she grabbed her packages and hurried down the hallway, dropped them in her room on the floor. Leaving the door open she ran to the room that Victor occupied and threw the door open. He had fallen asleep, dressed in dark slacks and a dark shirt with the buttons open revealing the hair on his chest. Rachel felt a pang of affection run through her; he looked so boyish while he slept. She longed to run her fingers through the soft mat of hair again like she used to when she lay on his chest. Rachel walked over and looked down at the sleeping man, she had loved him so fiercely, and she thought she would have died when he told her it was over. The hurt was so bad she left New York, a place she loved, and moved to a new city to start a new life far away from the memories of Victor. Looking at him now, his face peaceful with sleep, she felt it stir inside her heart once again and she did not know what to do.

Walking out of the room she closed the door quietly and went back to her room. It had been a long day and she showered the city off of her and changed into a simple white knit dress. The silence of the quiet apartment was broken when she put in a disc of holiday tunes. The light melody of Nat King Cole's "Merry Little Christmas" filled the air.

Rachel sat in front of the Christmas tree just like she used to as a child and watched the blinking lights, but her thoughts were on the man in the other room. Why

would he go through so much trouble to do this for her? She knew she could not go through heartbreak with him once again, this time it would destroy her. But maybe they could have one final holiday together; maybe then she could let go and move on. Her thoughts whirled around in her head trying to figure out what was best to do. That was how Victor found her a half an hour later. He had woken up knowing instantly he had overslept. He swore to himself and rushed out to the living room, there she was, she had gone from sitting in front of the tree to lying under it, staring up through the branches. The lights of the tree glittered off the copper streaks in her hair and her face. He thought right at that moment about how beautiful she was.

"What are you doing, Rae?"

She looked over at him, starting at his feet her gaze traveled to his face, "Just thinking."

"About what?" Victor asked softly.

"You, me, this," she waved her hand over to the table, where she had lit the candles on the centerpiece. "Why did you do all this, Vic?"

He got down to the floor stretching out his leg slowly. "Well I thought it would be nice for us. Didn't expect to oversleep and ruin everything," he laughed softly.

"It's not ruined, I kept the food warm."

"It wasn't just the food, I was going to talk, and you were going to talk. It was going to be all very dramatic."

"Ok, so talk now," she laughed.

"It's a serious talk, not to be held under a Christmas tree."

"I disagree," Rachel said, "it's a perfect place to talk about serious things."

"No it's not; I was trying to be a gentleman." Victor said with a smile on his face.

She leaned over him, her hair making a canopy around them, "Well then, let's not talk at all," she whispered.

Rachel was tired of analyzing her emotions; tonight she just wanted to feel. She kissed him softly, then with growing passion. His hand went to the back of her neck pulling her closer into his chest as they kissed. Rachel's fingers nimbly unbuttoned his

shirt, then twined into the mat of hair on his chest. It was just like she remembered, soft against a hard body. His hands slid up her thighs, to her waist, and then further to cup her breasts over the material of her dress. She arched, pressing herself more firmly into his strong fingers, moaning softly against his lips. She stood suddenly and with one fluid motion took her dress off, revealing just skimpy black panties underneath, those were soon removed and she was gloriously naked. The different colors of the Christmas lights dancing along her skin. Victor's breath caught, his eyes traveled along her body, remembering every curve until he met her gaze. He held out his hand to her and she gracefully knelt beside him. Kissing, touching, both trying to get him out of his clothes until he too was nude. His lips took her nipple and he felt her tremble, he was hungry for her and soon filled his mouth with the soft smooth globe.

"Touch me, Vic" Rachel whispered, "I missed how you touched me."

Her body was straddled across his lap leaving her open, they both watched as his hand slid down between the valley of her breasts to the flat plane of her stomach to settle between her thighs. His first touch caused her to jerk against his hand, she was already dripping wet. Victor watched her as he slowly rubbed her clit, then with a little more pressure. Her mouth was swollen with his kisses and parted as little moaning pants escaped from between her lips. It pleased him to watch her as she felt pleasure, her hips grinding against his hand.

"Yes baby, let it come," he whispered.

"Oh God," she moaned, she felt it building inside her, as if she was reaching for something she craved. He plunged two fingers inside her and his thumb still pressed against that secret button. She rode his fingers and he shuddered beneath her, it was everything he remembered, but so much more. Rachel came apart with his fingers still buried inside her, her body shaking as she fell over that sensual cliff. Victor stroked her hair as she lay against his chest, her body still having little tremors. She looked at him and held his gaze, her soft hand wrapped around him as she slipped his manhood into her wet, waiting body.

A groan escaped his lips as he felt himself deep inside her. It was like molten velvet and her muscles contracted around him, holding him in, taking him deeper. He clenched his fingers into the thick carpet as she rode him, every movement of her hips, was sweet pain to him. He knew she was trying to be gentle because of his leg, but he wanted the fire, the passion.

"Ride me, Rachel, hard," he moaned.

"I don't want to hurt your leg," she felt her body's response to having him buried inside her. She was trying to hold on to control for both their sakes, not to cause him pain and because she felt as if she was melting from the inside out.

"You won't hurt me, I know how you like it baby," he panted.

She moaned low in her throat sounding like a sleek jungle cat's purr and she let her restrained control go. She ground her hips taking him even deeper. The intensity grew as she rode him. Her fingers were tangled in the hair on his chest, his hands gripped her hips, lifting her and pulling her down on him harder. She threw her head back in ecstasy, "I'm going to come, Victor, please!"

"Yes baby, let it come, Rae."

Once again she exploded like a new star being born in the sky in a burst of fire. Victor saw her go over that edge and then followed, spilling himself into her. Rachel collapsed against him once again and they lay under the Christmas tree until their heartbeats calmed down to a normal rhythm. Soon after Rachel rose up to look at Vic, his eyes were closed and there was a small smile on his face.

"Why the Cheshire Cat look, hmmmm?" She asked softly with a smile of her own.

"I was just thinking that this was better than food."

"We didn't have any food yet, Vic. You ravished me without even giving me dinner." Rachel said in her best pouting voice.

"I ravished you? You were the one on top!"

"Yeah but you wanted me there didn't you," she said wickedly, giving him a smacking kiss on the lips she got up and went over to the table.

"I'm starved now," she said with her back turned to him. "Let's see what we have here. We have penne pasta and shrimp in a vodka wine sauce. And, oh! Raspberry chocolate cheesecake! I'm starting with that."

Victor was only half listening. Reaching for his pants, he retrieved something from the pocket. It was just before midnight so he thought this was the perfect time. Rachel turned around with a forkful of cheesecake in her mouth to see Victor sitting there with a velvet box opened up, the diamond ring inside the box glittered and Rachel's eyes widened.

"Marry me, Rae," he said simply with a big smile on his face.

Rachel thought she had never seen a more beautiful sight, a naked man holding a ring box, but the question hit her like a ton of bricks. The appetite that Rachel had two seconds before left her instantly and she sat down weakly in one of the chairs.

"W-What did you say to me?" she asked quietly.

"I said marry me." Victor repeated.

"Why? I mean why now? What happened three years ago when this is what I wanted?"

"Things were different back then, Rae. My job was dangerous and I didn't want to have to worry about leaving you behind if something happened to me."

"And now?" Rachel asked.

"Now it's different, I'm not on the force anymore. The new job I'll be doing is not dangerous in the least and we can get married and start a family."

Rachel listened to his words, he stopped talking and there was dead silence until she spoke.

"So that was the reason? You're telling me you broke my heart because you thought I couldn't handle the worry or stress from your job? But now you're hurt and off the force so I can forget the heartache and pain I went through because you want me back and for us to get married no less."

This was not going how Victor had planned; he could see Rachel's temper beginning to simmer and tried to calm the situation before it got any worse.

"Rae," he said soothingly, "I just want to be with you."

"But three years ago I was too weak to handle it, right?"

"No, I've seen what cops' wives go through when they lose their husbands. I didn't want you to have to go through that."

"Oh I see, but now I don't have to worry right?"

"Right, I will be running a security firm for high end clients all across the country. The most I'll be doing is babysitting rich people or doing the security for their homes."

He added hastily, "I'll be doing a lot of work in Georgia, and I figured we could buy a house down there and when I have to travel to New York you could come with me."

"Oh why didn't I think of that? Let me drop my life for Vic and go state hopping with him!" She said angrily.

"You are the most arrogant, self serving bastard I know, Victor!" You can go to hell if you think this is going to happen! How dare you think you can hurt me and then because we have a good fuck under a goddamn Christmas tree that you can just say, well hey, marry me?"

"Rachel, I love you! I've always loved you! I want us! I'm sorry that I hurt you, but we can get past this."

She took a deep breath to calm down and asked, "One thing Victor, tell me if you hadn't gotten hurt on the job, would you have asked me this question?"

He looked into her eyes and hesitated but before he could answer she said quietly, "That's my answer right there."

She gathered up her discarded clothes and still naked, walked to her room and closed the door, this time he heard the lock click. Victor sat there quietly for a few moments staring at the place where they had just made love. In frustration and anger he threw the ring box with the ring still inside into the branches of the Christmas tree.

"Fuck!" he said harshly as he slowly got up and walked to the bedroom, His leg was throbbing painfully again and this time he took the pain pills without even

thinking about it. He just wanted to sleep a dreamless sleep tonight; tomorrow he would try to talk to her again.

Rachel was crying in the other room. Through the tears streaming down her face, she hastily threw her things in to her suitcase. She did not care how they were packed; she just needed to go back to Atlanta. *He loves you still*, her heart said, *and you still love him*. However, her mind broke in with its own argument. *He didn't love you enough to trust you, to believe you could handle his job*. At the end of the battle between mind and heart, Rachel knew she could not stay until after Christmas. She called and changed her ticket for the next available flight to Georgia not caring about the cost.

She waited until she heard complete silence in the apartment. She did not want to see him when she left. She walked out, pulling her luggage behind her the little wheels making no sound in the thick carpet. She left her parents' gifts under the tree, and turned off all the lights and decorations.

Before she left she walked back to the door that Victor slept soundly behind. For a moment she laid her cheek against the smooth surface, then she bent down and placed his gift by the door. With one last look around she closed the door. After locking it she went down into the cool night and hailed a cab. The yellow cab drove away and she looked back at the apartment, every block making it further and further away. Again, silent tears ran down her cheeks.

Chapter 5

She was gone. He sat on the sofa with the gift she left at his door on his lap. Victor stared at the shiny blue paper with a silver bow around it. Rachel had snuck out in the middle of the night while he slept. He should not have taken those damn pills, then he would have heard her try to creep out and could have stopped her.

Damn who was he fooling? He could not have stopped her, even if he had tried it would be like trying to stop a moving train, she would have unleashed hellfire on him if he had tried. God! How had it gone so wrong, from them loving to a fight in just an instant? He thought he was in the right three years ago telling her goodbye, he had not wanted her to feel pain if she had ever lost him. He understood now that by trying to spare her that he had caused her more pain than he had imagined. He was stupid, he may have been wrong three years ago, but by God he was not going to give up. He was going to fight and get her back. He unwrapped the gift slowly and inside there was an amber Phoenix rising from flames, a sign of renewal.

* * * *

A week had passed since Rachel went back to Atlanta. She had gotten off the plane moving like a drone; she had picked up her car from airport parking and driven home. At her small apartment she crawled into bed and cried herself to sleep. From there she went through her week on automatic, going to work, smiling on cue, even

pulling out a laugh for co-workers or a friend. On the inside she did not feel it, it was all just pretend. In the silence of her little apartment, she let her hurt take over and sometimes she just lay in bed hugging herself as she wept; it was like losing him all over again. Her parents called and thanked her for the gifts she left, a crystal decanter and glasses for her father and his brandy, an embroidery set for her mom. She talked and acted like everything was ok, but her mom who always seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to her emotions said at the end of the conversation, "Baby, old hurts heal if you let them and love can make the pain nonexistent, just let yourself feel." Her throat had clogged with tears at those words and she said goodbye quickly and wept again.

The first gift came at her job; she was just finishing up with a client when she was called to the front desk. The receptionist, Emily, stared at the Christmas wrapping curiously.

"Late gift? Christmas was over a week ago." Emily said.

"I don't know." Rachel said with curiosity, "Maybe it's from my parents?"

She unwrapped the paper that was filled with Santa Claus and candy canes. Under the paper was the largest snow globe she had ever seen. The backdrop was Rockefeller Center and the Christmas tree. The little card stuck to the glass said, "Turn Key," so she did and the song "Deck the Halls" began to play. In the watery globe it began to snow. By that time a few other of her co-worker had gathered and their gasps of delight went unheard by her. She knew who had sent it, but she did not know why.

"It's awesome," one of the younger therapists said. "Do you know who sent it?"

Rachel lied and said, "No clue. Must be my dad's idea of a joke."

She took it out to her car; the rest of her day was spent thinking about what Victor was up to. She did not have long wait to find out, the next morning she heard a loud humming noise outside her apartment and knocking on her door. With tousled bed hair she padded out to the living room and answered the persistent knock.

A man stood there with a hard hat and a clipboard. "Where should I put the snow ma'am?"

"W-w-what? The what?" She stammered.

The burly man sighed impatiently. "The snow ma'am, from the snow machine that's out front."

"I didn't order snow, you must be mistaken."

"I got it right here," the man said looking at his clipboard. "For Ms. Rachel Hind's apartment, two zero six. Signed and paid for."

Her neighbors had already started to gather, some because of curiosity and some because of the noise. The kids that lived in the different apartments also came out, already in hats and gloves and shoes.

"Ms. Rachel can we play in the snow?" A little girl asked.

How could she refuse the little innocent eyes looking at her from different corners of the building? Some who had never even seen snow.

"As long as your parents say it's okay and you guys wait for me." With loud cheers around her, she told the big guy in the hard hat who was now wearing a grin on his face, "Put it on the front lawn."

She ran back inside and hurriedly pulled on her jeans, sweater, hat, and gloves and ran outside to play with the kids in the snow. She released all her pent up emotions in that snow, building snowmen and throwing snowballs with the kids. Their laughter and the fun uplifting her spirits. Because of the warmer winter Georgia was having, the snow melted by early afternoon. The kids trudged off to their homes chattering away about the snow and she closed the door to her home with a big smile on her face.

The telephone rang as she was putting her damp things in the washer and she ran to pick it up.

"Hello?" She said breathlessly and she recognized the voice instantly at the other end of the line.

"Did you enjoy your snow?" His deep voice made a shiver run through her body

"Victor what are you up to?" She asked but there was a smile in her voice.

"You didn't answer my question." Victor replied.

"Yes we did, the kids in the buildings around me and I, we all played until it melted."

It was Rachel's turn to question him once again. "Now you answer my question, what are you up to, Vic?"

Vic was smiling as he said, "making Christmas."

"I've got to go Rae, but keep looking for Santa," he said quickly.

Before she could respond, he hung up and she hugged the phone to her for a few seconds before she put it back into its cradle. Rachel could not stop smiling, she decided to take her mom's advice maybe she should make new memories to replace the old wounds. It would be a stupid mistake to give up on a love that she knew would never leave her heart.

She dressed for work quickly, running late, but for once not caring and soon she was immersed in her daily routine. Her thoughts were on Vic and his crazy antics though, the smile he put on her face stayed there all day.

Sunday dawned bright and early in Atlanta; the weather was already a balmy sixty degrees, fairly warm for a day in early January. Rachel rolled over in bed and swore she heard bells jingling, in her half-awake state she figured she was just hearing things.

Until she heard screams outside her window. Kids were yelling "Santa! Santa!" She scrambled out of bed for the second time in two days, with her hair wild all around her face. The door leading to the balcony was thrown open. There in the middle of the courtyard was a sleigh complete with horses wearing little reindeer horns and Santa sitting in the middle of presents galore. Santa suspiciously had grey eyes and two elves that looked suspiciously like her parents. She laughed aloud and leaned over the balcony yelling. "What are you people doing?"

The elves that were busy handing out presents to kids that were gathering and bewildered parents, who were also getting gifts, just waved and went back to work.

"Hey little girl, why don't you come downstairs and see what Santa brought you?" Santa called up to her.

"It seems Santa brought some elves I seem to know."

“Ho, ho, ho. Come see what else Santa brought.”

Rachel laughed aloud again and went inside to change, how did he ever rope her parents into doing this crazy stunt? She thought a moment, shrugged and figured it was not too hard since she thought they were a little odd as far as parents went. Finally dressed in a green sweater and jeans she ran a brush through her hair, checked herself in the mirror and went downstairs. Outside was filled with wrapping paper, chattering kids and adults. It seems her whole complex was in the courtyard. Amidst hugs from people, some who she had never met, she was finally able to wade through to her parent elves and Santa, A.K.A. Victor.

Her mom gave her a kiss and a hug whispering, “This is love girl.” Spreading her arms to show what Victor did for her and the community. Rachel chose to live in a neighborhood that some called the poor side of town, she called it a community. The people who lived there worked hard and got by how they could, but in this complex they were all like family helping each other one way or the other. Some of these kids probably got something small for Christmas, a trinket that their parent could afford. The kids here probably assumed Santa forgot about them and this neighborhood. Now, seeing all the kids with bright eyes and happy faces and the parents all happy as well, she knew Victor did a good thing, not just for her but for the people in her complex.

It made her love him all the more, she knew she loved him, she had never stopped loving him, she had let anger and hurt make her blind to the fact that her feelings would never change. Victor looked down at her from the sleigh and held his hand out to her, Rachel took his hand and he helped her up to sit next to him.

“This was wonderful Victor,” she said. “Look how happy you made all of them.”

“I’m glad that I could,” he replied. “Now what could Santa give little Rae for Christmas?”

“Santa, Santa!” A little girl cried out and Victor looked at the little girl who carried a baby doll, Victor reached over and lifted her into the sleigh with Rachel’s help.

“What can Santa do for you little peanut?” He asked in his Santa voice.

“Nothing Santa,” the little girl said. “My mom said we should thank you and I wanted to give you a hug.” Victor opened his arms and the little one barreled in and hugged him tight, then she gave him a kiss on his cheek. Soon there were yells and screams of, “Thank you Santa!” ringing in the air.

Rachel’s dad hugged her mom as she wiped tears from her eyes and Rachel felt tears mist her eyes. For now, their conversation had to be put on hold until after the celebration, then she would tell him how she felt.

The impromptu party broke up around noon and after the clean up and everyone dwindled away. Victor gave her a long hard kiss and promised her he would be back. He had to return the sleigh and horses, her parents drove off to their hotel after saying they would see her later. Her dad gave her a kiss on her forehead and whispered, “Be happy baby.” Rachel’s dad was not a man of many words and that was his simple dad way of giving her his blessings. Now Rachel sat alone in her apartment on pins and needles waiting for him to arrive, she finally knew what she needed, what she longed for, and it was him.

The knock came on the door and she rushed over to open it launching herself into his arms and kissing him before he could even step across the threshold into the room. Victor wrapped his arms around her tight and squeezed her close, accepting her kisses like a thirsty man being given a drink. His leg was stronger, but there was still a long way to go. He kicked the door close with his good leg and they stood, their tongues mating in a sensual dance. Still in a passionate embrace, he backed her up until they were next to the sofa. No words needed to be said at this moment in time. They undressed each other slowly taking time to caress and touch; Rachel wrapped her fingers around his hard cock and stroked him gently. She kissed her way down his chest until she was on her knees in front of him. Rachel kissed the tip of his manhood and his hips jerked in response, using her tongue she sampled and teased until she took his length in her mouth. Her lips wrapped around him sucking gently, to please him and to love him.

It was Victor now whose head was arched in pleasure, her hot mouth was doing tantalizing things to his body, he buried his hand in her hair and he slid himself deeper between her lips, she took it willingly. He pulled her up quickly, not being able to stand the torture anymore; he sat and pulled her down onto his cock, filling her deeply in one smooth motion.

"Oh Victor," she moaned. "I do love you, I love you." She chanted the words as she moved, taking him in more and more with every stroke of her body. Victor heard her words and his heart sang, he needed to hear her say that as much as he needed to feel her wrapped around him. They moved together reaching for that pinnacle, he felt her body tremble, his finger dug into the smooth skin of her hips and he pulled her against him hard and pumped into her. Their orgasms rocked through them at the same time, her wetness flowing down his manhood and his seed deep inside her.

He kissed her cheeks then her closed eyelids, then her lips whispering the words, "I love you," in return. Rachel finally moved and sat on the overstuffed cushions to face him. She pulled a blanket she had thrown over the chair over their legs and tucked her hair behind her ear.

"I'm sorry for running from New York like that." Rachel said quietly looking into his eyes.

"When I saw you were gone it felt like you stepped on my heart." Victor replied.

"I'm so sorry, Vic, I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't handle it."

He pulled her close to him in a fierce hug, "You don't have to apologize to me baby, I should be the one apologizing to you. I see now how you felt when I left you on Christmas Eve."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he stopped her by placing one finger on her soft lips. "No wait, let me finish, Rae. I was an idiot for not giving you the option to try with me when I was on the job. I just was so scared that if I died you'd be alone. It killed me, but I thought you deserved better than that."

"Every night after you left, regardless of if I was on the job or at home, I saw you in my head with some guy with no face, smiling at him, loving him and I wanted to kill him even though he was only in my imagination."

Rachel caressed his cheek with her hand. "Baby, you could have come to me anytime, but as time went on and one year passed then two, then three. I thought you never really wanted me."

"That was never further from the truth, I loved you then, I have loved you every day since. I fooled myself thinking I knew what was best for us both, it took almost getting my leg blown off to show me I was so damn stupid for thinking that way."

Victor took her face in his hands and kissed her. "Forgive me, Rae, but please don't turn away from me, you're the other half of my soul."

Rachel asked. "Do you remember what you asked me today, about what I wanted from Santa?"

"Yeah" he said cautiously hoping she was not going to push him away again.

"Well, I know what I want now."

"What do you want, Rae?" Victor said caressing her face.

"I want my ring from Christmas, Vic." Rachel replied.

"Oh that, well, I uh..."

"What do you mean *well*, I uh? Victor if you got rid of my ring, I'm going to roast you in oil!" She started to fume.

Pulling the ring from the pocket of his jeans on the floor, he presented it to her with a 'Voila!' She laughed as he slipped it on her finger and then she hugged and kissed him soundly. The telephone rang at that same time and he answered on the first ring.

"Yes Marcella, you can tell Henry "Operation Reunite" is a complete success," Victor said into the receiver.

"I'm getting married, Mama!" Rachel called out.

"Ok." Victor said and hung up. "They said congratulations and we're having breakfast tomorrow."

"Thank you for my Christmas, Vic." Rachel said to him, "I love you."

He held her tight knowing that this was his forever he was holding in his arms. "That's what our Christmases will be all about, Rae baby. From now on it's all love and lights."

"Love and lights," she echoed softly, they sealed that promise with a kiss.