



# **Santa Baby The Deed**

By

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Triskelion Publishing

[www.triskelionpublishing.com](http://www.triskelionpublishing.com)

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ISBN 1-932866-01-9

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## Chapter One

It was exactly as she remembered. It was funny how time could change so many things, yet leave others untouched.

Natalie Franklin removed her driving glasses and tossed them into the passenger seat of her compact rental. Grabbing her purse and keys, she left the car and wandered up the shelled driveway to the house that brought back so many happy memories. White washed, with pale blue trim, her parents beach house was located mere yards from the Gulf of Mexico. She recalled the countless number of summer and weekend vacations she'd spent at the house and a smile came to her face. It was almost like coming home, especially now since her parents and younger brother had moved to Colorado. For Christmas, her family had decided to go on a skiing trip and she'd been unable to join them because of her schedule at work. This house was all she had left to remind her of happier times, which was the reason she'd decided to spend her vacation in Panama City instead of with her friends back in Birmingham. Too many painful memories awaited there. She'd needed an escape. A chance to get over Paul and to clear her mind. Since spending time with her family was out, this house was the next best thing.

Breathing in the crisp air, Natalie smelled the ocean. Salty and tangy, it had been her favorite smell as a teenager. As she'd crossed the Hathaway Bridge earlier, connecting Panama City to Panama City Beach, Natalie had indulged in an old habit. Lowering her window, she'd stuck her face out to see if she could smell the ocean. She hadn't been able to. Only the whiff of the bay came to her, but it brought a smile to her face nonetheless. It had been too long since she'd visited Florida.

It was early evening, just about time for the tide to begin rising. She heard the crash of waves hitting the shore as she rounded the corner of the house, her gaze seeking a glimpse of the water beyond the sand dunes and sea oats. It was a moderately warm day for December, but the wind seemed to cut right through her thin pullover. Hunching her shoulders and huddling for body warmth, she stood and gazed at the ocean. None of the seaweed that clogged it during the summer was evident. Everywhere she looked, there was clear blue.

"Beautiful," Natalie murmured. Why had she stayed away so long? Being a teacher, she'd had ample opportunity to visit the past few years. Of course, up until last month, there'd been Paul to keep her tied to Birmingham.

She turned back to the house, freezing when she caught a glimpse of movement behind the huge bay window. There was an intruder in the house! Unsure of what to do, Natalie reached for her cell phone and debated calling the police. Maybe it would be better if she just went to the neighbors and asked Mr. Gaynor to check things out. She stuffed her cell back in her pocket and hurried back to her car. She tried to duck out of sight, but she felt eyes upon her as she scrambled across the sand. Her keys felt like ice as she dug them out of her purse. This was not how she'd envisioned her vacation.

Just her luck, her rental decided to stall. She turned the key again, praying that it would crank. When it only sputtered, she slapped her hand against the steering wheel. "Damn piece of crap!" She tried to crank it again, sending a cautious look toward the house.

No one came after her, but she didn't see how they couldn't hear her. When the front door opened, Natalie panicked. She fumbled for her cell, punching in the emergency number she'd memorized as a child.

A hand pounded on the driver side window and Natalie squeaked in alarm. Dear Lord, what did she do now? Her grip tightened on her cell. It was her last chance at safety. She must've misdialed the phone number because she got an error message. Frightened beyond belief, Natalie risked a glance at her attacker. Her breath left her lungs in a rush of relief. Although she hadn't been this close to him in years, Natalie recognized him instantly.

She rolled down the window. "Drew?"

Drew Richards, her childhood nemesis and son of her parents' best friends, gave her a lopsided grin. "What brings you down here, Nat?"

She grimaced. Only Drew still called her by the hated nickname. As children, he'd usually followed it with a rhyme. Nat the Cat. Nat the Rat. How she'd hated it when he'd done it! "I'm on vacation."

Drew leaned away from the window and Natalie was able to see more of his form. Although he wore faded jeans and an oversized hoodie, Drew was clearly all grown up. Tall and lean, he possessed the body of an athlete. In college, he'd played basketball until a torn ligament in his knee sidetracked his career. Natalie allowed her eyes to roam, silently admitting that the injury had not seemed to curb his daily workouts. He looked sublimely fit and had he been anyone but Drew, she'd probably flutter her eyelashes at him.

Drew opened her car door and motioned toward the house. "Why don't you come in?"

She climbed out on shaky legs. Her fear faded, but it was taking her body a while to pick up on the fact. Her heart raced and her body still hummed with nervous energy. She wiped her hands on her jeans to get rid of their clammy feeling. "Just let me get my things."

Drew gave her an odd look. "Your things?"

Realization set in slowly. "Yes, my things. I'm staying here for the week. Please don't tell me you're doing the same?"

Drew smiled his smile, the one that never failed to irritate her, and nodded. "I'm here until New Years."

Natalie wanted to curse, but she bit her tongue. It would be rude and childish. Drew had every right to be there. His parents had owned half the house, so it was only right that he inherit their half. But it was damned unlucky that he was there the one week she'd decided to come down. "I'm sorry. I should've called to make sure you wouldn't be here."

Drew's smile only widened. "Avoiding me, Nat?"

"Of course not. I just don't want to intrude." She turned her back on him and popped the trunk. She'd only brought two pieces of luggage instead of the usual excessive packing she'd done as a teenager.

"You're not intruding. In fact, I'm happy to have the company."

She gave him a searching look. "Are you sure? I can go find a hotel."

"Don't be silly. This is your house just as much as mine." He motioned toward the trunk. "Do you need help?" Without waiting for an answer, Drew glanced into the trunk. He whistled. "Only two? I'm impressed." He reached in and grabbed the bags before she could. Lifting them easily, he motioned for her to precede him. "After you."

She held out her hand. "I can carry one."

"I've got it, Nat. Just do me a favor and open the door."

As she walked, Natalie had the uncomfortable thought that he was looking at her ass. She turned once to see if she was correct, but he innocently returned her look. The stairs, warped by years of exposure to the salty air, creaked under their feet. The door stuck in the jamb, as it always had, so she gave it a little push with her hip. She held the door open for Drew before following him into the house.

Once she was inside, memories assailed her. She spun around in a circle, taking in the wicker furniture and nautical theme that seemed to be so prevalent in the area's vacation homes. Nothing had changed, not even the horrible painting she and her brother made of the ocean when they were in elementary school.

Following her gaze, Drew chuckled. "For years, I begged my parents to let me burn that painting. I must confess it's starting to grow on me now."

Noting his wistful look, Natalie's heart softened. "I'm sorry about your parents, Drew."

His eyes, bluer than the ocean outside, slowly returned to her face. "Thank you."

"I made it to the memorial, but I didn't have a chance to speak with you."

It was a bit of a lie. She could've spoken to him, but she'd been reluctant. She knew no words to comfort him for losing both his parents in a plane crash the year before. She'd seen him that day and the look of misery on his face sent her scurrying for cover. She'd known Drew her entire life. She'd seen him happy, angry, even sad. But nothing compared to the expression she'd seen that day. It was as if he'd lost his best friend. In a way, he had. As an only child, Drew had been close to his parents. They'd doted on him and he'd returned their love by being a devoted son.

Seeming uncomfortable with the conversation, Drew placed her luggage on the floor and pulled off his baseball cap. His hair was shorter than she remembered. The dark curls were cropped close to his head, adding to his masculine appeal. In college, he'd worn his hair longer, which made him look boyish. He'd been attractive then, but it compared in no way to the utter appeal of the man standing before her now. Natalie wanted to groan when she realized she was finding Drew attractive. It was something she'd never imagined would happen again after all that had happened between them in the past.

Seeking to put distance between them, she removed her pullover and laid it over the back of the couch. Even in her t-shirt, it felt too warm in the house. A sneaking suspicion told her it was due to the man standing beside her and not caused by the temperature of the room. She noticed boxes in the corner of the room and gestured toward them. "What is in those?"

Drew settled into a rocker, the wicker creaking under his weight. "My parents' things."

Natalie cursed her unruly tongue. She couldn't seem to say anything without putting her foot in her mouth. Being alone with Drew was making her nervous, which was silly since she'd been alone with him too many times to count. She rushed to change the subject. "Are you spending Christmas alone?"

"Yes." He seemed to be aware of her discomfort if the wry look on his face was any indication. "Where's Paul?"

Natalie abandoned her study of the room and turned back to Drew. "He's at home."

"Why didn't he come with you?"

She drew in a breath, surprised that it still hurt to hear his name. "That's none of your business."

Drew rocked back in his chair and grinned. "Don't tell me you finally dumped him? Good for you, Nat!"

Her cheeks turned pink with embarrassment. "He dumped me actually."

Drew stopped rocking immediately. His feet fell to the floor with a loud thump. "Did he really?"

She turned to the fireplace and toyed with the seashells gathered there. "I'd prefer it if we didn't talk about Paul." She picked up a shell and held it to her ear, loving the echo of sound she heard. She and her brother, Tyler, had found it during an outing to Shell Island. It was perfectly formed and soft pink in color. She carefully set down the shell and turned back to Drew. "It's over. That's all there is to know."

Drew watched her as if he knew a secret she didn't. He'd unzipped his hoodie, revealing the t-shirt he had on underneath. Natalie's mouth went dry at the sight of his body, having no problem imagining what he would look like shirtless. This vacation would be hell if she didn't find some way to get over her strange attraction to him. The only plausible explanation she could think of was that she'd gone too long without sex. She and Paul broke up in November, but they'd stopped having sex long before he left her.

"Why did you come?"

He surprised her by asking such a pointed question. Drew seldom showed interest in her personal life, so it was strange for him to seem concerned. She stared at the flames in the fireplace and pondered for a moment. "I needed to get away."

"From Paul?" Drew ventured, hitting the nail squarely on the head.

She grabbed the poker and jabbed at the burning log. "It's a bit warm for a fire."

Drew stood and came over to her. He took the poker from her limp fingers and dropped it in its holder. His hands cupped her shoulders as he turned her to face him. "And you're avoiding my question. Why, Nat?"

It had been a long time since someone touched her with such tenderness. The grip of his hands stayed gentle, but the feel of his hands sent ripples down her spine. She lifted her chin, intent on giving him a flippant answer, but the worry in his eyes took her breath away. She found herself spilling the entire truth. "Paul's gay."

Drew stared at her for several moments. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it, then opened it again. "I don't know what to say."

Natalie laughed humorlessly. "Imagine my surprise when my boyfriend of five years came home and told me he was in love. With another man, at that."

"You didn't suspect anything?"

She glanced up at him, a slight frown marring her features. "Of course not. Did you?"

Drew shifted his eyes away and she had her answer. "You did! Why didn't you warn me?"

He released her shoulders and took a couple steps back. "Would you have believed me?"

"Probably not, but you should've tried at least." Natalie felt the despair she'd fought for the past month return with a vengeance. She stumbled to the couch like a drunk and collapsed onto the cushions. She groaned and covered her face with both hands. "I'm such an idiot! Why could I not see what was right in front of my face?"

"It's not your fault, Nat. I don't believe anyone else ever suspected Paul was

homosexual."

Natalie was not comforted by his words. She lowered her hands and turned to meet Drew's gaze. "I'm not everyone else, Drew. I'm the woman who lived with him for five years, the person who should've known him better than anyone else. Instead I'm the last to know he's been cheating on me with his *boyfriend* for three years!"

"Regardless of his sexual preference, Paul's a loser." Drew joined her on the couch and draped a comforting arm around her. When he gently nudged her to cuddle against him, she did so without protest. "You're lucky to be rid of him."

She knew what he said was true, but words couldn't stem the loneliness she'd suffered since Paul left. Every night, she lay in bed and wondered if she would ever feel desirable again. Would she ever have the courage to give her heart to another man? She wasn't a fool. She'd known what she and Paul had wasn't love, but it had been a caring relationship and the closest she'd ever come. She rested her head on Drew's shoulder and sighed wistfully. "I miss him."

Drew rubbed her back in comforting circles. "It's only natural. Paul's been a part of your life for a long time."

She purred with contentment. Drew's hands were truly magic. Driving for five hours in a cramped car had left her muscles tight. She could feel the tension start slipping away as his strong fingers sought and massaged the ache in her lower back. "A little to the left."

Drew chuckled, but obeyed her command without protest. "You know, I could charge you for this."

He hit an especially sore spot in her lumbar region and her eyes fluttered closed. "Don't tease, Drew. You should feel sorry for me."

Drew shifted on the couch and propped his left leg behind her. She turned so that he could reach her back more easily. She propped her arm on his upraised knee and allowed her head to fall forward. Her hair shielded her face from view, but she sensed his eyes on her. Uncomfortable with silence, she spoke. "You've gotten better at this."

Drew slid his hands from her lower spine to her shoulders and back down in a circular motion. "If you're referring to the time you forced me to put suntan lotion on your back, then I must confess I was more interested in speed than quality."

"And you were fourteen. You probably had better things to do than spend time with a twelve-year-old girl."

"I don't recall one of these back then." Drew teased as he snapped her bra.

Natalie grinned at him over her shoulder. "I was a late bloomer and it's very rotten of you to remind me." She cast a skeptical look at her less than bountiful chest. "Not that I bloomed much anyway."

"I think you bloomed fine. Haven't you heard the saying *less is more*?"

"Very funny!" She tried to pinch his thigh, but it was rock hard muscle. "No fair. How come you're blessed with zero body fat while we lesser creatures suffer the Battle of the Bulge?"

"Like you're such a hippo," Drew scoffed. "What do you weigh? One ten? One fifteen?"

"One nineteen, thank you very much. And that's only because I kill myself doing Pilates every afternoon."



"You should take up pole dancing. It's probably more your speed."

She reached behind and slapped his side. "More like *your* speed. I prefer to keep my work-outs PG."

Drew gave her a wicked grin. "That's too bad. X-rated work-outs are much more interesting."

A mental picture came to her then of Drew involved in such an exercise. It didn't take much imagination to envision him naked and working up a sweat with some lucky woman. Unfortunately, that woman would never be her. "Speaking of exercise, do you fancy a walk along the beach?"

He glanced at his watch. "It'll be dark soon."

She bounded up from the couch, desperate to put space between her and Drew, and reached for her pullover. "I don't mind. Besides, it's been ages since I've strolled the beach at night." Her eyes lit up with excitement. "Do you have any nets? We can go crab hunting."

"I'm sure there's a couple around here somewhere." Drew took his time getting to his feet. "Do you have a coat? It gets chilly at night."

"I'll be fine." She glanced down at her pullover. It was thin, but a double layer usually kept her warm.

"Let's find those nets then. I think the last time I saw them they were in the hall closet."

She followed him and pleurably passed the time by gazing at his ass as he rummaged around in the jumbled closet. He straightened to a standing position and help up two nets. "I found them."

Grateful he hadn't caught her staring, she reached for a net. "I haven't done this in years. It's just like being a kid again."

"We need a bucket."

"Leave it." He gave her a curious look, so she continued speaking. "I'm not going to keep them."

"You mean to tell me we're risking our toes to catch crabs and then throwing them back?"

She laughed at his expression. "Yes." She grabbed his arm and tugged. "Come on. It'll be fun."

"For you, maybe."

"Quit being a party pooper." She wrestled the door open and shivered at the blast of cold air that greeted her. For a moment, she wondered if she should get a thicker coat, but decided not to waste any more time. The gulf beckoned to her. There was something about the wild, untamed nature of the ocean that fed her soul.

Drew shoved his cap on his head and drew the hood of his sweatshirt over his ears. "You're going to get sick going out without a hat."

"Drew! You're acting like my mother." She rocked back on her heels with excitement. "Come on, I'll race you to the pier."

Without waiting to see if he followed, Natalie bounded off the porch and raced past the sand dunes. Her feet sank into the white sand, making running difficult, but she forced herself to keep moving. Near the shoreline, the sand was packed down and it became easier to run. The crashing of the waves roared in her ears, blocking all sound but that of her own breathing and footsteps. Minutes later, she reached the pier and held onto a piling to catch her breath.



The wood was rough, but slimy, beneath her fingertips. It was time for high tide. Waves lapped at her ankles, burying her toes in the sand as the tide moved out again.

She stood there, arms wrapped around the piling, and stared at the moonlight reflected in the turbulent waves. "There's a storm coming," she said when Drew finally caught up to her.

Unlike her, he was not out of breath, but his cheeks were flushed red from the brisk wind. He crossed his arms over his chest and followed her gaze. "Forecasters are predicting a thunderstorm."

"Isn't it amazing?" She shook her head at Drew in wonder. "I'd forgotten how much I loved being here."

He bent to tie his shoelace. "We had some good times here."

"The best of my life perhaps." She pushed away from the piling. Bowing her head, she searched the shoreline for any sign of crabs. Drew got to his feet to help her look. She noticed a flash of black against the pale gleam of sand. "Oh! There's one." She scooped with her net and peered at it. "I caught it!"

She held up her net for Drew to see.

"You sure did."

She brought the net back down and peered at the tiny crab clinging inside. "Don't worry, little buddy. I'm not going to hurt you." She bent down and gently shook the crab free of the net. He scurried away and buried beneath the sand. Dusting her hands on her jeans, she rose and caught Drew's eye. She tilted her head to one side and gave him a goofy look when he continued to stare at her. "What is it?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Do you make a habit out of talking to crustacean?"

"Sometimes," she replied pertly.

"Do they talk back to you?"

She smothered a laugh and shook her finger at him. "Play nice, Drew. After all, you've got to spend Christmas with me this year."

Drew stuffed his hands into the pockets of his hoodie and shivered. "Are you cold yet?"

She was, but she hated to admit it. Her sneakers and hem of her jeans were soaked. Her toes and ears felt like they were about to fall off, but she wasn't ready to go in yet. "Just a few more minutes."

She headed up the beach in the direction of the condominiums that seemed to be taking over most of the oceanfront property. Years before, the Strip was full of two-story motels and the occasional high-rise. Now it seemed the entire landscape was changing right before her very eyes. She noticed a vacant lot where their neighbors, the Gaynors, used to live. "What happened here?"

Drew turned his cap around backwards and hunched his shoulders against the cold. "There was some damage from a hurricane a couple of years ago. The Gaynors moved back to Virginia instead of rebuilding."

They continued walking, the silence broken only by her occasional question. After learning that her favorite restaurant had closed, Natalie threw up her hands in surrender. "I've only been gone for six years. Can a town really change that much?"

Drew grabbed her elbow when she would've continued walking. "Six years is a long

time, Nat."

Natalie, disgusted by the changes in her beloved vacation spot, rolled her eyes. "Not that long. Take you, for example. You don't seem to have changed."

Drew took a step closer, his blue eyes intent on her face. "You're only seeing what you want to see. I have changed."

Natalie, shaken by the seriousness of his tone, took a step back. "You're exactly the same as I remember."

His voice turned smooth as honey. "I'm not a boy any longer."

A fact she could readily attest to. His manly appeal and newfound maturity had been tempting her all evening. "I'm not sure what you want me to say, Drew."

"Quit running from me, Nat."

"I'm not," she argued.

"Yes, you are. You've been doing it since the night we went to the fair."

She blushed to the roots of her hair, mortified that he remembered such an embarrassing incident. "That was twelve years ago!"

Drew's gaze was steady on her face. "You asked me to kiss you."

She covered her face with her hands and groaned. "Ugh! I was a silly girl."

"And I turned you down."

Natalie felt like she was reliving the moment all over again. Sitting in the Ferris wheel with Drew as he jokingly put his arm around her shoulder. Asking him to kiss her and being casually rebuffed. When the ride ended, she escaped and ran to his car, refusing to speak to him the entire drive home. On her list of mortifying moments, it ranked right below learning that Paul was gay.

She dropped her hands and gave him a pained look. "Why are you doing this?"

Drew smiled, the smile she'd always hated, but was foolishly growing fond of. "Because I want to take it back."

She blinked in confusion. "I don't understand. What are you saying to me, Drew?"

He grabbed her hand and tugged her forward. "This time I'm asking *you*." When they were inches apart, he nudged her face up to his. "Will you kiss me, Nat?"

She felt like she couldn't breathe. There was air in her lungs, but it didn't seem to be reaching her brain. At fifteen, she'd dreamt of Drew with all the pent-up hormonal lust her young soul contained. When he'd turned her down, her heart shattered. She strongly suspected he was the reason she was so reluctant to fall in love. Fear of rejection made her stick with safe men. Men like Paul, who didn't give her stomach butterflies.

It took all her willpower, but she moved out of his embrace. "No."

Drew frowned. "No?"

Her fingers shook with cold or fear. She wasn't sure which. "Don't do this, Drew." The wind picked up. She wrapped her arms around her waist and shivered. "I can't handle it right now."

Unable to bear the look on his face, she turned and did the one thing she knew how to do.

She ran.

## Chapter Two

"Natalie!"

Drew called to her, but she refused to turn back. If she stayed, she would give in to the spark that always seemed to ignite between them. Ignoring her feelings for him was hard enough at fifteen. Exposing herself to that pain now carried potential devastation.

The wind whipped about her head and shoulders, spraying bits of sand into her face. The ocean, so calm when she'd arrived, was now a frenzy of white capped waves. She could smell rain in the air and knew it wouldn't be long before the storm reached them.

Out of breath and with aching legs, she stumbled past the sand dunes and climbed the short flight of stairs leading to the back porch. She pulled on the sliding glass door, cursing when it didn't budge. She tried again, only giving up when she realized it was locked. She turned to run back down the stairs, but Drew was waiting for her at the bottom.

He stared up at her, his face unnervingly handsome in the moonlight. "We need to talk."

She planted her feet on the top stair and gripped the railing. "I have nothing to say to you."

He moved to the second step. "Even better. You can listen to what I have to say."

"Go away, Drew. I mean it."

"I want to explain."

She clamped her hands over her ears and hummed loudly. "I'm not listening."

Drew reached the fifth step, less than a foot away from her. "Very mature, Nat."

Her mouth dropped open. "You want to talk mature? Okay, fine!" She stomped down the stairs until they stood eye to eye. "How's this for mature? I don't want to see you. I don't want to talk to you. And I damn sure don't want to kiss you!"

He shook his head. "I think you're lying."

She shoved him, but it was like trying to move a brick wall. "Get out of my way."

He caught her hands and brought her body flush against his chest. His arms clamped about her like a vise as she struggled. "Damn you, Drew! Let go of me."

"Not until you listen to reason."

Natalie remembered a trick from childhood and allowed her body to go limp. While he was busy trying to grab hold of her falling body, she slipped past him and made a run for it. She got as far as the sand dunes bordering the back of the house before he caught her again.

He swung her off her feet and plopped her flat on her back in a dune. She immediately sat up, but he held her down with his body. "I want to apologize for hurting your feelings that night."

Natalie ignored the delicious feeling of him on top of her and continued her struggles. "It's starting to rain, Drew."

"The quicker you settle down, the quicker I can say what I need to and we can be inside."

"What makes you think I'm going to stay with you after this?"

"Where else are you going to go?"

Natalie shoved him. "A hotel, of course."

"How are you going to get there?"

"My ca..." her mouth snapped shut. Damn, her car wasn't cranking. How was she going to get to a hotel? "A cab."

Drew lifted his eyebrows. "How are you going to call them? The house has no telephones, remember?"

Natalie wanted to scream with frustration. Why hadn't her parents installed a phone line yet? Thank God for technology. She gave Drew a sickly sweet smile. "I have a cell."

"Do you?" He patted the pocket of her jeans. She gaped at him as he stuck his hands in her right pocket and pulled out her cell phone. "Not anymore."

"Give that back!"

"I will in the morning." Drew stuffed it in his back pocket before trapping her shoulders between his arms. "Now explain to me why you won't kiss me."

A raindrop rolled off his cheek and splattered her chin. The rain was cold, but the body heat Drew radiated was scorching. "Because I'm not attracted to you."

"Liar," he said softly. He pulled back and glanced pointedly at her breasts. "Your body gives you away."

He was referring to her nipples, which had traitorously turned into hard peaks when he'd touched her. She refused to show any weakness. "I'm cold."

"I could warm you if you'd give me the chance."

No doubt he could, but Natalie didn't trust herself to be with Drew. He would walk on without a second glance, while she continued to pine for him as she had for years. She was only a convenience to him. A body to heat his bed during the lonely holidays. She wouldn't allow herself to be used in such a manner. "I'm not a whore, Drew."

He drew back, his blue eyes indigo in the moonlight. "I never said you were."

"No, but you're implying it."

"I only asked for a kiss, Nat. Not a tumble in the sack."

She wasn't a fool. If she kissed him, she knew they would end up sleeping together. "I'm warning you, Drew. Get off me."

He surprised her by actually obeying. He rolled to the side and stared up at her as she scrambled to her feet and dusted the sand from her jeans. When she was finished, she held out her hand. "Now give me back my phone."

He lounged back on his elbows and lazily crossed his feet at the ankles. Lying there, he looked beyond sexy with his damp curly hair and bedroom eyes. His sweatshirt was plastered against his broad chest and his jeans clung like a second skin to his muscular thighs. "If you want it, come get it."

Her mouth went dry at his unintended double entendre. She did want. She wanted it real bad. "Not funny, Drew. Give me my phone."

He turned his face up to the sky and studied the dark clouds rolling past. "It's about to start pouring buckets."

"All the more reason for you to stop acting like a child and give me back my phone."

He stretched out on the sand and placed his hands behind his head. He whistled as if he had not a care in the world. Irritation swelled inside her. She'd not come this far to be mistreated. "Damn you, Drew. This is not funny."

"It's a little funny." His lips curved into a smile, a dimple appearing in each cheek. "I always loved watching you get angry."

She pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled loudly. "Must be the reason you picked on me so much as a kid."

He sat up and looped his arms over his bent knees. "No. I teased you because I had a crush on you back then."

Natalie's hand fell to her side, the beginnings of a headache forgotten. "No, you didn't!"

He plucked a sea oat from the laces of his sneaker and tossed it aside. "Yes, I did."

Why was he telling her this now? And if what he said was true, why hadn't he kissed her when she'd asked years before? "You're just yanking my chain."

He turned his attention back to her. "I assure you if I was yanking anything, it would not be your chain."

He smiled at her then. A slow, seductive smile that turned her insides to mush. Her immunity to him was weakening. If he kept this up, she would be putty in his hands in a matter of minutes. Her resistance was not tested further as a loud clap of thunder startled them. The wind, which was already fierce, whipped her hair about her face. She might be a nature lover, but she wasn't a fool. "I'm going inside."

This time, Drew didn't argue. He stood, but kept his head lowered against the bracing wind. The screen door was banging against its hinges as they climbed onto the front porch. Natalie sent Drew a worried glance. "It's going to be a bad one."

He held the door open for her and locked the screen door behind them. "You'd be a fool to go back out in that weather."

She'd already realized that. As much as she wanted to leave, she didn't want to put a cab driver in danger. It was going to be one heck of a nasty storm soon. If she were honest with herself, she wasn't anxious to leave. Part of her longed to stay here with Drew. An even larger part of her longed to share his bed. It was a small portion of her brain that screamed at her to resist his charms. Sadly, it was her brain that she paid the most attention to. "Where am I going to sleep?"

The words left her mouth before she'd thought them through. Coming on the heels of their discussion outside, Drew was bound to have a flippant comeback.

"Your old bedroom still has all its furniture."

Natalie, prepared for an entirely different answer, nodded slowly. "I'll take it then. Where are you sleeping?"

Drew moved to the fireplace and began to put out the flames. "In my old room."

Which put him across the hall from her. It was better than being next door, where they would have to share an adjoining bathroom, but still much too close for comfort. She reached for her luggage. "I'll go turn in then. Goodnight."

Drew stood, his body outlined in the window as lightning crashed nearby. The room crackled with electricity, but it was energy created from desire rather than science. His eyes reflected the glow of the overhead lights. He made a move toward her, but stopped himself almost immediately. "I really am glad you came, Nat."

Not knowing what to say, she gave him a weak smile and retreated to her room. Feeling like a coward and detesting the way she reacted to him, she tossed her bags in the

corner and flopped onto the bed. She sank into the mattress, feeling it shift beneath her on the old wooden slats. The bed was probably older than she was and only a single. In Birmingham, she was used to a king-sized with a special orthopedic mattress. Here, she would probably toss and turn all night.

Puffy, her favorite stuffed animal, sat in his place of honor in the center of the bed. She grabbed the blue bear and inhaled his familiar scent. She'd once doused him in her mother's perfume and the scent had yet to fade. She stroked his thread hair and sighed. "Oh, Puffy. What do I do now?" She held him in front of her face, almost as if she were waiting for him to answer. Laughing at her own folly, she hugged the bear to her chest. "You're the only friend I have."

"Can I come in?"

She stuffed Puffy behind her back and glanced up at Drew as he cracked open the door and asked if he could enter. She crossed her legs and attempted to look nonchalant. "Sure."

Drew had to duck his head to enter since the upstairs doors had been made a bit on the short side. Once inside, he straightened to his full height. "I wanted to see if you need anything. There are towels in the bathroom cabinet and the kitchen's pretty well stocked."

Her face remained carefully neutral. "Thank you. I should be okay."

He looked like he wanted to say more, but with a tiny shake of his head, he turned to the door. At the last moment, he spun back. "Oh, one more thing."

She reacted instinctively when he tossed her cell phone at her. She caught it one handed and tossed it on the mattress. "Thanks."

A wry look crossed his face. "You're not going to call a cab, are you?"

She shook her head in denial. "No. I'm afraid you're stuck with me." The wind howled around the eaves of the house. It was quickly followed by the sound of pouring rain. "At least until this storm passes."

He nodded in a distracted manner. "In that case, goodnight."

He left, shutting the door quietly behind him. The room felt empty without him in it. Mentally chastising herself, she got up and unpacked her luggage. It didn't take long, since she'd only brought what she considered necessary. After she finished, she laid out a pair of pajamas and headed for the shower. There seemed to be sand in every crevice of her body. Her skin and scalp felt itchy from the salty air.

She undressed and stepped under the warm spray. The shower felt like heaven after being in the cold for so long. She wriggled her toes, glad to see that feeling was finally returning to them. She scrubbed her body from head to toe, paying special attention to her hair as she washed and conditioned it. After numerous dye jobs and perms, she had to take special care of it else it became frizzy and unmanageable.

She stayed in the shower until her fingers began to prune. She turned off the water and wrapped a towel around her body. She used a second one to dry her hair before padding into her room. She came to a sudden stop, her horrified gaze coming to rest on her bed. "Holy shit!"

Her shocked exclamation was louder than she'd intended. She slapped her hand over her mouth and glanced toward the door. What did she do now? A leak the size of Manhattan seemed to have sprung right above her bed, completely soaking the cover and mattress. Poor Puffy had escaped the drenching, but his situation was precarious. He needed rescuing.

Springing forward, she snatched Puffy protectively against her chest. She kept a tight grip on her towel and turned back to the bathroom. Maybe she could use her brother's old room. She crossed to the connecting door located on the other side of the shower and peered inside. The room was devoid of furniture except for one lone bookshelf and a battered card table.

Natalie shut the door and rested her head against the cool wood. This was not her night. She went back to her room and pulled on her flannel pajamas. She'd forgotten her slippers at home, so she pulled on a pair of woolen socks before padding across the hall to Drew's room. She knocked on his door and waited.

Moments later, the door opened and revealed Drew, who'd already changed into his own brand of nightclothes. Plaid boxers only. Natalie wet her lips and forced her eyes to stay on his face, but it was difficult when such an expanse of tanned skin practically invited her gaze. She immediately stated her reason for being there. "My room sprung a leak. My bed's wet."

He opened the door wider and motioned her inside. "You can sleep in here."

She lifted an eyebrow and laughed. "You've got to be kidding."

Drew swept his arm toward the back of the room. "There are only two dry beds in the house and you're looking at them."

Natalie gazed in the direction he pointed. "Aren't you a little old for bunk beds?"

He shrugged, which drew her eyes to his broad shoulders. He really was something to look at, all dark and tautly muscled. Her gaze slipped lower, skimming his washboard stomach and following the trail of hair that ended at his boxers. She felt like she'd swallowed a match as she wrenched her eyes back to his face. She briefly debated the wisdom over sharing a room with him. She refused to sleep on the couch, so her choice seemed simple enough. "Can I at least get the bottom?"

His grinned, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and she knew he wasn't going to lose this chance at teasing her. "I prefer the top anyway."

"Figures you would." She moved past him and carefully eased onto the mattress. It wasn't nearly as comfortable as her bed at home, but it would do. "I hope you don't snore."

"I've never had anyone tell me if I did." He stepped lightly on the side of her bunk and boosted himself up. The bed above her creaked as he settled into it.

She hopped back to her feet and eyed the bed with concern. "Is it going to hold you?"

"I sure hope so." He propped his head on his arm and shifted toward her. "You plan on sleeping with Puffy?"

She glanced down, unaware that she was still clutching Puffy to her chest. "I couldn't leave him to get wet."

She got back into bed. Lying motionless, she stared at the bunk above her, silently envisioning the man who was lying mere inches away. She heard his breathing, which was deep and even, but did not sound like the breathing pattern of a sleeper. "Drew?"

"Hmmm?" was his sleepy response.

"Why did you come here?"

He was silent so long, she feared he wouldn't answer. Then he proved her wrong.

"It's the first Christmas without my parents. I thought coming here would make me feel closer to them."



Her throat clogged with unshed tears. How horrible for him. He'd lost his parents less than a year ago and as far as she knew, he had no other close relatives. He didn't even have a girlfriend. At least, she didn't think he did. "Oh, Drew. I don't know what to say."

The bed above her creaked and sounded as if he was turning over. "You don't have to say anything."

"But I want to."

"Nat, truly. It's enough that you agreed to stay. I was going out of my mind with loneliness until you showed up."

It was little consolation, but she was happy to be helping in a small way. She'd plan to leave in the morning, after the storm broke, but she tossed that idea out the window. No matter how much it damaged to her peace of mind, she wouldn't leave him to suffer Christmas alone. She knew exactly how it felt to be alone during the holidays and she wouldn't wish that fate on anyone.

She was staying for as long as he needed her.

## Chapter Three

Drew lay awake long after Nat had fallen asleep, staring at the ceiling and wondering how she'd stumbled into his life again after all these years. Earlier in the afternoon, he'd been watching the news and sinking further into depression when he heard a car outside. He'd glanced out the window, entranced at the sight of a gorgeous woman in a blue compact. It wasn't until she'd gotten out and faced the house that he realized it was Natalie Franklin.

She'd always been pretty, but the years had given her a softness not there before. The last time he'd seen her, she'd been with Paul. He'd exchanged the barest of pleasantries with Nat. There had been no time to assimilate all the changes the years had wrought.

When she rounded the side of the house, he'd trailed her and continued watching her through the bay window in the kitchen. The back view was just as pleasing as the front. Her jeans clung to a gently rounded ass, which gave way to long, slim thighs. It didn't take much imagination to envision those thighs wrapped around his hips as he drove into her small, perfectly formed body.

Drew groaned and buried his face into his pillow. Even now, he was hard and aching for her. Years of adolescent fantasies came rushing back. She was the girl forbidden to him. The daughter of his parents' best friends. At seventeen, he'd been too scared to pursue her. Now that they were adults, his childhood crush returned with a vengeance.

In the silence of the room, he listened as a soft sigh escaped Nat's lips. Drew's hands curved into the mattress. He wanted to climb in bed with her and wake her with a kiss. By sheer will power, he kept himself from doing just that. But will power alone couldn't shake the need he felt for her. Inviting her to stay in an effort to curb his loneliness was probably an act of lunacy, but he couldn't bear to stand there and watch her leave. Asking her to kiss him was definitely ill-advised, but he didn't regret it. He'd seen the yearning in her eyes she'd tried so hard to disguise. Before the holiday ended, he would get his kiss and much, much more. At least, he hoped so.

She sighed again, but this time it seemed purposeful. He crept to the edge of the bed and glanced down at her. "Something bugging you?"

Her eyes lifted to meet his. "I'm thirsty."

She looked so cute with her arm wrapped around her ratty bear and the covers pulled to her chin that he couldn't help but chuckle. "And I suppose you want me to fetch you a glass of water?"

She gave him an impish grin. "Would you please? My feet are cold."

He threw back his covers and nimbly jumped to the floor. One good thing about being tall was climbing in and out of bunk beds was not nearly as difficult. Unfortunately, the wood floor did seem to be quite chilly. He tiptoed across it in his bare feet until he reached the carpeted landing of the second floor. He hurried downstairs, grabbed them both a bottled water, and returned to the bedroom.

"Your *agua*." He slipped easily into their old habit of testing Spanish phrases on each other.

"*Gracias, senor*." Nat accepted the bottle and took a long swig. "I was parched."

He was surprised she remembered their little game. Sipping from his own bottle, he kept his eyes on her. He was reluctant to return to his bed, even though his feet felt like ice. He wanted to be able to look at her, which was not an easy task when he was on the top bunk.

Nat took another sip and held the bottle out to him. He took it and set it on the bedside table, not saying a word. Without a reason to continue standing, he reluctantly climbed into bed. He stretched out, clasped his hands over his waist, and railed against the fates for putting him in the same bedroom with Nat, but making it impossible to touch her. Well, not entirely impossible, but most definitely improbable.

"Drew?"

He perked up at the sound of her voice. "Yes? Do you need more water?"

"No." She paused briefly. "I'm cold."

He wanted to offer to be the one to warm her, but she hadn't taken it well the last time.

"Do you need another blanket? Or I can cut the heat up if you want."

"No, it's okay. Maybe I'll warm up in a minute."

Drew lay back, silently counting the time in his head that it would take her to speak. He was aware of her insomnia, a fact which would work well to his advantage. He didn't mind staying awake with her all night as long as he got something out of the deal.

Two minutes later, she began coughing. He shook his head in amusement and leaned over the edge of the bed. "Are you sure you don't need any water?"

She coughed a few more times and then cleared her throat. She balled up her fist and patted her chest. "No, I'm okay now." Her face screwed into an expression he couldn't name, but it was cute nonetheless. "My mattress is hard."

He returned her look with a bland one of his own. That was nothing compared to how hard he was. "Do you want to switch beds?"

She threw back her covers and clambered to her feet. She pressed her hand against his mattress and poked it. "It's not much better."

"Bunks are not known for their comfort levels."

She dropped back onto her bed and yanked the cover back to her chin. "I'm never going to get comfortable."

"Perhaps you can't sleep because you're in a strange house?"

He felt something poking the mattress underneath him. "Are you kicking me?"

She gave him a look of mock innocence. "No, I just propped my legs up." She lifted her head and plumped her pillow. "This is not a strange house, by the way." Her eyes softened to a pale green. "Even though I haven't been here lately, it still feels like home."

Drew rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling again. "I know what you mean." It felt like home to him also. Much more than his lonely apartment back in Columbus, where he had naught but a fern for company. *A dog.* Maybe he should look into getting a dog.

"Drew?"

He enjoyed hearing the sound of her voice. "Yes, Nat?"

"I'm still cold."

He sat up and swung his feet over the side of the bunk. "I'll go turn up the thermostat."

She stopped him by wrapping her fingers around his ankles. "I can't breathe if it gets too stuffy."

Drew didn't remember her being quite this bad with her insomnia when they were

kids. "What do you want me to do then, Nat? You don't want the heat on. You don't want a blanket. What else am I supposed to do?"

Her hand fell away from his ankle and his skin bemoaned the loss of her touch. He heard the rustle of blankets as she once again tried to get comfortable. He lay down again, wondering if this time she would be able to fall asleep. Moments later, he felt a tug on his sheet right before the mattress dipped toward the side. He turned his head, surprised to see Nat climbing up.

"Scoot over," she whispered and burrowed underneath his covers. She'd brought her blankets with her and tossed them over both of them. With her beside him, the curve of her hip nestled against his, the last thing Drew needed was more cover. He casually kicked his feet free of the tangle of blankets. "Brrr! It's freezing!" She curled into a ball and rubbed her icy toes against his calf.

"Damn, Nat! Your toes are like ice."

"I told you so." He'd moved his legs over, but she resolutely continued rubbing her cold feet against him. "They'll warm up in a minute."

He turned to face her and trapped her wandering toes between his hands. He rubbed her feet briskly, trying to warm them with friction. Somehow, his fierce rubbing slowed into a sensual caress. She didn't seem to mind. In fact, she sighed with pleasure.

"Ooh, that's much better."

Drew focused his attention on her feet. Her skin was soft, her toes perfectly formed. He didn't have to possess a foot fetish to appreciate what he saw. He massaged the soles of her feet right beneath her toes.

"You missed your calling, Drew. You should do this professionally."

He moved up to her ankles, the bones located there seeming small and delicate in his hands. "I'll stick with being a sportscaster. I don't have to worry about unsatisfied customers."

Of their own will, his hands continued to move upwards. He reached her knees, but Nat didn't protest. He couldn't go any further. Her flannel pajamas could only stretch so far. With reluctance, he removed his hands from the legs of her pajamas and cursed the raging hard-on he currently sported. He briefly considered pulling down her pants and continuing his exploration in a more carnal way, but he doubted Nat would let him.

Flopping onto his back, he threw his arm over his eyes. He needed to block out the fact that she was lying beside him, close enough to touch. Her hip brushed his as she turned on her left side, putting her back toward him. *Just great!* He was lying there fantasizing about having his hands on her body and she calmly turned over to sleep. The world wasn't fair.

His silent thoughts whirled to a halt when she wriggled backwards, planting her curvy ass along his side. "Drew, I'm still cold."

*Hallelujah!* There was still hope. He turned and draped an arm over her waist, tucking her against his body. She would be able to feel his dick prodding her in the backside, but maybe she was too sleepy to notice.

"Uh, Drew?"

*No such luck.* "Yeah?"

"Did you really mean it?"

He couldn't think straight. His hormones were reacting to her proximity, begging him

to make love to her. "About what?"

"Crushing on me when we were kids?"

He winced. He'd not meant to reveal that tidbit of information. Heaven knew, he'd spent half his life trying to hide the fact that he was attracted to her. It was too late to back down now. "I meant it."

"Why didn't you try anything then?"

Because he was a chicken shit kid who'd wanted desperately to be the perfect son. "The time never seemed right."

His arm was around her waist, so he felt it when her breath hitched. "What about that night at the fair?"

He remembered it clearly. They'd had so much fun that night, holding hands and riding every ride in the park. Everything had been perfect until the Ferris wheel. With the glow of the lights in her eyes, she asked him to kiss her and his heart screeched to a halt. He'd just graduated high school and she was about to be a sophomore. He was going off to college in Virginia, while she would be in Birmingham. Doubts assailed him, so he put her down as kindly as he knew how and pretended the night had never happened.

"I was young and stupid," was the only excuse he could think of.

"Me too, I guess. Stupid for thinking you would be interested in me like that."

He fumbled for her hand and laced their fingers together over her belly. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, Nat. I never meant to."

He sensed she was withdrawing by the way she tensed against him. He prepared himself and waited for her to pull away.

"Drew? One more thing."

"What's that?"

She wriggled her ass against him, wresting a groan from his lips. "Care to explain what is poking me in the ass?"

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She'd shocked him.

Natalie knew it as soon as the words left her lips. She'd snuggled closer for body warmth and received heat of an entirely different nature. He was hard and straining against her ass. Immediately, a rush of moisture flooded her groin. She clamped her thighs tightly together in a vain effort to ease the ache between her legs. It didn't help. Instead, her action seemed to intensify her desire for him to touch her. She wanted his hands on her. But most of all, she wanted what he could give her. A hard cock and a chance at exhaustion. Whenever her tendency for insomnia appeared, she used sex as a way to get to sleep.

She drew her hand from his and turned to face him.

He was watching her. In his eyes, she saw the battle taking place between desire and uncertainty. She put her hand on his chest, feeling the rise and fall of every choppy breath he took. He wanted her, that much was obvious. Why was it taking so long for him to do something about it?

Keeping her eyes locked with his, she inched closer. She held her breath, waiting to see what his reaction would be. He wasn't pulling away, so it must be safe to proceed. She was

anxious to know the difference between fucking Paul, who'd confessed to thinking of someone else while they had sex and fucking Drew, who clearly wanted *her*. Sex with Paul had been nice at first, but she'd never felt the way she was feeling now. Drew was the forbidden fruit, the one guy she thought she could never have.

She rubbed her thigh along the length of his leg. "Aren't you going to answer my question?"

He didn't speak at first. Puffy was still clutched against her chest, but he reached out and took her beloved stuffed animal from her. She watched curiously as Drew lifted onto one elbow and placed Puffy at the head of the bed. He took great care in arranging Puffy so that his back was to them. "What are you doing?"

Drew lowered himself back to the mattress and snagged her about the hips. "I don't want him to watch."

Now it was Natalie's turn to be surprised. "Watch what?"

"This."

Drew leaned over her, trapping her against the mattress with his body. His broad shoulders blocked what little she could see of the room. His cock nestled between her thighs and its hard length sent pulsing shock waves through her body. She turned her face up to his, unable to see his expression in the darkness of the room. The storm continued to rage outside, giving them both a sense of urgency. The beating of their hearts matched the rumble of thunder. The desire between them even hotter than lightning.

His lips touched hers, his tongue boldly plundering the damp recesses of her mouth. She cupped his shoulders with both hands and reveled in his kiss. They kissed like two horny teenagers enjoying their first time in the backseat. By the time Drew pulled back, she was hot and wet with need. She whimpered as he deliberately shifted his cock deeper in the cleft between her legs.

"Do you still want me to explain what was poking you? Or would you rather me show you?"

"Mmm," Nat licked her swollen lips and smiled wickedly. "Show me."

Drew took her hand, slowly guiding it down his chest, across his taut abdomen, and beneath the elastic waistband of his boxers. Her fingertips brushed the head of his cock as she uncurled her fingers and wrapped them around his firm shaft.

"Mas?"

It took her a minute to realize he was asking if she wanted more. She stroked his cock, loving every inch of her new discovery. "Yes." She didn't even bother to reply in Spanish, so great was her yearning to touch more of him.

Drew put a halt to her exploration by putting his hand over hers and withdrawing it from his boxers. He made a tssking sound. "If you want to be in the game, you've got to play by the rules."

She reached for him again. "You sound like a baseball coach."

He grinned, making her want his lips on hers again. "Sportscaster. Remember?"

She eluded his hands and managed to tuck her thumbs in the waistband of his boxers. She kept them there, deliberately drawing out the anticipation. Her nails raked the sensitive skin of his lower belly, ruffling the dark hair which arched lower. "Want to hit a home run?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of a grand slam." Drew pulled up her shirt,

revealing the pale skin of her stomach. He paused and gave her belly button a second look. "When did you get your navel pierced?"

"A few months ago. Do you not like it?" She placed her hand protectively over her midsection. She'd forgotten about her piercing. She'd kept it a secret from her parents, who would likely disapprove. When she'd shown it to Paul, he hadn't said anything, but he'd clearly not approved either.

Drew brushed her hand aside and studied the dangling jewel. "I think it's sexy." He touched the jewel with tip of his forefinger. "Did it hurt?"

She shook her head. "Not much."

Drew lowered his head and nuzzled his lips on the sensitive skin beneath her navel. His stubble tickled, but his warm breath made her melt. Trailing his tongue higher, he skimmed her belly button and continued a leisurely path to her breasts. He pushed up her shirt, bunching it at her shoulders as he kissed her breast. Her nipples immediately hardened and begged for his touch. He obliged by taking one into his mouth and lightly biting. Her grip on the waistband of his boxers tightened.

Abandoning her breasts, Drew helped to completely remove her shirt. He lowered his body inch by glorious inch onto hers. She shivered and arched against him. It was so good to again feel the sensation of someone's skin. To have hands touch her and lips. The fact that it was Drew just made it that much sweeter.

Suddenly she was tired of a slow wooing. She wanted it hard and fast. She needed him deep inside her, driving the loneliness away if only for one night. Her hands slipped down and cupped his erection. "Fuck me, Drew. Now."

His cock throbbed against her palm. The tip smooth and beaded with a drop of pre-cum. She traced the vein prominent in his shaft, then lower to cup his balls. She bit her lip with anticipation. The only man she'd ever been with was Paul. Sex with him had been adequate, but not mind-blowing. Judging from how hot Drew made her, this experience was going to worthwhile.

Drew got to his knees and patted her hips. "Raise up."

She did as he asked. He grabbed a handful of her pajama bottoms and slid them past her hips. He pulled one leg, then the other off and tossed her clothing onto the floor. His gaze immediately narrowed in on the tiny pair of panties she wore. With her feet still planted against the mattress and her hips arched, she afforded him a clear view of her damp sex.

Drew brushed his knuckle across the crotch of her panties. "Are you hot for me, Nat?"

She kept her mouth closed. Wasn't it obvious? Her panties were soaked and being that they were silk, he had to be able to see the wetness. But Drew wasn't going to let her avoid the question.

His knuckle against returned, this time lingering against her swollen clit. "Are you, Nat?"

She drew in a shaky breath. "Yes."

He smiled, but continued his slow exploration along the seam of her panties. "If you only knew how many times I lay in this bed dreaming of you like this, you would be shocked."

Personally, she probably wouldn't. She had done the same in her bed across the hall. Fantasizing about him coming to her room and easing the ache inside her. Recalling that he'd



been a teenager at the time, she gave him a bold look. "What did you do about it?"

He opened his hand and placed it palm down against her pussy. He began rubbing in slow circles. "I did what any normal red-blooded American boy would do."

Her breath hitched. His hands wrought pure magic. Her nerve endings hummed in excitement. "You jerked off?"

"Yeah." He didn't even have the grace to look embarrassed.

She moaned when he rubbed a particularly sensitive spot. "Ooh...right there!"

Drew returned to the spot. "Here?"

Her eyes closed and she dropped her head onto the pillow. "Yes. Exactly right there."

"You look exactly like you did in my fantasies."

Her eyes opened and focused on his face. The slight cleft in his chin, the dark slash of his brows above eyes of the deepest blue. "So do you."

Drew's hand stilled. "You fantasized about me?"

She recalled the numerous times she'd woken from a fitful sleep, yearning to know his kiss, longing for his touch. "All the time."

He took her earlobe between his teeth and laved it with his tongue. "Did you make yourself come?"

Her cheeks flushed. "No."

"Why not?"

"I wasn't sure how."

His hands moved between her legs again. "I'll show you."

She'd learned how to masturbate in the years since then. Paul had often left her in a worked-up state, so she'd had to if she wanted her own release. But she saw no reason to tell Drew. If he wanted to make her come, she was more than willing to be his student.

The outside world seemed to retreat. All that existed was Drew and this room and the things he was making her feel. He kept his hands outside her panties, but the heat of his palm seared the delicate folds of skin he rubbed. At first, she tried to hold back the moans. It became more difficult and she finally surrendered by crying out. "Oh God!"

Hot beyond belief, she needed to come. Unable to wait, she grabbed Drew's wrist and guided his hand inside her panties. "Make me come, Drew." She resorted to begging. "Please."

Her panties stretched and she heard the snap of the elastic band as she shoved his hand to where she needed it most. His lean fingers brushed her hairless mound as they continued toward her swollen labia. Parting the folds of her pussy, Drew slid a finger inside her. His palm continued to rub against her clit as he drove her wild with stroking fingers. Her inner muscles clenched tightly at the invasion.

Needing to hold onto something, she lifted her arms over her head and wrapped her hands around the wooden railing of the bunk. With his free hand, Drew trailed a path up her arm and back down again. It tickled, so she laughed softly. "Stop!"

He moved the wrong hand. She cried out in denial when he removed his fingers from her sex. "Drew!"

He cupped her cheek and waited for her to look at him. She could smell herself on his hand, smell the need still coursing through her body, as she did so. "I'm tired of the two of us coming alone. This time, we do it together."

Fine by her. In fact, it was more than fine. It was un-fucking-believable.

It was a simple enough matter to remove her panties. She kicked them free of her ankles after he'd shoved them past her knees. Their hands collided in the rush to rid him of his boxers. He wrapped a hand around his cock and prepared to thrust inside. "Wait!" His biceps flexed as he pushed back a couple of inches. "Condom."

He reached past her head and slid a condom from beneath the pillow. She eyed him with amusement. "Expecting to get laid?"

He ripped open the package and sheathed himself in a matter of moments. "Hoping so."

She widened her legs and nudged his hips forward. "Quit hoping, because you're definitely about to."

He nudged her then his long shaft filled her in one smooth, slow thrust. They lay there, both adjusting to the experience. He remained motionless inside her so long that she gave him a worried look. "Falling asleep on me?"

"Not hardly," he laughed. "Just trying to let it all sink in."

She placed her hand on his ass and pushed him forward. "How about *you* sinking in?"

He withdrew partially, then thrust forward. This time, she felt it all the way to her toes. "Ooh, this is much better than sex with Paul."

It was not the right thing to say. Drew stiffened, his hurt expression causing her heart to clench. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

He shrugged as if the matter was of no concern. "Hey. I'll take it as a compliment."

She hated the nonchalant way he always hid his emotions from her. She placed her hand against his chest, right above his heart. "I did mean it as such, but it was tacky of me to bring him up."

"Nat, just forget about it. Okay?"

It wasn't okay. Not by a long shot, but he seemed determined to override any argument she had remaining. He rolled his hips, sinking deeper and deeper into her tight warmth. His lips returned to her neck, sucking and alternately biting. She tilted her head to the side and kissed his shoulder. She nipped the skin, then sank her teeth in harder as he gave a powerful flex of his hips. "Oh, fuck!" She whispered it quietly to herself, but he heard her.

"What sort of language is that for a school teacher? What would your students say?"

She grinned, recalling the rowdy bunch of students she currently taught. "Who do you think taught me?"

He shook his head with amusement. "A wild bunch, huh?"

"Not half as wild as I want to be with you right now."

Drew gave her a measuring look. Then his lips curved into a wicked grin. "Wish granted."

Silence reigned except for their harsh breathing and soft exclamations of delight as they strained against each other. Both suddenly desperate to reach the heights of ecstasy. Every thrust he made, she arched and drew him deeper. When he retreated, she moaned with pleasure.

Drew's hands clenched spasmodically against the pillow by her head. "Please say you're close."

Her muscles gloved him and she could feel them start to clench around him. "Very,

very close," she panted.

He moved again and she went over the edge, crying out her release softly. Drew's hips moved jerkily and then she felt a rush of warmth as his cum filled the condom inside her. He remained inside her, his head dropping to rest on the pillow beside hers. His weight pressed her into the mattress, their skin slippery with sweat. She grinned as she remembered what had gotten them in bed together in the first place.

She rubbed her hand down his back, relishing the smooth, taut muscle located there. "Drew?"

He stirred, but didn't lift his head. "Hmm?"

"I'm hot now."

He groaned.

## Chapter Four

Combating Nat's insomnia turned out to be a very interesting endeavor. She was a wonderful partner, not afraid to state her mind or take charge when it was needed. He'd lingered over her body, discovering the secrets of what she liked and what she didn't. When his slow tease became too much for the both of them, he took her hard and fast. It seemed to be the way she enjoyed it if her moans were anything to go by. It took a couple of hours, but finally he succeeded in exhausting her. Drew gazed at the blonde head pillowed on his chest. Nat slept with her hand over his heart, her soft breath whispering across his skin. In repose, she more resembled an angel instead of the temptress she'd proven herself to be.

The rain and wind had diminished. A few rumbles of thunder could still be heard, but it was far off in the distance. In the morning, he would need to up on the roof and repair the leak in the ceiling above Nat's bed. He hoped it wouldn't deter her from joining him at night. A sudden thought struck him. *What if she wasn't staying?* Just because she'd fucked him didn't mean she wasn't still leaving in the morning. He almost woke her up to ask, but couldn't bear to disturb her slumber. Only when he forced her past the point of exhaustion had she been able to fall asleep.

Nat shifted and tossed a long, slim thigh over his hip. His dick reacted instantly. *Down boy.* Instead of being tired, he was completely rejuvenated. The way he felt was similar to diving into the ocean during early summer. The sun was hot on your skin, but the water cool and refreshing.

Knowing he would never be able to sleep, he eased out from under Nat and carefully laid her head on the pillow. He reached for Puffy and placed him under her folded arm. The blankets had been kicked to the foot of the bed, but before he covered her he took a moment to gaze upon her nude form. Her skin was pale, but smooth and unblemished. Her breasts, which he gave her hell about when she'd reached puberty, were round and full. Her navel ring sparkled in the semi-darkness, drawing his eyes to her small waist and the curve of her hips. The hair between her legs had been waxed, giving him no clue as to the color. When he'd put his hands in her panties and found a hairless pussy, he'd been shocked. Nat was a private person and he couldn't imagine her spreading her legs while someone applied hot wax to her body.

His dick gave another twitch at the thought. He wondered if she'd ever played with wax. Doubtlessly not with Paul, her gay ex-boyfriend. Drew had only met the man a couple of times, and he'd seemed nice enough, but he'd never thought Paul good enough for Nat. No man would ever be good enough for her. Sighing at his predicament, Drew dressed and left the room. He went to the room across the hall. First he stripped the sheets off her bed and took them downstairs to be washed. After that, he gathered the tools he would need to fix the roof with the sun came up.

At six o'clock, he was nursing his first cup of coffee when she showed up. She was adorably mussed, her hair sticking up in all directions and her pajama top inside out.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully.

"Mornin'." She blinked as if in a daze, stumbled toward the coffee pot, and let out a

huge yawn. She poured herself a mug and added a dollop of cream and sugar. "Why are you up so early?"

"I've got to fix the roof."

She turned and propped her hip against the counter, blowing on her coffee as she waited for it to cool. "Do you need some help?"

After watching her blow on her coffee, he did need help. Sadly the kind of help he needed was not the sort she was referring to. "I might need you to hold the ladder, but other than that it should be pretty simple."

She rolled her eyes. "Spoken like a true man. Next I suppose you'll be trying to redo the plumbing."

He drained his mug and moved to the sink to rinse it out. "I make a pretty good handy man."

"A legend in your own mind." She looked as if she wanted to say something more, but held her tongue. Pushing away from the counter, she strolled toward the den. She dropped into a cushioned futon and cradled her steaming mug between her hands. "What are we going to do after you fix the roof?"

"We?" He latched onto her use of pronoun. Did that mean she was staying?

The sunlight streaming through an eastern window made her eyes appear emerald. She gave him a brief look before nodding. "I'm going to stay if you don't mind."

Mind? Hell, he was ready to dance a jig. There were far less enjoyable ways to spend Christmas than shacked up with a sexy woman for seven days. "I don't mind."

When she smiled, her eyes crinkled at the corners. "Good. So? What are we going to do today?"

He knew how he wanted to spend the day. Wrapped between her legs seemed a viable option. "How about we decide when I come back in?"

"Sounds like a plan." She set aside her mug and plopped her hands on her hips. "Where is this ladder you're talking about?"

"In the shed outside."

They found the ladder and propped it against the back wall of the house. Nat held it for him as he climbed. He had a tool belt strapped around his hips and a piece of tarp clamped between his teeth. He hoped it was just a loose shingle, but he was going to be prepared in either case. He stepped onto the roof and concentrated on keeping his balance. With the rain, the shingles could be slippery.

"Are you okay up there?" Nat called to him.

He peered over the edge of the roof and gave her a thumbs up. He grabbed the tarp from his mouth. "Everything's fine."

She shielded her eyes from the sun. "Okay. I'm going back inside to get showered then."

"Don't use all the hot water." He'd always teased her about her predilection for long showers. Even from the roof, he saw her roll her eyes.

"Ha, ha! Very funny."

She disappeared into the house, leaving him to complete his task. Crouching down, he scanned the shingles that appeared to be in the proximity of the leak. There was one that appeared to be loose. He moved forward and inspected it closely. It seemed he had found the

culprit.

He nailed the shingle back in place. Put the tarp over it for good measure and nailed that down too. Satisfied that he'd done the best he could, he retreated to the ladder and swung his legs over it. It was shaky, but should remain still long enough for him to scale down.

As he entered the house, he heard the shower still running. He grinned to himself as wicked thought occurred to him. If he hurried, he should be able to catch Nat before she got out. A romp in the shower seemed an entertaining way to pass the morning.

As he climbed the steps, he heard singing coming from upstairs. He paused to listen, wondering if he had anything to do with her sudden good mood. She'd left the bathroom door unlocked, so it was easy to sneak inside. Through the pale blue of the shower curtain, he saw the outline of her body. He watched as she turned her back to the shower head, her hands coming up to rinse shampoo from her hair. He pushed the curtain aside, the metal rings rattling loudly. Her eyes popped open in surprise. Her wide-eyed expression was quickly replaced by a neutral one.

"Are you finished with the roof?"

He nodded, his gaze encompassing her entire body, which was rosy red from the hot water. Soap covered her shoulders, slowly flowing down her arms and breasts to continue a lazy path to her toes. She stepped from the shower and leaned past him for a towel she'd placed on the counter. She blotted her face, dried her hair, and wrapped it around her body. She put her hand on his hip and pushed him gently to the side. "Shower is all yours then."

She left the bathroom, leaving him watching with a dumbfounded expression. That was it? She'd had the opportunity to join him and she'd left? Cursing under his breath, he ripped the tool belt from his waist and stripped off his clothes. He showered quickly, muttering the entire time. He was a fool. Only a fool would get involved with someone who'd just gone through a traumatic break-up. When their past history was added in, it was no wonder Nat had left him alone. They were just asking for trouble.

Even with good reasons to avoid her, he longed to touch her again. No amount of reasoning would make him quit wanting her. It hadn't worked in high school and damned sure wouldn't work now that he'd had her.

He turned off the shower and dried off. He hadn't brought any clothes, thinking he wouldn't need them. "Fuck it," he muttered to himself. It wasn't like she hadn't seen him naked anyway. He tossed the towel aside, grabbed his tool belt, and boldly strode into her room.

She was perched on the edge of the bed, calmly running a comb through her hair. She betrayed her reaction to his lack of clothing by blushing. He wanted to growl in frustration. What had happened to the sultry seductress he'd been with the night before? Well, damn it, he wasn't going to let her act as if nothing had happened between them.

He tossed his tool belt on the dresser and came forward. The comb she was using trembled as she moved it through her shoulder length blonde hair. Other than that, she acted as if him striding toward her butt-assed naked was an everyday occurrence.

He stopped at the edge of the bed, close enough to smell the conditioner she'd used on her hair. With each breath, more scents came to him. The lingering trace of soap on her skin. A hint of the baby lotion she rubbed on her legs. He bent and nuzzled his nose against her

neck. "Mmm. You smell good."

She braced her hands on the bed and leaned back. "It's called *bathing*, Drew."

It would be so easy to undress her. All she wore was a towel, a mere scrap of material that hid her delicious curves. He cupped her shoulder with one hand and turned his head to watch as he moved his fingers down her arm. Goose bumps rose on her skin, making the fine hair on her arms stand up on end. She was reacting to him. She would never be able to hide what her body showed him.

Nat planted her hand against his chest and gave a slight shove. "Drew, cut it out. I've got plans for today."

"So do I." He followed the path his hand had taken with his mouth. When he reached her hand, he sucked one finger into his mouth and gave her a seductive look. "I plan on making you come."

"Drew." Her voice was shaky, her resistance beginning to fade.

He moved to another finger and did the same to it. "What?"

"Can you do something for me?"

He smiled slowly. He was getting through to her. "Anything."

She bit her lip as if she were unsure what to say. "Bring me your tool belt."

He glanced over his shoulder, curious to know what she was about. He retrieved it and handed it to her. "What are you doing, Nat?"

She fiddled with the clasp and motioned him forward. "Come here."

He stood still as she fastened the belt around his lean hips and cinched it closed. His cock was hard and straining, but she ignored it as she arranged the belt just so. She leaned back on her elbows and surveyed her work. "Perfect."

Drew glanced down before giving her an amused look. "I sincerely hope you're not expecting me to repair any more leaks dressed in this get-up."

She shoved her damp hair over her shoulder and smiled. "Nope, no more leaks." Reaching out, she grabbed his hand and drew it down to her pussy, which was already wet and hot for him. "But I do have need of your tool."

Drew used his fingers to part her folds and caressed her clit. Nat moaned and widened her legs. If she wanted him to play handy man for her, he was more than willing. He stroked her pussy, wondering if he'd ever had a woman this hot for him before. Nat was continuing to surprise him.

Playing his role, Drew crouched between her legs and pushed her thighs further apart. Her pussy lips were swollen, the hairless expanse practically begging for his tongue. "I'm afraid a closer inspection is necessary."

Nat clutched his shoulders. Her eyes fairly glowed with excitement. "Will it cost extra?"

"Most definitely."

He lowered his head, his tongue unerringly latching onto her clit. He stroked her with his tongue, loving the small cries she gave and the way her nails dug into his shoulders. His Nat was not afraid to show her appreciation. He loved the taste of her, the honeyed sweetness of her that flowed against his tongue.

"Oh my God!" Nat's thighs trembled against his ears, letting him know that she was close to coming. He increased his efforts, his tongue mimicking the motions his cock would



soon be making deep inside her. Her hands moved to the back of his head and she held on tightly. "More."

He did as she asked, using his lips, tongue, and teeth to bring her to an explosive climax. She fell back against the mattress, her chest rising and falling rapidly. "Drew?" She didn't lift her head, but used her foot to nudge him. "Get up here with me."

*Gladly.* He climbed into the bed that he'd dreamed about for years and gathered the woman he'd dreamed about even longer into his arms. She was still wearing her towel, but a quick tug and her body was uncovered. He reverently cupped her breasts, the weight of them warm and heavy against his palms.

Nat attempted to undo his belt, but he stopped her. "What are you doing?"

Her fingers stilled. "I don't want my hip to get whacked with a hammer as we have sex."

He rolled over and dumped her across his lap. He moved her fingers away from the belt and grinned wickedly. "Then you're going to have to do all the work."

He never would've guessed, but role playing was a definite turn on. He wanted to see it through to the end. Nat didn't seem to mind. Leaving the tool belt alone, she straddled him and reached for his cock. Her small hands circled him, gently stroking, before positioning him at her damp opening. She slid forward, engulfing him a sensual move that nearly made his come right then.

He pushed the holster holding a hammer away from her knee and stroked his hands up her smooth thigh. "Man, this is better than any of the dreams I had as a kid."

She rose up and slowly slid back down. She scraped her nails across his chest. "Same here."

He planted his feet against the mattress to gain traction and pushed his hips up to meet her downward movements. "What? You never dreamed of having a horny repair man in your bed?"

She laughed, the sound husky and seductive to his ears. "No, but I did have a recurring one about the boy next door."

He gripped her hips in an effort to go deeper. "Lucky for you. You're getting two for the price of one."

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Nat spent a thrilling morning in bed. Drew fulfilled more than one of her fantasies, even some she hadn't realized she had until he suggested them. If he wasn't careful, he was going to find her permanently attached to his side.

He was sprawled beside her in bed, his right arm slung over the pillow and his left cradling her breast. How like a man. She laughed softly and watched as he napped. Unlike her, who'd slept for the first time in days, he'd been awake most of last night. She trailed a finger over the stubble he had yet to shave off. With rumpled hair and unshaven face, he no longer resembled the boy she'd known. She turned her hand and cupped his cheek. His skin was warm, his cheekbone sharply prominent beneath her fingers. He'd lost weight in the past year. She'd been able to see that right off.

Snuggling next to him, she wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed the bottom

of his chin. She wished he would open up to her. Other than a few vague references to his parents, he was not giving her a chance to comfort him. This holiday season was hard on them both. They'd both lost someone close to them, but her heart ached for him. He'd lost both his parents, while she'd only lost someone who'd been gone long before he'd ever walked out the door. She squeezed him tight, offering comfort even though she knew he wouldn't be aware of it.

His arm moved and she glanced up to find his blue eyes locked on her face. He gave her a sleepy smile. "What was that for?"

She curled against his body and fudged her answer just a bit. "I enjoyed myself earlier. Thank you."

He rolled onto his back, carrying her with him so that she sprawled against his chest. "You're welcome." He glanced down at his the belt he was still wearing and then back at her. "Can I take this off now? One of the tools is digging into my ass."

"Be my guest." She waited for him to toss it aside before speaking again. "Drew?"

"Yes?" He settled back on the bed and rested his hands on her bare back.

"Do you still miss them?"

His eyes grew shuttered. His hands, which had been rubbing her back, immediately stopped. "My parents?"

She rested her chin on her hand and nodded. "You haven't talked about them much."

He moved his hands from her body and propped them behind his head. "There isn't much to talk about."

"Yes, there is. Holidays are a difficult time, but celebrating them for the first time without a loved one must be especially so." She put her hand over his heart. "You can talk to me about them, Drew. I promise I won't think of you as less than a man, if that's what you're worried about."

"Nat, let's not do this. Okay? I promise you I'm fine."

She didn't think he was. "You need to talk to someone. I was just hoping it would be me."

His eyes softened as he reached up to cradle her face. "I do talk to you, sweetheart."

Her heart leapt at his use of an endearment. "I know you do, but I'm worried about you."

"Don't be. I'm seriously okay." He moved out from under her and got to his feet. "Are you hungry? I'll go fix us something to eat."

He picked up her discarded towel and wrapped it around his waist. Sitting up, she clutched a sheet to her breasts. "I really wish you wouldn't keep avoiding the subject, Drew."

With an unreadable expression in his eyes, Drew turned and left. Her shoulders lifted as she let out a large sigh. What did she do now? She didn't want to keep picking his sore spot, but she felt talking about it would help him. When she'd told him about Paul the night before, it had been as if a giant weight had lifted. He'd been the first person she'd told the actual reason for the break-up. Not even her family or closest friends knew about Paul being gay.

She dropped the sheet and reached for her robe. She'd go downstairs and see if Drew needed any help. As she reached the stairs, she met him coming halfway up. He paused while both of them waited for the other to say something.

He was the first to speak. "I'm sorry."

She felt rooted to her spot. "For what?"

He crooked smile warmed her heart. "I'm not sure."

His long legs made it easy for him to climb to her. He stopped a couple of steps away and tilted his head back to look her in the eye. "Having you here is probably the only thing holding me together right now."

It wasn't much, but his few words were all she needed to hear. It was enough to know that she was helping in some small way. She framed his face with her hands and pressed a soft kiss against his lips. It was the first one they'd shared without the intention of taking it further. This kiss was meant to comfort. She pulled back and her hands dropped to her sides. "I've finally decided what I want to do today."

He gave her a curious look. "And what is that?"

She grabbed his hand and led him back down the stairs. "Only the best part about Christmas."

Drew groaned, but he followed her easily enough. "Please don't tell me what I think you're about to tell me."

She glanced over her shoulder and laughed at his heartfelt groan. "Time to decorate the tree."

## Chapter Five

"A little to the left."

Nat bit her thumb and considered the effect. "No, no. The right. Move it a little more to the right."

Drew did as she asked, sending her an exasperated look. "Is that good?"

She stepped back and surveyed the star he'd placed on top of the tree. "Maybe just a little to the left."

"Natalie," Drew growled warningly. He only used her full name when she was being especially difficult. "You'd better be glad we're not in bed, else I would've already left you by now."

She giggled and moved forward to kiss him on his cheek. He smelled like soap and the rum from the eggnog they'd made earlier. "Thank you, Drew."

He enfolded her in his arms, taking control of the kiss with masterful ease. When she was weak with longing, he set her back on her feet. He turned and examined the tree they'd spent all afternoon decorating. "Not too bad." He reached for the plug and handed it to her. "Would you care to do the honors?"

She clapped with excitement and crouched down to plug in the lights. As she did, there was a brief flare of color before she heard a loud pop. Hopping backwards, she stood and looked with dismay at the tree. "Oh, no!"

Drew wrapped his arms around her from behind and propped his chin on her shoulder. "I told you those lights would never work. I think they've been here since our parents first bought the place."

Disappointed, she crouched back down and unplugged the lights. "Maybe there's some more in the garage."

Drew followed her, watching in amusement as she dug through the large stack of boxes piled almost to the ceiling. "We can always go to town and buy more."

She used a step stool to reach a box tucked in the corner and shook her head. "It's not the same." She shifted the box in her arms and stumbled toward the worktable he was propped against.

"Here. Let me get that for you." He took the box from her and turned to place it on the table. As he did, the lid flipped open and he stared with growing apprehension at the items revealed. Nat came up behind him and peered into the box. "Did you find them? Oh!"

They both fell silent, waiting for the other one to speak first. On the top of the box, innocently packed among dusty magazines and old clothes, was a framed picture of him and his parents. It had been taken during his senior year of college, right after he'd fucked his knee playing basketball.

He lifted the picture from the box. "I haven't been able to look at any pictures since the accident happened."

Nat put her hand against his back and leaned closer. "Maybe it'll help to remember the happy times."

Drew closed his eyes, trying to remember the day that picture had been taken, but all he

could envision was the way his parents had looked lying so still in their coffins. His eyes popped open and he gave Nat a helpless look. "I can't, Nat."

She turned to him, taking the picture from him, and rubbing his arms gently. "Then don't. It takes time."

She led him from the room and shut the door behind them, but it couldn't close the rush of memories. His eyes circled the room, seeing the familiar scene, remembering his parents in every one of them. He drew up against the door and pressed his hands to his face. It was ridiculous for a grown man to miss his parents so much. "What is wrong with me?"

Nat moved his hands and cupped his cheeks. "Drew, look at me. Nothing is wrong with you. You keep holding it in, when what you really need to do is let it out." Her green eyes searched his. "Have you even cried?"

No. Not once. He'd refused to let himself. His parents were the ones who'd lost everything, not him. He was still alive. It would be selfish of him to break down. "I don't cry, Nat."

She tried again. "Well, then. Have you allowed yourself to mourn? It's the only way you'll move on."

She had a point. He kept shying away from thoughts of his parents, when what he really wanted to do was remember them with the fondness he'd always felt for them. "I'll try."

Nat smiled at him, a genuine smile that lit her eyes and made her face beam. "That's all anyone can ask of you."

For the hundredth time that day, Drew silently thanked her for staying. With her here, he was actually looking forward to Christmas. Which reminded him, he would need to get her a present. How to get to town without her becoming suspicious? There was always that damned tree she'd been intent on decorating. "Would you like to ride to the mall with me? We can buy a new strand of lights."

She nodded and rushed for the stairs. "I need to change. I'll be down in just a minute."

He heard the clomp of her feet on the floor upstairs and laughed to himself. She'd always been a fan of holidays. Sooner than he thought possible, she returned downstairs. She was dressed in a green sweater, which brought out her eyes, and a pair of jeans that molded to her delicious curves. He almost changed his mind and suggested they stay home, but the excitement in her eyes wouldn't let him do it.

He pulled his hoodie on over his jeans and t-shirt and reached for his cap. When he finished, he noticed her watching him. "What?"

She grabbed her coat and urged him toward the door. "Nothing. I'm just anxious to get going."

He dug in his heels. "It's not nothing. What are you thinking about?"

"I was enjoying the view."

He felt like Tarzan, wanting to pound his chest and howl. He slapped his hand on the wall behind her and leaned in close. "We could always stay here."

She was tempted. Her eyes flicked toward the stairs, then toward the unlit Christmas tree. She turned her gaze back to him and locked her hands around his neck. "I'll make you a deal. First we get the lights. Then we come back here and..." her fingers tiptoed down his chest to cup his crotch. "I show my gratitude."

His dick hardened and pressed against her palm. It was a good thing he was wearing jeans else the hard-on he was going to have for the rest of the afternoon would be evident to all the last minute shoppers they were sure to encounter. He pivoted and grabbed his keys off the table.

"Let's get moving then."

At the mall, they were forced to park in the area he grudgingly referred to as the *back forty*. The long walk toward the entrance was brightened by the fact that Nat held his hand. It was like being in high school again, getting turned on just by a pretty girl smiling at him. But Nat was more than just a pretty face. She was sweet, caring friend who could become so much more if they both allowed it.

It was easy to sneak away from her. After buying lights for the tree, she got engrossed in a *Clinique* sale, so he pretended he was off to the restroom. She'd glanced up from a tube of lipstick and gave him an absent-minded look. "I'll be right here."

He hurried to the other side of the mall and then realized he had no clue what to get her. He planted his hands on his hips and turned in a slow circle. Most of the stores catered to tourists and young adults. His gaze locked in on a store, which boasted novelty items. He scanned the window, looking for one item in particular. An item they boasted to have in stock. It would be perfect.

Ten minutes later, his small gift tucked in the pocket of his jeans, he returned to Nat, who was still oohing and aahing over the selection inside the glass enclosed counters. "About ready?"

She gave the counter a lingering look and grabbed the bag holding their lights. "Sure."

He motioned toward the make-up. "You didn't get anything?"

She smiled sheepishly and opened the bag they'd put their lights in. He laughed at the sight of a couple tubes of lipstick and various eye shadows. "And here I was thinking you'd resisted the urge."

She tossed her hair over one shoulder and closed the bag. "A girl can remain strong over many things, but a *Clinique* sale is not it."

They left the store, moving out of the way a young couple with two laughing kids in tow. Drew linked arms with Nat, intent on not letting the sight of a happy family bring him down.

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The days passed by in a blur. Their daylight hours were spent scouring the tourist town for familiar sights. They ate at Sharky's, a popular seaside restaurant that Nat had loved as a teenager. They took a trip to Shell Island, where they spent all afternoon searching for hermit crabs. Their last outing was to an arcade they'd visited many times over the years. Drew finally convinced her to try her hand at the batting cages. She gave up after a slow pitch baseball hit her in the knee.

Laughing, she pulled off her helmet and exited the cage. "I'm not much for sports."

Drew stepped back from the fast pitches being tossed at him and swung his bat in a practiced swing. "With the speed you chose, you'd have to be playing golf to hit anything anyway. You do know that cage is mainly meant for six-year-olds, don't you?"

"Not everyone can be the perfect athlete like you, Drew." She returned her bat to the

attendant and stood to watch Drew finish his batting. She admired the bunch of his muscles underneath his long-sleeved t-shirt as he swung in a perfect arc. Even clothed, his body was something to behold. He stepped back to the plate and hit a line drive right over the center of the pitching machine. She whooped in excitement. "Home run!"

He turned to smile at her and her heart froze in her chest. The look of tenderness in his eyes shocked her. It hadn't been there before. She was quite certain. But she was just as certain that she'd been granting him the same sort of look for several days now.

Developing feelings for him was just asking for heartbreak. It was already Christmas Eve and she would be leaving the day after tomorrow. Drew exited the cage and blew a kiss at her as he went to return to his bat. Although it was stupid, her heart still flopped over in her chest. It was just lust. That's all it was. At least, that's what she told herself.

Drew returned to her side. His hand was warm in hers. "What's on the agenda for tonight?"

"There's caroling at the pier."

He opened her car door and waited for her to fasten her seatbelt. "I was thinking more along the lines of having you to myself."

She grinned at him as he shut the door, trailing him with his eyes as he circled to the driver's side. As he settled behind the wheel, she ran her hand down his taut thigh. "I like your idea better."

He leaned over the console, pressing a wet, open-mouthed kiss against her willing lips. When he pulled back, she was left with butterflies in her stomach and a severe case of the nerves. What was happening to her? It was like experiencing delayed puppy love. She'd already fucked him. Why this sudden nervousness around him?

"What's the matter?"

She shook her head in answer and turned on the radio. Relaxing against the seat, she listened to the familiar sounds of Kid Rock and Sheryl Crow and hummed along with the music. She turned toward the window, seeing the pastel colored hotels pass by in a blur.

"You're being very quiet."

"I'm just tired."

"I'm sorry for keeping you up so late."

At that, she had to smile. "You're not the only one at fault there. I had something to do with it."

Remembering the hot nights they'd spent together, she shifted on her seat and clamped her thighs together. Only two more miles and she could be in his arms again.

Drew surprised her by turning into a vacant parking lot and shutting off the engine. She frowned and glanced over at him. "What are we doing here?"

Drew ignored her question and got out of the car. He opened her door and grabbed her hand. "Come on. There's something I want to do."

Nat motioned toward the locked gates of the Miracle Strip Amusement Park. "But it's closed down, Drew."

He put a finger to his lips and motioned for her to follow him. They snuck around a side entrance and he clasped his hands together. "Here. Jump."

She backed away from him. "That's trespassing. No way!"

"Nat, please. We won't get caught."

"That's always what someone says right before something horrible happens."

Drew chuckled. "Quit being a worrywart and climb over. Your father is cousins with the police chief after all."

"That's true." Nat judged the height from the top of the fence to the ground. It didn't seem that far of a drop. She walked forward. "Okay. Give me a boost."

It wasn't easy, but she managed to climb over and drop to her feet. As she straightened, she saw they were right beside the Sea Dragon, which put them only yards away from the Ferris wheel. She gave Drew a suspicious look. "Why did you bring me here?"

He wrapped his arm around her waist and ushered her to the familiar ride. "I want to erase an old memory."

Her heart flopped over again. If he kept being so sweet, she would never be able to leave him. Drew undid the gate to one of the buckets and made a sweeping motion with his hand. "After you."

She settled into the metal seat and slid over to make room for him. "Who's going to turn it on?"

He arched an eyebrow. "As rusty as this thing is, I don't believe I would trust it moving."

He put an arm behind her seat and slid closer. "Is this about right?"

She decided to be devilish. "No. I believe we were at the top last time."

"Work with me here, Nat."

It was dark in the amusement park. The only light to be had came from the hotel across the street and the various night-lights strewn throughout the parking lot behind them. It was quiet, unlike the night she'd first asked him to kiss her. Then the park had been filled with screaming tourists and the smell of popcorn filled the air.

"Ask me to kiss you, Nat."

The wind blew a strand of hair across her face and she pushed it away. "You don't have to do this."

He inched closer, tipping her chin to his. "Yes, I do." His eyes bored into hers. "Ask me."

Pushing aside the memory of a scared fifteen-year-old, she seized the second chance he offered. "Will you kiss me, Drew?"

His answer was to touch her cheek and turn her face to his. Their lips met in a soft caress, returning with more fervor again and again. His tongue rasped against hers, their breathing the only sound they could hear. Twelve years ago, she'd asked him to kiss her in this very spot. She'd been disappointed at the time when he'd turned her down, but now she knew it was well worth the wait.

Drew cupped her breast through the wool of her sweater. Her nipple immediately puckered against his palm. He pulled away. His eyes searched hers in the darkness. "I wish I could fuck you right here."

Her hand moved from his shoulder to his thigh. "Why can't you?"

He glanced around, a half smile curving his lips. "I guess there's not anything to stop us. Is there?"

She unzipped his jeans and reached inside to stroke his cock, which didn't seem to need convincing. Somehow, she managed to wriggle out of her jeans and straddle him in the



confined bucket. As she moved upon him, she knew something was different. He didn't move his hands from her hips or even close his eyes. Instead, he kept his gaze locked with hers as she moved upon him. With a tender look, he brushed her hair away from her face. "I love you, Nat."

If not for the bar against her backside, she probably would've fallen off his lap. She stopped moving, with him still fully seated inside her, and shook her head. "Excuse me?"

He gripped her hips and urged her to continue moving. "You heard me."

"Yes, I did. But I must've been dreaming."

"You don't have to say it back. Just know that I do love you."

She bit her lip and increased her movements. Unable to deal with his confession, she poured her heart into her actions. She wasn't ready to say the words. Wasn't even sure he would believe her. But she loved him back. Loved him with every fiber of her being. Probably had for half her life.

## Chapter Six

Nat was sprawled across his chest again.

Drew smiled to himself and pulled the covers down, admiring the sleek curve and creamy skin of her back. He trailed his fingers down her spine, reluctant to wake her but anxious to watch her green eyes fill with passion. It was Christmas Day, the last full day they would spend together and he intended on putting every minute to good use. They'd not talked about what would happen tomorrow. By unspoken agreement, the future of their relationship had not been discussed since the night he'd told her he loved her. He still couldn't believe he'd done it. Not that he didn't feel that way, but just shocked that he'd finally put his feelings for her into words. Nat was the first girl he'd ever loved and would hopefully be the last.

"Good morning."

He glanced back in time to see her rub a hand across her sleepy eyes. "Merry Christmas."

Her hand dropped and she smiled. "Merry Christmas."

He moved his hand lower and cupped her ass. She purred with pleasure and changed the angle of her body so that he could easily slip inside her. She continued to lie atop him as they had sex slowly and leisurely. Neither was in a rush to finish, both wanting to prolong the moment as long as possible. They came together, quietly and holding on to each other.

Nat was the first to speak. "Do you want to exchange presents now?"

He stayed inside her as the final shudders of his orgasm faded away. "You got me a present?"

She lifted herself on an elbow and gave him a mock glare. "Of course I did. Don't I get you one every year?"

The corners of his lips tilted. "Yeah, but you normally Fed-Ex it to me."

She slid lower on his body and lightly bit his nipple. "Well, this year is you're getting it hand delivered." She reached between their bodies and stroked his dick, quickly bringing it back to attention. She slid lower, her lips encircling the head and sucking lightly. He gripped the sheets and closed his eyes as Nat pleased him with her mouth.

When he was close, he warned her. "I'm about to come, Nat."

She ignored him and continued sucking. He went over the edge, his hips jerking away from the bed as she drained him. Nat crawled up his body and sprawled over his again. "And Happy New Year."

He laughed and kissed her. "Some hand delivery you've got there."

Nat pulled away and pouted. "Where's my present?"

He grinned, imagining the surprise on her face when she saw what he'd gotten her. "It's under the tree."

They raced down the stairs like they had as children. Nat beat him and was on her hands and knees reaching for her present as he skidded to a stop. The small box was wrapped in gaily decorated paper. Nat's eyes sparkled as she glanced up at him with the box in her hands. "Can I open it?"

At his nod, she ripped open the package and lifted the lid to the box. "Oh, Drew! It's perfect!"

She leapt to her feet and threw her arms around him. "I love it. Thank you so much!"

He was glad she liked it. The belly ring with a dangling seashell wasn't much, but hopefully when she wore it, she would think of him and the time they'd spent together.

Nat suddenly looked nervous. "I have something for you."

He tilted his head. "I thought you already gave me my present."

She reached under the tree and handed it a thick, square box to him. "That was just something extra."

He tore open the wrapping and stared at what was revealed. "A photo album?"

Nat got to her feet, her lower lip nervously trapped between her teeth. "I had my mom ship it to me. It's full of all the pictures we could find of you and your parents."

"Nat." His voice cracked and he cleared his throat before continuing. "Thank you."

Her eyes searched his. "Open it."

He took a deep breath, then opened it to the first page. He experienced a mild sort of shock when he saw a picture of his parents with arms linked and making faces at the camera. He remembered the day the picture had been taken. He flipped through the pages, each picture holding a special meaning for him. As he recalled the happy times they'd shared, he felt cleansed. For the first time in a year, he could look at their picture and not be overwhelmed by sadness. And it was all Nat's doing.

He set the book aside and framed her face. "Thank you."

"Are you sure you like it?"

"I love it." He kissed her to reassure her that it was the perfect gift.

When they broke apart, her cheeks were flushed pink. She picked the book up and handed it back to him. "There is still one more page."

He turned to the last page and grinned. It was a picture of the two of them in high school. While decorating the tree, Nat had roped him into lifting her on his shoulders so she could put the star on top. They'd ended up falling and Nat's mother had snapped the picture while they were struggling to their feet.

Nat's arm was across his shoulder and his hand was at her waist, helping her to her feet. They were laughing at each other, both covered head to toe in tinsel and Christmas ornaments. He traced the picture with his forefinger. "I'd forgotten about this."

She leaned over to study the picture. "I had too. I had fun that day."

Drew met her gaze and a silent look passed between them. "Me too."

They both spoke at the same time.

"Drew."

"Nat."

She laughed and motioned toward him. "Go ahead."

Now was his moment. He could lay it all out on the table for her and hope she took the bait. "I've known you my whole life. I've been in love with you for half that time. I need to know what your feelings for me are. Because Nat, I don't see how I'm going to survive watching you walk out that door tomorrow without knowing."

She toyed with the shell on her gift and refused to meet his eyes. "Drew..."

He stopped her before she could deny it. "Don't give me that bullshit about not loving

me, because I know you'd be lying. You and I belong together."

She lifted her gaze to his face, her green eyes dull with concern. "I know."

He opened his mouth to refute, then snapped it closed. *She was agreeing?* "Wait. What are you saying?"

She slapped his arm and laughed. "I'm saying, if you would let me finish, that I love you too."

"You do?"

She nodded and motioned around the room. "If I didn't love you, do you think I would be opening Christmas presents without a stitch of clothing on?"

He glanced down at his body. She had a point. He hadn't even thought of clothing earlier. "So what are we going to do about our situation?"

She came closer and trailed a fingernail down his chest. "First, we're going to celebrate. Then we're going to get dressed. And after that, we need to call the rental agency to pick up my car."

He grinned. "But how are you going to get home?"

She pressed herself against him and turned her face to his. "I'm already home."

He cupped her shoulders and kissed her. "Birmingham is not that far from Columbus."

She shook her head. "It's too far. I've got to finish out the school year, but maybe we can figure something out by summer."

He kissed her again, the press of their mouths becoming hotter and more insistent. "Maybe we can come back here for vacation."

"If you want." Nat wrapped her arms around him. "I love you, Drew."

"I love you, Nat."

As he stood there holding the woman he loved, Drew realized that of all the Christmases he'd spent at the house, this one would top them all.