



A Taste of Christmas
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Jennifer McKenzie

Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this book to my father. He never realized his dream of being published, but his guidance and love of books has led me to continue the dream. I miss you, Dad.

Chapter One

As she ran across the parking lot, Tabitha tried to keep her purse on her shoulder while she adjusted the strap of her blue heels. She was late for her sister's party, and Carly wasn't very forgiving of tardiness.

The store was decked out in Christmas candles and mincemeat jars mixed up with the groceries. Overhead, the store had muted Christmas music drifting from the speakers. Tabitha headed straight for the wine aisle. All she had to do was find that one bottle that would make her sister happy, and then she was on her way.

Her heels echoed against the linoleum in the almost empty store. It was after eight, and most people were home with their loving families. Tabitha sighed as sudden depression weighed her down. She wasn't going to visit her "loving family". She was going to Carly's. Her sister wasn't known for being loving. Rich? *Yes*. Loving? *No*.

Just as she got to the rows of wine bottles, Tabitha was distracted by a collection of holiday candy at the end of the aisle. The next thing she knew, she plowed into something solid and bounced back. Pinching her eyes closed, she braced herself for hard contact with the floor.

Two strong hands reached out and grabbed onto her waist, saving her from the inevitable humiliation of landing on her butt.

When Tabitha opened her eyes, she found herself staring up into a pair of the deepest brown eyes she'd ever seen. Way up. She was five-foot-ten and the man towered over her, making him at least six-foot-five. For a moment she couldn't speak, because running into him had knocked the

breath out of her.

"Are you alright?" He even had a deep voice. It was rich, like creamy hot chocolate.

"I think so." Finally, she could breathe. His hands lingered on her waist for a moment, and then they were gone.

He smiled, and she noticed his face was lean, but strong. It was the first time she'd ever met anyone who fit the word "lanky".

She straightened her twisted skirt before offering him a tentative grin. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going. Did I do any damage?"

He gave her a conspiratorial wink. "Not much can damage me." He turned away and picked up a bottle of wine.

Stepping around him to reach for the one bottle that would keep her sister off her back, Tabitha was dismayed to find only an empty space. She must have made a noise, because Mr. Tall and Handsome glanced back.

"Something wrong? You're not hurt from our little collision, are you?" It was then that she saw that the bottle in his hand carried the tell-tale label of the over-priced, exclusive wine Tabitha needed in order to have a relatively peaceful evening at her sister's stuffy party.

"Do you really have to buy that label?" She was hoping he'd picked that bottle for no other reason than because it was pretty. Gold lettering and sparkling grapes hanging from a perfect vine might be the only reason this guy had picked it up.

When he didn't even glance down, she knew she was out of luck. He shook his head. "I have to buy this wine. It's for a client. Sorry."

Facing him, she had to crook her neck just to look up into at his face. "Look, I know this is going to sound crazy, but I really need that bottle of wine."

His expression on his face said it all. All his earlier friendliness was gone, and he became insufferably polite. "I'm sure you can find something equally suitable. I'll even help you, even though I'm late."

Could he sound any stuffier? Probably. Anyone who bought that wine for a client had to have his nose in the air. She sighed.

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"No, I can't. I really don't want to give you my family history, but that bottle will give me a much more peaceful evening. If I don't have it, it'll be hell."

"I'm sure it won't be that bad."

She just stared at him. Not that bad? Every year the annual Christmas party given by the Spinoli family was a humiliating experience. The one year when she'd refused to go her mother had suffered an "anxiety attack" and claimed she needed her children together at the holidays. It was pointless to try and escape. The only thing Tabitha could do was try to make her sentence a little lighter.

This year, it required a bottle of wine. *That* bottle of wine. The tall, handsome idiot with the melting brown eyes and lean body didn't know what he was condemning her to when he refused to cooperate.

He made an impatient movement and she realized how insane she must sound. Forcing a smile, she finally gave up. "You're right. Please don't let me keep you." With that, she turned her back on him and unwanted tears welled up in her eyes. Why should he understand? She didn't. Her family was what it was. Nothing she ever said or did made her time with them any better. Why would a bottle of wine make tonight any easier?

She was already late and would suffer the consequences for that. Squaring her shoulders, she walked back out the parking lot and got into her car.

Jim sighed as he watched the tall, pretty woman walk away.

All the freaks are out this season, he thought. *Trust me to find one of them.* Freak or not, however, she was tall and graceful. Her long brown hair flowed down her back, and her curls swayed in rhythm with her hips. Her curves were just right. But her most outstanding feature was her eyes. They were hazel, with gold and green flecks. And they shone with worry.

Jim shook his head and walked to the nearest cashier's station. One would have thought the woman was on her way to face a firing squad rather than attending a family get together. Well, some people did have awful families.

It irritated him that he was still thinking about her. She'd gotten so

upset. Something in her stare told him that, in her mind anyway, she *needed* that particular bottle of wine.

It didn't do any good for him to tell himself she could find it at another store. He'd had to go to three different ones before he'd found this particular brand. As he paid for it, he wondered if spending two hundred dollars for the bottle was going to impress this client. He needed to impress tonight. The website company he worked for was counting on millions of dollars of business from Ernest Spinoli. He couldn't blow this. It wouldn't be the first time he maxed out his credit card out for a client. Sighing, he hurriedly signed his name on the credit slip and ran for the door.

Maybe he would catch her and that say he was sorry. What he really wanted to do was to find out what made her eyes so sad and yet, so confident. If he was honest with himself, he'd also admit that the feel of those curves when she ran into him had a lot to do with his wanting to catch her.

When he reached the parking lot, it was empty except for his car. What had he expected? For some reason, he was deeply disappointed that he would never see the brown haired woman with the beautiful hazel eyes again.

* * * * *

The glaring lights made Tabitha squint as the door of the two-story Victorian home was opened onto its wraparound porch. The house was packed with people and it looked like the drinking was already in full swing. Carly looked perfect, as always. A black cocktail dress in cap sleeves emphasized her size four waist and made her look dainty and petite. It also made Tabitha's light blue chiffon look juvenile. Nothing new there. Carly's welcoming smile was almost as fake as her smooth skin. The wonders of Botox. Ernest stood next to her, swaying slightly. Tabitha knew her brother-in-law was more obnoxious when he was drunk. This night was going to be every bit as bad as she feared.

"Tabby!" Her sister's use of her nickname was enough to send

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Tabitha scurrying for emotional cover. Carly's eyes took in Tabitha's empty hands. "Where's the wine I asked you to bring?" Though there was a smile pasted on Carly's face, her tone was sharp.

"I didn't bring it." Tabitha wasn't going to bother to explain why. She was twenty-nine, not five. Not bringing a bottle of wine to a party was not the end of the world.

"Why? I ask so little of you." Carly lowered her voice but her brown eyes snapped with anger.

Tabitha sighed. "It's just a bottle of wine, Carly. I looked for it and I couldn't find it."

"I knew I shouldn't have relied on you." Her sister turned away and looked up at her husband.

"Whasa matthur?" he asked Carly, in a loud tone.

"Nothing, Ernie. Tabby forgot to get the wine as she promised, which is really no surprise."

"Thas okay," Ernest slurred. "I told that website guy to bring some. He'll bring it."

"What website guy?" Tabitha had a stone in her gut for several reasons.

"I told you Ernie was trying to get his vintner website updated and revamped," Carly said.

"You also told me *I* was going to get your business." Anger filled Tabitha. Once again, her sister was had passed her over as unimportant—which wouldn't have been so bad, except for all the free maintenance she'd helped Ernie with so far. The promise of steady business for her home-based web design company was enough to keep her helping out.

"We decided to go with someone bigger." Her sister wouldn't look at her.

"I see."

"It's not like we actually promised you anything." Carly waved away the months of work Tabitha had done for her. "Besides, we can't count on you. Look what happened when all I asked you to do was get a bottle of wine."

Looking at her sister, Tabitha took in her the designer shoes, her

perfectly coiffed hair, and the jewelry ensemble that cost more than Tabitha would make in a year. She and Carly were as different as night and day. Tabitha was never going to be rich, and her sister was never going to be poor. It was as simple as that.

What neither of them realized was that they had an audience to their conversation. Standing just inside the door, having come in almost immediately after Tabitha, was Mr. Tall and Handsome. When he cleared his throat, Tabitha whipped her head around and saw him standing there, holding the bottle of wine that might have prevented all of this. *The website guy*. Great.

* * * * *

After listening to the two sisters, Jim was both embarrassed and angry. Every word that came out of Carly's mouth confirmed what the tall woman had told him in the store. She needed that bottle of wine. Here she was taking insults—and all because he wouldn't give *it* up. Okay. He didn't know what was really going on here, but he still felt horrible.

"If this is the bottle of wine you're talking about, then its ownership is in question." Jim held up the bottle, found a professional smile in him somewhere, and pasted it on his face.

"Whadder ya mean, Jim?" Ernest appeared at Carly's side. The tall woman appeared to be puzzled.

"I mean that Miss—I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name earlier." He met those beautiful gold-flecked eyes.

"I'm Tabitha. Tabitha Durst." Her voice was deep and polite, and it reminded him of singing. She was wearing blue, a welcome relief from all the black Jim saw at these parties, and matching heels that made her several inches taller than any other woman in the room. That was a welcome change too, since his six-foot-six frame usually dwarfed his dates and made "other activities" with women challenging. This woman was just right.

"This is James Stoddard, Tabby." Carly spoke up. "You know the Stoddards, who own the winery in St. Helena?"

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"Call me Jim. I'm the black sheep of the family. I'm afraid I didn't want to make wine." Jim grinned down at Tabitha. The smile that lit her face was like the sun shining through rain clouds. *I'd like to make her smile like that all the time.*

"Then we have something in common." She grinned. "I didn't want to make money."

Her sister's gaze shot daggers at her as she took Jim by the arm and dragged him away. "James, I want to introduce you to the people you'll be working with. My sister has been helping with the website maintenance, and I hope she hasn't damaged anything permanently."

Looking back over his shoulder, he watched the smile die on Tabitha's face as an older, smaller version of Carly moved toward her.

"Tabby, why do you always fight with your sister?"

Tabitha turned. Her mother's stern admonition was only made the idea of her leaving the party more attractive.

"Please don't call me Tabby, Mother," she said it gently.

"I just don't understand why you two can't get along." Her mother sounded completely bewildered.

"We get along fine, Mom." Tabitha tried to steer her mother back into the party. "Don't worry."

"No. I heard you two arguing. What were you fighting about?"

"Nothing, really." She tried to sooth her mother. "Carly was a little upset because I didn't bring the wine like she asked me to. It's all fine now." She tried to sooth her mother.

"If you would only listen to us, these things wouldn't happen," her mother replied firmly.

For just an instant, Tabitha thought about telling her mother she didn't listen to either her or Carly because she didn't want to be anything like them. They were family, but she didn't want to build a life looking up to them.

Instead, all she said was, "Yes, mother."

Years of panic attacks and other ailments since Tabitha's father died made confrontation with her mother impossible. It was easier to simply let it go. Wasn't it?

Finally, to Tabitha's relief, she found Geraldine, an old friend of her mother's, and passed her mother off to her.

In Tabitha's opinion, she had stayed at this party long enough. She greeted a few distant family members as she was expected to do, and then she headed for the door to slip out.

"Wait!" A voice sounded behind her. Her hand on the knob, she turned her head and saw Jim, the Website Guy, coming toward her. She turned all the way around and faced him.

He took a deep breath. "I wanted to apologize to you for—"

"For what?" She interrupted him. "Getting to a bottle of wine before I did? Believe me, I don't think it would have made any difference."

She spun back toward the door.

"Please, wait." This time his voice was soft, and his hand covered hers on the door knob.

Tears filled her eyes, and she dragged in a stuttering breath. *I can't cry here. I just can't.*

"I'm trying to say I'm sorry," he said. "It's not usual for a man to do this, so you should pay a little attention."

Tabitha looked up to see him grinning down at her. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face him. She managed a weak smile. "I'm very sorry you got caught up in my family drama. It's the holidays. People get weird."

"Tabitha—"

Before he could stop her again, she opened the door and turned to slip out. "If you have any questions about what I've done on Carly's website, please let me know. She'll give you my number." And as quickly as her size nine feet would carry her, she bolted for her car.

The rest of the party wasn't interesting to Jim. He only knew Ernest, who passed out before the party was half over. Carly turned out to be a gossip monger, and she clung to him the entire night telling him everything about everyone, but her information was all tinged with scandal and secrets. Why she thought he'd be interested, he didn't know. By eleven o'clock, he was finished and decided he had the client happy

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enough to let allow him to go home. Well, technically, the client was unconscious, but that was good enough for Jim.

Before he left, he asked Carly for Tabitha's telephone number. "Since she's been working on the website," he said. "I'll need to contact her if I run into any problems."

Carly looked doubtful, so he tried another tack. "Unless you want me to start from scratch, which would be much more expensive, of course."

It worked. Carly handed over Tabitha's number.

It was after eleven o'clock, and he hoped Tabitha wasn't asleep yet. Something about those eyes wasn't going to let him sleep until he called her.

Out in his car, he dialed her number on his cell phone.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded sleepy.

"Is this Tabitha?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm not interested."

"Not interested in a bottle of real wine?" he quickly asked before she hung up on him.

The silence on the phone was deafening.

"I don't like wine," she finally stated. Raised by vintners himself, he knew what she meant.

"I was thinking of *American wine*. Namely, beer. Come on. Take pity on me. It's the holidays, and my client passed out on me."

Her laugh was husky and deep, like her voice, and the sound of it warmed him.

"So call one of your friends." She sounded unsympathetic.

"Most of my friends are too snooty to drink beer." He joked. *And none of them have your eyes.*

"That doesn't say much about your choice of friends." Though her comment was an insult, he could tell she was amused.

"See? I need your help," he said. "Have a beer with me."

On pins and needles, he suffered through another long silence. Then he heard her sigh.

"That sounds fine. Should I meet you somewhere? I'm assuming

you're after information on the Spinoli website."

"No I'm not," he said. *Not even close.* "But you can assume that if you want. Why don't we meet at Kelly's?"

"You know about Kelly's?" She sounded as if she didn't believe him.

"All the right people know about that place."

"Kelly's it is, then. In fifteen minutes?"

"I'll be there."

Chapter Two

Kelly's bar was in the middle of nowhere. According to the map, it was inside the Sonoma city limits, but it was surrounded by vineyards. Kelly's didn't sell wine, however. Instead, it had every beer imaginable on tap, in bottles, and in cans, but no wine.

The place was a haven for Tabitha. Raised on wine and snobbery, her sole aim in life was to get away and be a regular person. Kelly's was the one place where she could do that.

It was a converted barn, and the outside was lit with neon beer signs and bug zappers. Inside, it had sawdust covered floors and a bar made of dark wood. The bar stools were chairs with stilts and the jukebox played every redneck song ever written. And *Danny Boy*.

As Tabitha looked around the bar, several people greeted her. She waved back and went to get a beer. Someone else came in after her, and several patrons greeted that person as well. Tabitha turned around to see if she knew the new arrival.

Well, well, well. Everyone seemed to know Mr. Tall and Handsome.

He waved and headed for where she stood. The bartender had a beer up on the bar for him before he got there. He was obviously a regular.

She lifted an eyebrow. "It's funny that I've never seen you here."

"I usually come on Monday nights during football season. And sometimes on Sundays, for NASCAR." He took a drink of his beer as Tabitha received hers. He drank domestic, instead of some fancy micro-

brew, which put him up a notch in her book.

"I always come on Fridays. I guess that's why we haven't run into each other."

He grinned at her. "Fridays are ladies' nights. I avoid them."

"Good plan, website guy." She aimed a glare at him. "You probably wouldn't survive."

"So, why don't you come on Mondays and watch football with me and the guys?"

Smirking, she put her elbows against the bar and looked out at the crowd. "I don't consider watching football to be a social activity. I prefer live music."

"So do I. So why haven't I met you before? My family specializes in socializing with other rich winery owners. The Durst family is well known, so how have you avoided me?"

Eying him suspiciously, she realized the charm that usually turned her off was lowering her guard. "Didn't you know? They only let me out twice a month. I'm the crazy sister. They've kept me hidden in the attic for years." She tried to look mysterious, but it must have failed because he laughed.

"That would explain it." Something about the way he was looking at her made her blood flow faster. Heat rose in her face. To hide her discomfort, she took another sip of her beer.

"I have the codes and passwords for the website written down for you in my purse." She reached for her black bag on the bar.

"I told you." He looked out at the large screen TV in the corner of the bar. "That's not why I called."

Tabitha looked at his profile. He had a perfect Roman nose, gorgeous chocolate brown eyes, and he was tall and good looking. *Why would this guy call me? Don't ask. Who needs that kind of rejection?*

There was one swig left of her beer. She drank it, put the bottle on the bar, and shrugged. "Well, if you're not going to tell me the real reason, I'll just go home and go back to bed."

She stepped away from the bar and found a wall of chest in front of her. Tipping her head up, she looked at him. "What's the idea?" There

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was a scent of pine and wood about him. It went to her head and made her dizzy.

"I want you to ask me why."

"No."

He looked down at her. "Why not?"

"Because then you'll tell me."

"That makes no sense." Jim shook his head.

God, she wanted to run her fingers through his hair. But instead, she simply said, "See? You're better off if I leave. I make no sense."

Tabitha went to move, and he blocked her again.

"Tell me why you won't ask me."

"Why won't you just tell me?" She countered.

The sudden smile that spread across his face was *not* reassuring.

"Why don't I just show you why I called instead?"

Before Tabitha recognized his intent, she found herself in his arms and getting the pants kissed off her. Almost literally. She forgot she was in a bar. She forgot Jim was a virtual stranger. She forgot everything but those fantastic lips doing wonderful things to hers. Somewhere in the background she heard hoots, whistles, and a couple of people yelling, "Get a room!"

Like they had minds of their own, her hands slid into his hair, and she inhaled his woodsy smell. He pulled her closer. She melted against him, just like in all the romance novels she'd ever read. She was a puddle at his feet.

They both pulled back and sat there staring at each other, while several people yelled out, "Kiss her again!"

"Come on," he said. "We're leaving." She barely had time to grab her purse before he yanked her out the door to his car.

* * * * *

He hadn't intended to kiss her, but her lips were so beautiful he couldn't resist having a taste. The fireworks were unexpected.

What was he going to do now? He didn't know. Dragging her into

the parking lot had seemed the best way to get her in private. Acting like a caveman wasn't his usual manner, but Tabitha brought out the worst in him. The idea that he would call her just to get information was insulting. Proving her wrong was his pleasure.

"Wait a minute." Her voice was low and determined. She tugged on his hand. "I'm not going to sleep with you."

"I wasn't asking you to." *Not yet, anyway.*

"Quit pulling on me." She yanked her hand away from his. "What do you want from me?"

Looking into those beautiful hazel eyes, he thought about telling her he was the one with whom he wanted to spend all his time with. His gut instinct told him he would soon be taking her home to meet his mother. Should he tell her that? Probably not. Chances were she hadn't even decided whether she liked him or not.

"I want to spend time with you." He faced her and kept his hands behind his back. "I promise I won't kiss you again." *Tonight.*

Her eyes narrowed and she looked doubtful. "Boy Scout's honor?"

He cocked his head to the side. "What makes you think I was a Boy Scout?"

An unladylike snort came out of her mouth. "You're clean cut, very polite, and you probably love your mother. You were a Boy Scout."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." He was itched to stroke his hands through her hair and prove he wasn't such a good boy.

"It's not really. So, were you?"

"No. My parents thought I was too smart for the Boy Scouts." Or football. Or baseball.

"Really?" She looked at him with curiosity, as if he'd suddenly become more interesting.

"For the record, though, I do love my mother. I'll promise any way you want me to if you come to my parents' Christmas party with me."

Looking uncomfortable, she peered down at her shoes. "You want to take me home to meet your mother?" Her eyes came up and met his.

"Why?"

"You need to know the worst about me. I'm sure my family will be

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glad to fill you in." Bitterness filled his voice. He couldn't help it.

"You know the worst about me, I guess. So it seems a fair exchange." Her face was thoughtful.

Jim stayed quiet and let her think about it.

"All right," she finally said. "When is the party?"

He grinned. "Next Saturday. You have a whole week to get nervous."

"After my sister's parties, I don't get nervous anymore." She grinned back at him, and his heart flip-flopped.

Jim realized he just might be falling in love with her already.

* * * * *

To Tabitha, the week seemed to fly by. For the first time in years, she went shopping for a dress to impress a man, not her family. She found a beautiful red dress that clung to her curves and made her look more feminine than anything else she owned. The earrings she bought to go with it were hanging gold angels. She wasn't nervous. She was excited.

Every night she talked to Jim on the phone. Some of their conversations were actually about the website he was working on for her sister, but a lot of them were about nothing in particular. Tabitha found she looked forward to their evening conversations. No one had found her interesting in a long time, and she discovered that she and Jim had many things in common.

One night, he actually asked her about her taste in movies.

"Let me guess," he said in a dry tone. "You like chick flicks."

"No. Actually, I prefer old movies." She looked over at her DVD collection of Katherine Hepburn and Claudette Colbert movies. "I suppose some of them would be considered chick flicks, but not all of them."

"Well, the *Casablanca* discussion has been done to death."

"I love that movie," she said. "You mean the discussion about whether Ingrid Bergman should get on the plane?"

"Yeah, it was in one of those chick flick movies, I think." He was

being sarcastic, and she liked it. "How about *The Maltese Falcon*?"

"What about it?" she asked.

"Should Sam Spade have turned the woman he loved over to the police?"

"That sounds like a moral dilemma."

"What's your opinion?" He actually sounded interested. "I'm curious."

"It was the right thing to do. She broke the law, and he turned her in. Loving her was incidental."

"Really? He could have passed the buck and kept her with him."

"Yes, but remember what he said?" She was getting into their conversation. "He couldn't trust that one day she wouldn't put a bullet in him."

"Well, that's motivation for getting her hung."

"Maybe he didn't really love her."

"He said he did."

"That doesn't mean anything." She knew that for a fact. Saying "*I love you*" was easy. Following it up was the tricky part.

"It would to me."

She blinked. Had she heard him right? They were getting into dangerous territory. They were supposed to be talking about movies.

"Did you ever see *It's A Wonderful Life* on the big screen?" she asked. "They showed it at that renovated theater in downtown Santa Rosa."

"You're changing the subject."

"Yes. Please." *My heart is on the line here; don't make me fall for you.*

He was silent for a moment, and then he said, "No, I've never seen *It's A Wonderful Life* on the big screen. I do like that movie, though. My Grandma used to make us watch it every year."

"My Dad was the one who made us watch it." Tabitha smiled. "Carly hates it."

He laughed. "Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

"She isn't exactly the warm, fuzzy type," Tabitha said ruefully.

"And you are?"

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She wanted to change the subject again. "Does your Grandma live near by?"

"No. She used to, but she passed away three years ago." There was sadness in his voice. "I haven't seen *It's A Wonderful Life* since."

"I'm so sorry. I have to watch it alone every year, too. My Dad died four years ago."

"You sound as if you miss him. Were you close?"

She bit her lip. Talking about her father meant opening another can of worms. Taking a deep breath, she decided to take the plunge and reveal a little more of herself than usual. "We were close when I was younger. When I didn't go into the family business, however, he was very disappointed. We didn't talk much before he died." It was still painful. Why was she telling him this?

"I know what you mean." His voice was soft. "Being the black sheep of my family, I found it's tough to face parental disapproval. It must have been difficult for you when your father died."

"It was." She took another deep breath. "He and I did finally talk, though. Even though he still couldn't accept that I didn't want to be in the wine business, he told me he was proud of me."

"I'm sure he was." Jim's voice was full of sympathy.

After a moment of silence, Tabitha finally cleared her throat and said, "Did you have any other Christmas traditions while you were growing up?"

"Well, my dad always gives my mom a ton of Christmas roses."

"That's so sweet. I'm not familiar with Christmas roses. Are they like big red roses?"

"No. They're white, and their petals are longer. You haven't heard the legend behind them?"

"No."

"Mom told me that a young girl named Madelon wanted to go see the baby Jesus. She saw that others had brought him gold, frankincense and myrrh, but she had nothing to give. She searched everywhere for flowers to bring him, but it was winter and there were no flowers in bloom. She began to cry and an angel came to comfort her. When she told

the angel her story, he struck the ground that was wet with her tears and a bush covered with white roses appeared. Madelon gave one of those roses to the baby Jesus."

"What a beautiful story!"

"When Mom and Dad met, he was poor. Their first Christmas together, he couldn't afford to get her anything but a single Christmas rose. Only one. You have to hear my Mom tell the story. She repeats it every year."

"Sounds like your parents are very happy."

"They are. I only hope I'm that lucky."

"I'm sure you will be."

"You know, Tabitha, I think so, too."

For a moment, she thought he was going to say more, but instead, he guided her onto other topics that were less personal.

Chapter Three

On Saturday morning, Tabitha's phone rang early. She groaned and answered it. "Hello?"

"Good morning. Are you up for bagels and cream cheese?" he asked.

Tabitha groaned again. She was *not* a morning person. "As long as you're not so chipper when you show up. I'm assuming you're not forcing me to get up and be presentable for a public place."

"Hell no! You told me about your wonderful morning personality. I'm right down the street. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Tabitha jumped out of bed, brushed her unruly hair, and pulled on a pair of jeans and a long sleeved shirt. As she was brushing her teeth, there was a knock at her door.

When she opened it, he stood there with two coffees, a bag of bagels, and a tub of cream cheese. Grinning, he stepped into her apartment. "Delivery for you."

"How did you know where I lived? Are you stalking me?" She joked, taking the bag from him and putting it on her kitchen table.

He looked horrified. "Oh no! Your sister gave me your address. I wouldn't stalk you. Not unless you wanted me to." He tried to look sinister, and she laughed.

"Give it up, Jim. You look too nice to be a stalker."

"Damn! I thought I had another career choice."

Laughing, she got a bread knife out and put a bagel on a plate. She spread cream cheese on it and handed it to Jim as he folded himself into one of her kitchen chairs.

He thanked her. "I would have brought you breakfast in bed, but I thought that was getting near a danger zone."

"You mean waking me up in the morning is dangerous?" She smiled. The look on his face made her heart beat a little faster.

He shook his head. "No, I was thinking that getting us both near a bed would be dangerous."

"Oh." Tabitha's face heated and she couldn't look him in the eye. She had nothing to say to that.

"I promised I'd keep my hands to myself. Not my thoughts." He smiled gently at her.

If anything, Tabitha grew even hotter. "I see." What else could she say? Please don't? Pretend you're not a Boy Scout?

Her bagel was ready and she sat down at the table with him. The thought passed through her mind that it felt natural to sit at a kitchen table with him and have breakfast. She pushed the thought away, but not before it made her face heat again.

"What's on your mind, Tabitha? You've been awfully quiet this morning. And that isn't like you."

Tabitha swallowed a piece of her bagel. Would she tell him? *Could* she tell him that she was thinking he was the best early Christmas present she'd ever received in her life? No. She didn't know him well enough. She knew things *about* him, but that was different. She shrugged.

"I'm just quiet in the mornings."

For a moment, she thought he was going to challenge her, but instead he just took another bite of his a bagel.

When his mouth wasn't full, he said, "I know we already have a date tonight, but I was wondering if you'd help me with my Christmas shopping. There's only one week left, and I'm stumped."

"I'm no good a picking out presents." She narrowed her eyes. "Maybe you should ask someone else."

He shook his head. "Nope. I want your help." Looking around her

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apartment, he nodded. "You've got good taste."

"I don't have *Dogs Playing Poker* on the wall, if that's what you mean." She looked around at the various prints on the wall. They were all from local artists depicting various subjects like Mount St. Helena and a Redwood tree forest. Why had she never noticed before that all of the paintings she chose were scenery? Her books were arranged by author, not by aesthetic beauty. And her only knick-knacks were the Christmas village pieces she put up every year, even if she didn't have a Christmas tree. She'd been collecting different houses, people, and other accessories for the village for a long time. It was her favorite part of holiday preparations. She didn't have crystals or fancy candles dotting her bookcases. Only family pictures sat on the shelves. What did he see that told him she had good taste?

Her sister's words floated through her mind. "*The only taste you have is in your mouth.*" Tabitha shook her head. Letting Carly's words continue to hurt her was ridiculous.

She realized that Jim was looking at her, and that he probably had been for a long time.

"What?" Suddenly self-conscious, she met his chocolate brown eyes.

They turned dark, and she could see what he wanted in them. "I'm just wondering how I'm going to keep my promise."

"I don't know. Is it really that hard?" As the words flew out of her mouth, she tried to wish them back. How embarrassing. The telltale heat climbed up her face and spread over her neck. Tabitha hated that she blushed so easily. It was humiliating.

He grinned. "Yes, it is."

Her face grew even hotter, and she squirmed in her seat. "Should I say 'I'm sorry'? Or should I be relieved?" she quipped, trying to be clever.

"Well, I wouldn't mind a little sympathy." He was smiling at her.

She grinned, too. "Oh, poor baby. Does it hurt much?"

"Aren't you going to kiss it and make it better?"

"Jim!" She tried to look appalled, and just ended up laughing.

"No? I'm so disappointed." He looked crestfallen. "In that case, why don't we go Christmas shopping?"

"I have to change my clothes."

"Can I help?" He looked so hopeful, she laughed again.

"I can do it myself. Can you entertain yourself for a half an hour while I change?"

With an exaggerated sigh, he got up from his chair and sat on her overstuffed couch. "I'll just inspect your CD collection." He pulled the case where she kept her music toward him and started studying the titles. "You go on. I'm going to file this information away for future blackmail."

Tabitha got up and headed for the bedroom. Before she reached it, she heard him say, "*Best of the 80s?* There was music in the 80s?"

Laughing, she closed her bedroom door.

Jim grinned and continued shuffling through her music collection. *It* told him the tall, strong woman was a hopeless romantic. She had some hard stuff, but there were too many signs that Tabitha Durst liked sappy love songs. He filed that notion away. Whatever she said, the art on her walls and her music told him she was old-fashioned.

Just like me.

Though both of them made their living using modern technology, he could see Tabitha wasn't really a "modern woman". There was no evidence that she slept around or partied a lot. The more time he spent with her, the more he was found himself falling for her. Jim hadn't decided yet if that was a positive thing or not.

A closer look at her book collection also revealed she also wasn't dumb. There was plenty of popular fiction, but she also had a good collection of non-fiction books that looked well read. She wasn't a woman who used books as merely a decorating tool. She actually read them. If she owned any romance, he didn't see it. Smiling, he thought that she probably did own some, but hid them.

He'd gotten what he wanted this morning. He now knew more about her personally than he had before he showed up. That knowledge was worth the cost of a few bagels.

By the time Tabitha came out of her bedroom twenty minutes later,

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he was back on the couch trying to look as innocent as possible. Once he looked at her though, all thought went out of his brain and the blood rushed elsewhere.

Since the day was mild, Tabitha had chosen a blue jean skirt that ended just above her knees. Her light green shirt was made of some filmy material that hugged her curves. The color brought out the green flecks in her eyes. Her shoes were denim wedge heels that did something to her legs that made his mouth water. For once, she'd left her hair down, and it flowed like a soft brown ribbons down her back.

Women's clothing wasn't usually interesting to Jim, but Tabitha was tall and curvy and he knew it wasn't easy looking that good. Being tall himself, he knew that finding clothes the right size was difficult enough without searching for something fantastic. She looked amazing.

His mouth must have been hanging open, because he watched that charming blush creep over her face and her neck again. Standing up, he hoped the evidence of how she affected him didn't show too much through his jeans. Resisting the need to readjust himself, he picked up his keys from the table.

"Ready for the Christmas torture?" He wasn't surprised his voice cracked a little. Clearing his throat, he watched her pick up her purse and cell phone.

"Ready as I'll ever be." She smiled, and he melted. And at that moment, Jim realized he was a goner.

* * * * *

The mall was crowded as Jim and Tabitha began weaving in and out of stores in search of Christmas presents. Tabitha wasn't sure she'd be any help finding one for Jim's fourteen-year-old niece and his thirty-year-old sister-in-law, but Jim seemed to have confidence that she could.

"It's crazy here!" Wide-eyed, Jim stared at people hefting large bags and striding purposely to wherever they were going.

"At least you didn't wait until Christmas Eve like my father used to do." Tabitha smiled at the memory. Her father had always bought his

presents at the last minute. He used to say that by having three women in his life, he never knew if they were going to change their minds, so he had to wait. When he passed away four years earlier, Tabitha felt she lost the one family member with whom she could relate.

"I usually do." Jim admitted, looking as if he were confessing a dark sin. "This place is a real madhouse by then."

He and Tabitha kept walking toward the big department store at the west end of the mall. Her only idea was to buy a brand name something from a brand name store. What she knew about Jim's family wouldn't fill up her purse. They were rich, and they owned a winery. That was all she really knew. Big names impressed rich people. So she would go with that.

As she walked quickly toward her goal, she stopped and stared at a charming display outside Christmas store. There, among the Dickens' village and Victorian figurines, sat a locomotive complete with presents in one of its cars and a wreath on the engine. It would go perfectly with her collection. Wandering over, she took a look at the price.

Too steep on my budget. She sighed.

"What is it, Tabitha?" Jim came up behind her. "Oh, nice. That train would go great with your collection. You've already got the station."

"Yes, I know. It's just too rich for my blood." She sighed again.

"Trying to be an independent web designer is difficult."

"Why don't you go to work for one of the big guys? You're good enough."

"Thanks. " Tabitha's face grew hot at the compliment. "But I like working for myself."

She looked again at the train and forced herself to walk away.

"Someday I'll be able to afford everything I want." She spoke confidently, even though she had her doubts.

Inside the big department store, Jim bought his niece a makeup kit and his sister-in-law a necklace Tabitha helped him pick out.

"How about you? Do you have any shopping to finish?" he asked her as he paid for his purchases.

"Nope. Don't get mad at me, but I was done a couple of weeks

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ago." She smiled smugly.

Jim groaned. "I should have known." As they left the mall for his car, he asked her out to lunch.

"I owe you for going through the Christmas torture with me." He turned those warm brown eyes on her, and she felt her resistance crumbling.

"I'd love to go to lunch with you."

"I was hoping you'd say that." The smile he gave her made her knees weak. "I've got it all planned."

Hopping into the car, he seemed excited. Tabitha shrugged and got in. Maybe he knew of a really great restaurant and was hoping to impress her with it. She stifled a sigh. That was not what impressed her. Yet he seemed so happy, she kept quiet.

It wasn't until she noticed they were heading out of Santa Rosa and towards Boonville that she wondered where he was taking her.

"Where are we going?" She braced herself for another curve on the small two-lane road.

"It's a surprise." He smiled.

Studying him, she hoped she hadn't just made a huge mistake.

About an hour and a half later, they stopped beside a produce stand just west of Boonville, where people bought hot cider and chestnuts. Behind the stand was a huge apple orchard with a maze of trees. Tabitha was enchanted.

Jim parked the car, got out, and opened the trunk. Out came a basket and a thermos. He handed her a blanket and walked her over to one of the large apple trees. The air was cool, but dry, so he spread out the blanket and sat down.

"Have a seat. I was hoping you'd let me do this."

Sitting down beside him, she watched him pulled out two turkey sandwiches, a bunch of grapes, and a can of cashews. They were all her favorites. When had she told him that? He remembered everything.

He even had hot chocolate in the thermos.

"You can have hot cider if you want," he said. "This roadside stand is famous for its cider."

"How do you know about this place?" She looked around at the apple orchard and strawberry field.

"My Mom and Dad used to bring us here to pick up pumpkins." Jim smiled at the memory. "In the fall, they have tractor rides through the apple orchards to the pumpkin patch. We'd pick out our pumpkin, and Mom would buy fresh fruit and vegetables for all the family parties."

"Sounds like you have some great childhood memories." Tabitha was jealous. "I don't have memories like that." *Far from it.*

"Mom and Dad are rich, but they're great. I was lucky. You'll see. They're not so bad." He took a bite of one of the sandwiches. "You can make memories like that now."

Thoughtfully, Tabitha picked a grape off the stems. Maybe he was right. She'd never thought about doing things to create good memories for herself, instead of complaining that she'd had a crappy childhood.

"I guess I can." She smiled at him. "That's a great idea. Thank you, Jim." She leaned over and kissed him.

Had she thought about it, she wouldn't have done it. His absolute stillness told her she had just made a grave error.

One moment he was totally still, and the next she was in his arms. His hand crept up into her hair and he wrapped his free arm around her waist. "I really meant to keep my promise, but there's only so much I can take." He muttered.

Then his lips claimed hers, branding her. His hand clenched in her hair, causing goose bumps to pop up all over her arms. She opened her mouth and touched his tongue with hers, and he groaned. Melting against him, Tabitha reveled in his heat and allowed him to lower her to the blanket. When the kiss broke, she put her hands on either side of his face and looked up in his eyes. What she saw there both frightened and thrilled her.

He wanted her, and he accepted her exactly as she was. It was all there for her to see. Tabitha suddenly realized she was falling in love with him.

Yet even as the thought blazed through her like lightning, she had no time to really ponder it as Jim kissed her breath away. His hands were

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insistent, pressing against the curve of her waist. She lost herself in him as she drank in his desire for her, and sighed beneath him.

A car horn brought them both abruptly back to reality.

Tabitha sat up and frantically pulled down her blouse, which had somehow ridden up to just below her breasts. Then her hands went to her hair, and she tried to use her fingers to comb it. The inevitable heat crept over her face. Basically, she had attacked him right out in the open. What must he think of her?

She stole a glance at him, and thought he looked sheepish. "I'm sorry, Tabitha," he said. "I kind of lost it there. I shouldn't have broken my promise in public. Sorry if I embarrassed you."

What a sweetie.

"I believe *I* attacked *you*." She smiled at him.

He grinned at her. "Well, maybe you did, but I didn't need to jump back."

"I liked it." His eyes were like chocolate syrup. *My favorite. That goofy grin is so endearing.*

"We'll have to try it again when we're someplace indoors. I don't mean to keep kissing you in front of other people."

"Let's get through the party tonight first." Once his parents looked her over, Tabitha doubted that he'd want to kiss her anymore. The thought depressed her.

"Speaking of that," Jim said. "We'd better get back and give you time to get ready."

Chapter Four

Five hours later, Tabitha stared at her reflection in her Cheval mirror. She was tall and, curvy, with brown hair, hazel eyes, and a muscular build. Nothing in her reflection should excite a man. Yet, in Jim's eyes, she saw desire and acceptance. Was it just wishful thinking?

She'd told him she didn't get nervous about parties, but all of a sudden she was very anxious about this one. His parents might appreciate her "pedigree" since she came from the "right" family, but her choice of profession and current lifestyle wouldn't thrill them. She was twenty-nine, single, poor, and working from her home office. Not very impressive in comparison to the Stoddard family, which owned two wineries and a museum in Healdsburg.

Shaking her head, she turned away from the mirror and finished getting ready. The new dress looked good on her. It would do, anyway. And it wasn't black. Her sister would be appalled, which was all the more reason for her to wear it.

A knock at the door told her Jim was early.

He stood in her doorway, all six-foot-six inches of him gorgeous in pressed black pants and a casual long-sleeved shirt that was formal enough for the party but sexy enough for anything. And he smelled heavenly. Whatever scent he wore made her nuts. Did he do it on purpose?

The look on his face said she didn't look so bad herself. He smiled.

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"You look beautiful."

"You look great, too," she said, feeling the heat rise on her face again.

"I brought you these." He handed her a bouquet of ivory white roses, their long blossoms seeming to sparkle in the light. She inhaled their sweet scent.

"They're gorgeous. Are they Christmas roses?"

"Yes." He nodded. "I thought you should see what they look like."

"Let me get a vase." She did and soon, roses, water, and the vase were on her table adding the perfect touch to her apartment.

"Ready?" He took her arm.

She looked up at him. "Ready as I'll ever be." She murmured.

* * * * *

The winery was between Calistoga and Guerneville. It had a sweeping driveway, which allowed limousines to drop guests at the entrance. The archway over the front door read *Golden Leaf Winery*. The house itself was huge, with a large, stone front porch onto which light poured out from the door. Classical music floated over the grass.

Tabitha's stomach lurched.

She didn't belong here.

Her date didn't look much better. "Remember," he said. "My mom and dad are great, but I'm not vouching for the rest of them."

She looked at him. "How about giving me a run down while we wait for the pretentious valet parking?"

"I have two brothers, two sisters-in-law, three nieces, and Mom and Dad. Unfortunately, this little family get together is a formal party with all the hobnobbing the wine country can provide." He grimaced. "I go because it helps business."

"Is that how you got Ernest as a client?"

Jim nodded. "My brother knows him."

"He's the one who runs the other winery."

"Right. That's John. Then there's Peter. He's the manager of The

Golden Leaf, and will take over when Dad retires."

"James, John, and Peter. Who's Judas?" Tabitha bit her lip. Why was she always a smart mouth when she was nervous?

Jim took it well. "That would be Judith, John's wife."

"I was joking."

"I'm not. Judith's pissed off that Peter's getting The Golden Leaf. She thinks John, as the oldest, should have it all."

"And Peter's wife?"

"A dishrag. Judith walks all over her." Jim sighed. "I've told you more than you need to know." He ran his hand through his light brown hair. "I really don't like this party. I only go for Mom. She puts a lot of work into them and I feel obligated."

"Before we go in—" Tabitha turned in her seat and looked at him. "I need to know something."

He met her glance. "Shoot."

"Do you want me to be on my best social behavior? I can put on an act if you want. I'm not a social misfit, but being Miss Prim and Proper is not really me."

"Are you kidding me? No! I don't want you to be something you're not." He took her hand. "You be who you are. I don't care what my family thinks. Well, except maybe my dad. I think that if you'll just be yourself, my folks will love you."

"Are you sure?" She twisted her hands in her lap, and her nerves jumped.

"I'm sure." His smile was reassuring. She breathed a sigh.

Then they were at the entrance to the house and walking up the stone steps.

"I'm hoping to avoid the more obnoxious members of my family." Jim murmured as he gently moved her forward and tried to skirt through the door past the "welcoming committee".

With Jim's hand on her arm, Tabitha wondered if she would be able to quit shaking. He squeezed her arm gently. There was a couple ahead of them, and he tried to ease her past them.

No such luck.

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"James! How good of you to come. Oh, and you brought a date. How nice. Which one are you?"

With a deadpan expression, Tabitha responded. "He picked me up at another party." She almost laughed at the expression on Judith's face. It was the absolute truth. The fact that it sounded bad wasn't Tabitha's fault.

"Did he? Well, I'm sure you can enjoy the amenities of The Golden Leaf."

"Oh I've been here before," Tabitha said. She wasn't going to let Judith get away with the snob routine.

"Have you? As a tourist, dear?"

"No, with my father. You might know of him. His name was Harrison Durst." Since her father's name was internationally known, Tabitha knew Judith would have heard it. She sent up a silent apology to her father for using him to socially crush this woman, but she'd asked for it.

"Really?" Judith's social smile slipped. Tabitha studied her closely. She was short, blonde, and perfectly made up, reminding her of her sister. They were cut from the same mold.

"Oh yes." Tabitha went on. "I was sixteen when my father brought me here to wine taste. He had a lot of faith in my palate. I remember how I hated the wine. I'm sure it's improved since then. Or at least, I hope so." Pasting a smile on her face, she watched Judith turn red.

"Yes. I've heard of you, I do believe. You're the poor member of the family, aren't you?" Slam. *Good one, Judith.*

"Only because I believe in making money the old fashioned way. I earn it. You'll excuse me, won't you?" And with that, Tabitha turned her back on the woman.

Jim looked at her, but she couldn't read his expression. Standing in front of him, she raised a questioning eyebrow.

"You're amazing." He leaned down and kissed her quickly. "I haven't seen Judith set down like that—ever. Thank you."

Jim escorted her across the living room and approached a couple Tabitha recognized.

"Mom, Dad, this is Tabitha Durst."

Zeke shook her hand with a firm grip. His gray eyes twinkled.

"She made it passed the gargoyle, did she?" His laughter boomed across the room

"Zeke! Stop it." Vanessa shushed him. "Judith might hear you."

"She is a gargoyle. It's just like her to want to stand at the door so everyone mistakes her for the hostess. She lets you do all the work, and she takes all the credit." His twinkling eyes flashed.

Vanessa patted his arm and turned to Tabitha. "It's nice to meet you, dear. I knew your father a long time ago."

"Wait! You *were* here, weren't you? That's right. *Tabby*. Harrison brought you out to taste test for us." His huge laughter filled the room again. He turned to his wife. "She hated my burgundy, which was right on the mark. Remember, honey? We had that foreman who didn't know wine from grape juice."

Tabitha squirmed as Zeke went on. "Harrison told me he'd have his best taster come out, and damn if it wasn't his sixteen-year-old daughter. She was brilliant."

As her face warmed, Tabitha wondered if it would ever be its natural color again.

Jim stared at her. "How brilliant was she, Dad?"

Zeke laughed. "I made her do a taste test. I thought Harry was out of his mind."

Tabitha wanted to run away and forget that younger version of herself had ever existed. The arrogance she'd shown people then made them resentful. Her talent only emphasized her separateness.

Zeke said, "She named every wine, every year, and blew everyone away. Then, she tested our wine and told us exactly what was wrong with it. I fired that stupid foreman that very day, and our wine got better."

Outwardly smiling politely, and inwardly cringing, Tabitha held up a glass of wine that had been shoved into her hand. "It's certainly a fine wine now." She sipped it and tried not to wince. Years of wine tasting and instruction from her father had chased her away from the wine business just as fast as her legs would carry her. The day she turned twenty-one, she moved out and started her education in web design.

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As if reading her mind, Zeke asked, "What are you doing now, Tabby? Are you a taster for your dad's winery?"

"No. I'm in website design."

"Waste of a great palate, if you ask me. That's what this worthless black sheep is doing as well." He patted his son on the back. Tabitha thought Zeke looked proud.

"Is that how you met?" Vanessa asked.

"No. We met at my sister's party."

"Well, that's wonderful." Zeke boomed out. "Let me show you around."

Zeke introduced her to the other guests, some of whom she'd known all her life. Somehow, she lost track of Jim and was speaking with one of her father's old friends when her sister suddenly appeared at her side.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed at Tabitha. "This is no place for you."

"Jim brought me." She tried to walk away, but Carly grabbed her arm.

"Jim? Oh, you mean *James*. Well, that's a bad joke if you ask me. Do you think it would be too much to ask that you not embarrass me here?"

Tabitha stared into her sister's brown eyes, which were so much like their father's. It hurt Tabitha that her sister couldn't love her just as she was.

"Don't talk to me, then. Most people don't even know we're related."

"If I could keep it that way, I would. There are people who know you're my sister. So just for once, will you please try and be normal?"

Wincing, Tabitha tried to ignore the many curious glances from the other partygoers as she lowered her voice so only Carly could hear her, in an attempt to stand up for herself.

"Carly, I don't embarrass you. You embarrass *me*. You're so busy kissing up to everyone and worrying about what they think that you don't realize that Ernest is drinking himself into oblivion and Mom is slowly losing her sanity. So don't tell me *I'm* embarrassing." Again, she tried to

pull away.

Her sister turned an ugly shade of red. "You're only here because some guy took pity on you," she yelled. "There's no other reason any man with any taste would want to be with you."

Tabitha just kept walking away.

Her face grew hot as her sister yelled after her, "He'll find out all your taste is in your mouth."

Where is the front door? Tabitha kept moving. Tears threatened to fall from her eyes, and she wasn't going to let her sister see her cry.

At the front door, she approached one of the valet boys.

"Will one of you please go find Jim Stoddard and tell him his date is leaving?" One of the boys nodded, palmed the ten she handed him, and disappeared into the house.

Five minutes later, she watched Jim approach the open front door.

"What's up?" His face was concerned.

"I need to leave." Her voice shook.

For a moment, she thought he might protest. Instead, he rifled in his pockets, came up with the valet receipt, and handed it to one of the boys.

Tabitha tapped her foot as she waited for Jim's car to show up so she could get home. It had been a mistake for her to come to one of these parties. She should have said no.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?"

Tabitha turned to look up at Jim. "Look. I don't go to these parties for a reason. My childhood wasn't all about soccer, music lessons, and Girl Scouts. It was about wine. *All* about wine. Tasting it, fermenting it, storing it, selling it, and drinking it." She turned away and peered down the driveway looking for the valet. "It's better if I just don't go. I don't belong here anymore."

Just as she finished speaking, the valet arrived and they got into the car. The silence between them grew painful, but Tabitha couldn't talk anymore without crying.

Pulling up in front of her apartment, Jim turned off the engine and turned to look at her. "Before you get out, will you at least tell me if I'm

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included in this boycott?"

Tabitha wanted to say no. But if she were honest with herself, she'd know that she was already partly in love with him. The problem was that eventually, he would want his family's approval.

Her family was never going to approve of anything she did. Dating Jim wouldn't change that. Breaking their relationship off now, before it really was anything, made more sense.

"Jim, I think we should go our separate ways." Proud that she could keep her voice steady, she tried to ignore the knot settling into the pit of her stomach. She couldn't look at him.

There was a long, awkward silence.

Finally, she turned to face him. His hands were clenched on the steering wheel and a muscle jumped in his jaw.

When he finally spoke, Tabitha was surprised at the hurt and anger she heard in his tone.

"You won't even give us a chance?"

"There *is* no chance." How could she explain that to him? "I hate the wine business. I had it shoved down my throat, and I'm not going back to it."

His eyes bored into hers. "What does that have to do with us?"

Helplessly she shrugged. "Your family won't like that I'm not in the wine business. My family will never approve. So what's the point?"

"Your family's opinion is that important to you? If so, why are you in web design? Why don't you just admit that you don't have the guts to really try at a relationship?" Bitterness rode every syllable he spoke.

What could she say? "I'm not setting myself up to be hurt again."

Surprising her, he nodded. "I see. So I'm condemned before I even commit the crime. Well, if I'm already convicted—"

His hands shot out and grasped her arms. With a bruising grip, he yanked her toward him and crushed her mouth with his.

With no conscious thought, Tabitha returned his kiss. Her anger faded as his tongue wrapped around hers. One of his hands tangled in her hair, and his other hand brushed the side of her breast. All of her senses went on alert. The smell of his cologne, the feel of his hand clenched in her

hair, and the sound of his groan all sent her reeling. He broke the kiss, and she whimpered.

Then, sanity returned.

He was about to kiss her again when she shoved her hands against his chest with all her might. Releasing her, he looked hurt and confused.

It was too much. Tabitha started to cry. "I can't. I can't. I'm falling for you, and you'll only break my heart. Your family is too important to you."

Before he could say anything in response, she flung open her door and ran into her apartment.

* * * * *

Jim watched her run, her heels slapping the pavement as she approached her door. He was sorry he'd lost his temper. She was scared, which might be a good thing.

And she'd said she was falling for him.

One thing she had wrong, though. His family wasn't more important to him than she was. Loving Tabitha made him lighter and happier. All his life, his family had pushed him to be something he wasn't. Finding acceptance with them wasn't easy, but he had finally done it somehow. Though his parents would love to see him back in the wine business, they were happy he was in web design. Apparently Tabitha hadn't found that acceptance yet. Maybe she never would.

He certainly wasn't going to give up on her though. He had a lot to do.

Chapter Five

Sunday was awful. Twice Tabitha picked up the phone to call Jim, and twice she hung up without dialing. Worst of all, she was waiting for a phone call from him. Right after she fled from his car to her apartment, she immediately began to have second thoughts about her behavior.

Nothing she knew about him told her that his family dictated his choices. In fact, the opposite appeared to be true. All she knew about him came back to her in a rush. He made his own choices. If he wanted to be with her, he would.

So, her tirade wasn't really about him. It was about herself.

She was afraid to go against her family. Her mother's health, her sister's scorn, and the weight she gave to both made Tabitha afraid to try anything that might cause more friction. Her experience with choosing a different profession from the one envisioned by her parents made her wary of going against the grain again.

Stuck inside her own loneliness, she kept refusing to stand up and be who she really was. It was obvious that she had broken with her family over her choice in work, but for some reason she wasn't able to go against them in her choice of men. What kind of a woman did that make her? In her mind, she was protecting both Jim and herself from pain.

Thinking about it now, she knew it was too late anyway. She loved Jim desperately, and now she'd ruined everything.

For once, she let herself cry all she wanted.

* * * * *

Monday mornings were always awful for Tabitha, but this one was worse than usual. Bracing herself to face life without Jim, she got up and showered. Her clients still needed her. What else did she have but her work? It had always been her refuge.

Looking in the mirror, she saw how pale she was. Her brown eyes were dull and lifeless. It was rare that she had to wear makeup, but it looked like this today was one of those days when she needed it.

The phone rang.

Maybe it's him.

Pushing the thought away, she snatched up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Tabitha?" It was her morning appointment.

Her heart sank, but she kept her voice level. "Yes, Mrs. Landau. I'll be there in another hour."

"That's why I called, dear. I'm going to have to cancel our appointment today. I'm so sorry to be last minute."

"Oh that's fine. We can reschedule whenever you want."

"I'll call you, dear. Have a wonderful day." And for some reason, Mrs. Landau laughed merrily.

"You too. Thank you," Tabitha said. *What a relief.*

The phone rang again. This time it was her afternoon appointment, who also cancelled.

She frowned. *Maybe I'm being blacklisted. That would figure. The one thing that keeps me from going crazy is going to fall apart, too.*

She was about to get back into her pajamas and pull the covers over her head when there was a knock at the door.

When she looked out her peephole, all she saw were flowers. Lots and lots of flowers. She opened the door, and behind the enormous bouquet stood a delivery boy.

"Are those for me?" she asked.

The boy smiled. "Are you Tabitha Durst?"

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She nodded. He handed her the flowers, and she started to close the door.

"Wait," he said. "That's not all."

The next thing she knew, three more delivery men came in with vases and baskets filled with Christmas roses. Soon, every flat surface in her apartment was covered with them.

Bewildered, she stood at the door. One of the delivery men handed her a card which read, "This is only the beginning. Jim."

Tears leaked from her eyes. When the delivery truck finally left, she called Jim, but both of his numbers went straight to voice mail. She was puzzled.

About twenty minutes later, there was another knock on the door.

What now?

She looked out the peephole, and saw Santa Claus. Actually, there were three of them.

She opened her door, and one of them handed her a card. It was another note from Jim, which read, *"I can't sing, so this will have to do."*

The three Santas sang *A Christmas Love Song*.

Once it ended, the tallest Santa handed her another note. Tabitha was still trying to grasp everything as she unfolded it.

It read, "If you don't come and see me, I'll keep this up until you do. Meet me at Kelly's at seven p.m."

With butterflies in her stomach, Tabitha ran into her bedroom. Another shopping trip was in order. She needed to look fabulous tonight.

* * * * *

At seven that evening, Tabitha sat in Kelly's fidgeting at the bar. The dress she'd bought was more revealing than anything she'd ever owned, and it made her self-conscious. Yet her embarrassment would be worth it if the sage green dress bowled Jim over. Trying not to pull up its plunging neckline and haul down her skirt, she played with the hem, and then dropped it. Her beer was half gone, and she chewed on a stir stick. What if he didn't show up? If he didn't, he'd never know how wrong she

had been.

Finally, the door opened, and he came in. He resembled a panther, sleek and dangerous. His familiar smell reached her and she almost closed her eyes in relief and pleasure. Instead, she watched his eyes as he took in her dress. Impossibly, they got even darker. If she read him right, the dress was a hit.

"Did you show up because you wanted the annoyances to stop, or because you really wanted to thank me?" There was a twinkle in his eyes, but something in his manner told her he wasn't entirely confident of her answer.

"Thank you." She said it quietly.

Moving closer, he kept his eyes on hers. "Do you still think we shouldn't see each other because of our crazy families?"

She shook her head.

"Good, because that would be a shame. You were the best palate your Dad ever had, but I've seen your computer work. It's brilliant. Your family is insane to go with my company."

"My family comes with me. Are you willing to take that on?"

"Yes." His crooked grin made her chest tight. "Are you willing to take on Judith and my crazy family?"

"If it means I'll get to see you, I will."

He still hadn't touched her, but he stood so close she had to crook her neck to look up into his face.

"Then I say, let's have some American wine on that."

Everything inside her unraveled and all her tension melted away. She smiled at him.

"Jim, you're a treasure."

He put his hand on her cheek. "Smile at me like that, and you may get more *treasure* than you'll know what to do with."

"Really? In that case..." She smiled again.

Jim stared at her, and then suddenly grabbed her hand and hauled her toward the door. "That's it. We're leaving."

"Your place or mine?" She was breathless by the time they reached the parking lot.

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"Mine. Don't argue." He leaned down and touched her nose with his. "You smiled at me."

"It might have just been just a smile." Her eyes met his.

His hands gripped her shoulders. "Don't play with me, Tabitha. Was it?"

"No."

The look on his face made her heart race. "Good."

They reached his car and, scrambled in. He peeled out of the driveway as if he were late for something.

"You don't have to drive so fast." She closed her eyes.

"I don't want you to have time to change your mind."

As it turned out, it was only a short twenty minute drive of to Jim's small house in Healdsburg.

"I wasn't expecting...company," he said. His voice trailed off.

Keeping a straight face, she told him. "I'll leave my white gloves in the car."

He laughed and pulled out his keys.

The moment she walked through his door, she felt right at home. Everything was right. The furniture was comfortable, the colors were subtle. And the artwork was to her taste.

He threw his keys on a table by the door and walked toward her. For some reason, Tabitha began to back up.

"Have you changed your mind, Tabitha?" he asked.

She shivered at his tone. He looked dangerous.

Swallowing nervously, she managed to croak out. "No."

He backed her up more until she felt the couch against her legs.

"Are you sure?" He halted just inches from her body.

She wanted this more than anything. Maybe it would be nothing more than just sex to him, but Tabitha wanted it with this man. "I'm sure, Jim."

She braced herself for his passionate response, and it undid her when his hands reached out and gently stroked her upper arms. Then he pulled her against him and held her close, doing nothing else. "I don't want to rush this." He murmured against her hair. "You smell so good."

Her hands crept up around his neck, and she moved against him. He groaned. Kissing his neck, she lifted her leg and rubbed her knee against his crotch. "You smell so good it drives me crazy." She whispered in his ear.

He held her away from him and pulled off his shirt. As he did, he backed her up step by step down his hallway. Then off came his belt, his pants, and his socks. The bedroom was at the end of the hall, and he kept her walking backward until they reached the bed. Then, he pulled her dress off over her head. His hands were impatient as he unhooked her bra and started for her panty hose. He groaned when he discovered she was wearing garters.

"Did you wear these to torture me?"

Her hand reached down and rubbed the tell-tale bulge showing through his briefs. "No. I'm doing *this* to torture you."

Grabbing her hand, he closed his eyes and unhooked her garters in two snaps. He tore her stockings as he pulled everything off. She fell onto the bed and he tumbled after her, his hands touching her everywhere.

As his fingertips gently touched her breasts, he murmured, "Perfect."

She arched against his hands as they stroked her. Then, he lowered his mouth and scraped his tongue over one of her aching peaks. Moaning, she ran her hands through his hair, pressing him closer.

His fingers touched her soft opening and she almost flew off the bed. He flicked the little nub just above it, and she cried out.

"You're so wet." His voice was hoarse. "I want you so much."

"Please! Jim, please." Her head thrashed against the pillow as she steadily climbed toward some previously unknown height.

When he put his mouth there, she went totally still with pleasure and then began to move. She reached the dizzying heights of pleasure and felt as if she were flying away. It shattered her.

Then his lips met hers, and she tasted herself on him. His arousal pulsed against the junction of her thighs.

Lifting his head, he reached into a drawer in the bedside table and pulled out a condom. His hands trembled as he tore open the package.

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Tabitha was amazed. No man had ever shaken from wanting her.

In a heartbeat, Jim smoothed the condom over his length and she lifted her hips in blatant invitation.

Instead of plunging into her, however, he moved with excruciating slowness, back and forth, until she thought she'd lose her mind. Sweat gathered on his back as he held his control. Her movements became frantic and instinctive. *Faster!* She needed it faster and harder. What she didn't realize was that she was screaming it out loud.

It seemed to send him over the edge, and with a loud shout of pleasure that sent her spinning, he thrust in her with speed and power. Over and over, until their cries rose up almost simultaneously.

"I love you."

She hadn't meant to say it. It was stupid. This was just sex, and she was telling this guy she loved him.

He took her face in his hands, and she cringed. Here it comes, she thought. He's going to tell me he has a commitment problem, or that he's in therapy or—

"I love you too, Tabitha," he said. "I have almost since the day I met you."

"What?" She blinked in surprise.

He kissed her. "I fell in love with you that first night at Kelly's."

"You're kidding!" She stared into his eyes, looking for any signs of humor.

He grinned down at her. "Nope. I just wanted to convince you that I was irresistible."

"Well, you succeeded. The Christmas roses convinced me. Good move there." She grinned back at him. Feeling like she had just won the lottery, she rested her head against on his shoulder and relaxed.

He loved her.

Happier than she had ever had been before in her life, she drifted off to sleep.

Author Bio

Jennifer McKenzie lives in extreme Northern California with her husband and two children. A confirmed bibliophile, she always wanted to write and be a published author. Her favorite time of day is right before bed, when she can read whatever book she can get her hands on—which ranges from a romance, to a history of China.

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Chapter One

She was in big trouble.

Lily turned this way and that, her full skirt swishing around her legs. She smoothed her hands over the whisper thin fabric, picking it up with the tips of her fingers and letting it fall back into place. She always got fidgety when called before the council. They made her nervous. She didn't know why. She did a good job, did what they asked her to do.

Usually.

"Miss Lily, are you ready?"

She turned and saw the newest sprite smiling shyly at her, holding the door open. Her pretty pale blue wings fluttered behind her, the sign of a true novice. Only newbies lacked wing control. Lily could proudly say she'd had her wings under control for years.

She smiled at the sprite and walked into the room. A knot formed in her stomach when she saw who sat at the center of the large table. Not just Mistress, the head of the fairy council. No, the actual Madam Fairy. The one *everyone* answered to. Lily gulped. Jeez, what had she done? At least her wings weren't flapping.

Her nerves must've shown, because Mistress smiled at her, kindness shining in her eyes.

"Sit down, Lily." Madam pointed to the lone chair that sat before the long table. Important head fairies sat on either side of the madam, including Mistress, the fairy Lily normally took orders from. "How are you, dear?"

Lily clenched her hands in her lap, and they sank into the diaphanous folds of her dress. "I—I'm fine, Madam. Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine, Lily. Madam has a proposition for you." Mistress smiled at her, her pink sparkly eyelashes fluttering. How Lily envied those eyelashes. She envied everything about Mistress, because everything having to do with her was pink. Mistress had pretty pink hair, the pink eyelashes, a sweet pink mouth, her skin glittery and pale pink—not to mention all of her pink clothes. Just the thought of that pink wardrobe made Lily want to sigh with longing. Pink was her favorite color. But it was reserved for the children fairies.

Lily was a holiday fairy, which meant she wore head to toe red. Dark red hair, ruby red lips, pale skin—to emphasize those red lips you know—and every red dress imaginable. So dark, so dramatic, so *red*. For once Lily wanted to be light and whimsical, airy and free, beloved by children. Pink and sparkly.

This could be her chance. Maybe.

"Yes, Mistress is right, I have a proposition for you. Something we believe you'll be very interested in." Madam smiled at her. Since she was *the* top of the line fairy, Madam wore white. Crystal clear, pristine white, with just a hint of sparkle. All of it emphasized her fair-haired, fair-skinned beauty. The most beautiful fairy of all.

Lily nodded, excited, and she squirmed in her seat. If they were going to offer her a children fairy position, she would probably faint with glee.

"We need you to do something special this Christmas season." Madam paused, her pale, pale blue eyes meeting Mistress' before she looked at Lily. "We need you to teach someone how to love."

"A child?" Lily couldn't help herself; she had to ask. A glittering pink dress was in her future. She could just *feel* it.

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"Oh, no children involved in this situation, no. We have plenty of children fairies, and you're one of our top holiday fairies after all. We wouldn't move you from your position."

Lily slumped in her chair. Bye-bye pink. "I thank you for the compliment, but what do I know about love? I've never been a mortal, I just pretend to be one during the holidays." And it was exhausting work, being a mortal. Those humans knew how to put someone through the ropes. So many emotions, so many senses, so many thoughts! It hurt her head just to think about it.

"How long have you been a holiday fairy, Lily?"

Lily tapped her lips with her index finger, thinking. "I have no idea, to be honest. I know it's been a long time."

"Two hundred and twenty-eight years, to be exact." Mistress looked up from her pile of notes. "You're one of our oldest fairies, Lily. We need you. *He* needs you."

Lily's eyebrows rose. "*He*? Who is this he?"

"The mortal who needs to learn how to love, the one you're going to help. You see, Lily, there's a theme to this year's Christmas candidates. We're teaching people how to love, how to live again. But this one, the one you'll be working with, he won't let anyone into his life, doesn't want to deal with love. He's too afraid." Madam shook her head.

Great. What did they call that type of behavior? Maybe he's a recluse. He could be miserable and mean-spirited, too. Oh, my. Those types were usually the worst. "Why is he such a special case? I don't understand."

"He's a very important man. What he offers to his society is so very wonderful, but he doesn't allow anyone to get close. He's lost so much, he's afraid he'll only lose again and again." Madam's brow wrinkled. "He has such a wall up no one is able to penetrate it. That's where you come in."

"I need to penetrate his wall?" Now Lily was really confused. She thought that was what the mortal man did to the mortal woman. Not that she had any experience in it, but still. She kind of knew what they talked

about. The sex thing. Oh, her mind was wandering when she needed to focus...

So why did they want her to help this man, teach him how to love when she didn't know how herself? She knew all about holiday spirit, knew how to fill an empty person with the spirit until they were full to bursting. But *love*?

All of the fairies tittered, delicate hands covering their giggling mouths. "Oh, Lily, you're going to be perfect." Madam said. "We know you will be. You're just what he needs."

Lily had no idea what that meant. And she wasn't sure if she even liked it.

* * * * *

"Dr. Killian, your last appointment for the day cancelled."

Tim glanced at his receptionist as he cruised past her desk.

"Thanks, Angie. You can go ahead and go home for the night."

There was no denying the relief in her eyes at the thought of leaving at a decent hour. Not that he could blame her. He'd been working poor Angie, his entire staff, to the bone, and during the holidays, too. They weren't complaining about all of the money they were making, but he could see on their faces they didn't enjoy so many hours. They had families to go home to, presents to buy, Christmas trees to decorate.

And he had none of that.

Tim sighed. No time to get sentimental now. It wasn't anyone's fault he lost both of his parents in a tragic accident a few years ago. That they were older and their parents and siblings had all passed before them. They had struggled to have a baby for so many years that when Tim finally arrived, they didn't bother trying for any more. Which meant he was totally and completely alone.

He tried not to let it bother him. Yeah, he missed his parents. They'd been wonderful people; supportive, loving. He had only fond memories of them, memories that didn't bother him for most of the year. Christmas was the exception, though. When everyone promoted family

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and gift giving and being with the ones you love, traveling over hills and snow to get to grandmother's house, that's when it got to him. When he missed his mom and dad more than anything, and wished he had someone to share his life with.

Dreamy sentiment is for fools, he told himself. He grabbed a couple of files from his desk and shoved them into his briefcase, then snapped it shut. He grabbed his coat, turned off the lights in his office, and left for the night, too tired to get any paperwork done. Too tired and too sad, though he would never admit to the last thought.

Outside the night air was cold and windy, even more so than normal for the time of year on the coast. He shivered in his thick coat, put his head down against the wind, and stuck his hands in his pockets, heading toward the lot where he parked his car.

And collided so hard with someone he knocked the little person to the ground.

"Ow!"

Tim watched in fascination as the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life glared up at him with angry green eyes. She sat on the sidewalk, the impact of their collision having knocked her right on her butt, her hand rubbing said butt as she grimaced.

Even in pain she was gorgeous. The deepest, darkest red hair curled in big waves around her tiny shoulders, a heart shaped face, full, juicy red lips, and pale skin that appeared so smooth, so flawless, it almost didn't look real.

"Are you going to help me up, or you gonna just stand there and gawk at me all night?"

And a sassy mouth to wrap that pretty package up all nice and neat with a not-so-flawless bow. Of course she was right, he was acting like a gaping jackass. Tim offered his hand and she took it, hauling herself up with one smooth motion. The second their hands connected he felt the zing. A tightening in the pit of his stomach, a twitching in his groin. Something he'd certainly never experienced the first time he touched a woman before...

"Are you okay?" he asked, trying to ignore the tumultuous feelings swirling inside of him.

She nodded, brushed her hair away from her face. "I'm fine. The sidewalk is like ice, it's so cold." She rubbed her little butt again, and Tim couldn't help but watch, fascinated by the slide of her slim hand on her curves.

"I'm sorry I ran into you. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

"I know." She smiled, easing the sting of her sarcastic remark. "But I forgive you."

"Thank you." He smiled. The weird nervous feeling eased, and he began to feel like himself again. He decided to turn on the charm, the normal device he used on women. *Keep it light, keep it flirty, and don't let them get too close.* A personal motto he'd kept to always. "I'm a doctor, you know, so if you need me to check you out, I would be more than happy to oblige. Make sure your...backside is okay."

An unladylike snort was her reply. "I'm sure you would," she muttered with a shake of her head.

Huh. "What do you mean by that?"

She rolled her eyes, causing him to notice just how vivid green they were. Full of angry little sparks, too. He lived in a small town, why had he never seen this woman before? "That was the worst line I've heard by far. Does that work on all of the women you bump into?"

"It's not like I bump into women on purpose..."

"Uh huh." She nodded and started to walk away. "Thank you, doctor, but I don't need a full body examination tonight."

Tim watched her go, admiring the subtle sway of her narrow hips, the way her skirt billowed around her legs. Insane to wear a skirt in this kind of weather in the middle of December, even if she did have a heavy coat and knee length boots on. Sexy black leather boots that fit her legs just so. Boots he could imagine unzipping slowly and slipping off her feet, revealing a long expanse of pale slim leg...

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He shook his head. No use having lusty thoughts about that one, he thought. He again headed for his car. Talk about unreceptive. His charm must be weakening.

* * * * *

So she had to work with *that*? Lily shook her head and picked up the pace, hugging her waist tight against the bitter cold. Handsome as sin with a devil's smile and one of the tackiest lines she'd ever heard in all her years! And she'd heard a lot of them. Some so good she would never forget, and some so awful they were burned in her brain for all eternity. The one Dr. Timothy Killian just used on her ranked right up there in the awful category.

Actually, what he said wasn't that bad. It didn't help she'd reacted so strongly to him. When their bodies connected and she'd landed on the sidewalk, it wasn't just from the fall. She'd been so overwhelmed by the brief contact of his body against hers it sent her toppling. The way he looked at her, the feeling of her hand in his. All of it had made her shiver, and she wanted to shiver again just thinking about it. So she did.

She'd never experienced anything like it before. Such awareness for a mortal. The emotions she normally dealt with were all about spirit and joy, warmth and remembrance. She'd never been so aware of another human being, never wondered what it would feel like to have him touch her in a more intimate way. Goodness, she'd never been touched in an intimate way besides polite hugs and the occasional peck on the cheek. She'd heard about sex, learned the basics from the few movies she'd watched during her time on earth, but she'd never experienced it. She didn't know what it was like to have a man hold her, touch her tenderly, kiss her.

Now, though... Now Lily wondered...