

Hidden Hearts

Copyright 2001
Denise A. Agnew

New Year, New Beginning...

Returning to her hometown, Tiffany Kent struggles with awkward childhood memories like the time certified nerd Zack Blayne tried to kiss her. Instead, she discovers a town as changed as she is and Zack transformed from chemistry-set kid...to firefighter hottie.

“No can do, Andrea. I’ve got lots of work to do. Things piled up over Christmas,” Tiffany Kent said into the phone as snow drifted passed the windows of her office in Blaircroft Museum in Denver. “Besides, this weather looks like it might turn into a blizzard.”

A blast of wind swirled the white stuff around in the air. She sank into the chair behind her desk.

“Don’t say no again this year,” Andrea Blayne said, a plea in her voice.

“You are one stubborn woman, you know that?” Tiffany asked. Then she chuckled. “New Year’s Eve is no big deal to me. Every year I climb into my flannel PJs, pop open a bottle of sparkling apple cider, and give myself a toast while I watch the ball drop in Times Square. I’m comfortable and there are no wild parties to wade through.”

Andrea’s sigh echoed over the phone line. “Exactly. That’s just what I mean. You’re always alone. Don’t you ever get bored with the same old scenario?”

“No. Maybe when I’m ninety-five I’ll be tired of the same state of affairs, but right now I’m comfortable.”

“Comfortable.” Andrea made the word sound contemptible. “Loneliness is comfortable.”

“Oh, come on. It doesn’t follow that because I’m alone I’m lonely.”

“Uh-huh.” Andrea didn’t sound convinced. “And if you weren’t such a good friend, I would strangle you. When was the last time you were here?”

“You know how long.” Tiffany frowned and listened to the small clock on her desk tick away.

Andrea and her family came to Denver several times a year, but Tiffany didn’t venture to little Clydeswell, Colorado. Ever.

The museum was quiet. Almost too quiet. Most of the employees of the museum took vacation during Christmas and New Years and that left a rag tag staff. Still, she enjoyed the calm and tried to persuade herself she didn’t mind that year after year everyone expected her to work during the holidays.

“Come have a great time with us. You won’t be disappointed.” Andrea’s voice took on a mischievous bent. “Besides, I’ve got someone I want you to meet.”

“No, no, no.” Tiffany groaned. More snow flew by the window, and she mentally urged the storm to continue. “Not another hunter with a voice like Elmer Fudd. I’m not doing it.”

“Everyone misses you.”

“Right. After ten years most of them don’t remember me.”

“Wouldn’t recognize you, either. You’ve changed so much.”

“All the better.”

“Okay, let’s put it this way. If you don’t peel your butt away from that desk for a change and party a little, I’m going to drive through this storm and kick your butt. How does that sound?”

“Menacing.”

A huge sigh came over the line. “Besides, you have to come to Clydeswell this year. There’s this guy who is *dying* to meet you.”

“It won’t work.”

“What if it’s something he wants more than anything in the world?”

Tiffany screwed up her face and caught a glimpse of herself in the glass front bookcase near her desk. Her long red hair stuck up in several places, and her face looked pale. She doubted any guy would be too enthralled with the picture she presented right now.

“Guess he’ll just have to be disappointed,” Tiffany said.

“All right, all right. I’ll tell him it’s a no go and that’s the end of it, okay?”

Relief slid through Tiffany. “Good.”

After a short pause Andrea continued. “By the way, your mom called me.”

“She didn’t.”

“Yes, and she told me a little secret. Fess up. Why didn’t you tell me you battled pneumonia for two weeks over Thanksgiving? Hmm?”

Tiffany stiffened. “Because I took care of it myself.”

“Took care of it yourself?” Andrea’s voice sharpened. “You mean you had no one there to look after you?”

“I missed a lot of work as it is because I was out sick. I feel like I’m still trying to catch up.”

“It sounds to me like your workplace is abusing you. You know, one of those places that finds a person who is a good worker, then promptly drives them into the ground because they’re the only ones working hard and then some.”

“Isn’t that the way it is everywhere?” Tiffany sounded resigned to her own ears, and though she didn’t like the attitudes of many people she worked with, she refused to stoop to their level and become lazy.

“It doesn’t have to be that way, and you don’t have to always be on your own. It makes me shudder to think you were that ill with no one to care for you.”

Tiffany smiled at her friend’s concern. “You’re a sweetie, but not to worry. Mom and Dad almost flew up from Arizona, but I told them not to.”

“Yeah, you probably said it wasn’t that bad. Were you in the hospital?”

Tiffany almost lied, then decided against it. “Yeah. Two days.”

Andrea groaned. “My God.”

Another line on Tiffany’s phone rang. “Look, I’d love to talk longer, but I’ve got another call.”

“Okay, but call me later so I can finish convincing you that it’s better to be up here with us partying.”

Tiffany chuckled and hung up. After she took care of the other phone call, she noticed that the snow seemed to be easing and the wind ceased. Maybe she could make a drive into the mountains tomorrow and arrive in her old hometown in a couple of hours. Good thing the holiday came on a weekend this year. If she decided to go to Clydeswell, she would still have time to return to work on Monday.

She closed her eyes and remembered how pristine and beautiful little Clydeswell looked in the winter when it snowed. The town sparkled like a jewel, each frosted façade on the Victorian buildings festooned with Christmas decorations. She wondered how much had changed in ten years. If she went there now, would she find the place so altered she wouldn’t recognize it or

care for it anymore? Would she regret driving through the streets and retracing old memories? Shoving aside speculation, she returned to her work.

After an hour she put down her pen and rubbed her temples. Looking at the clock, she realized quitting time approached. Soon her colleagues would file out the door and head home to warm hearths and families. She would return to a chilled apartment and a cup of tea.

Whoopee.

Maybe she did need a change. Would it hurt to discover if Clydeswell remained the stuffy, restrictive town she escaped all those years ago? One visit didn't mean she would stay forever. She looked out the window and realized sunshine peaked through the clouds.

Moments later she snatched up the phone and dialed Andrea's number.

* * *

"Halleluia! We're here. I can't wait to pick up my costume. I've never been a fairy godmother before." Andrea opened the door to Vicksman's Costume Shop and waved her hand to Tiffany. "You first."

Since Tiffany arrived in town early that morning, her short, bubbling blonde friend never seemed to stop talking. "I hope you're pleased with yourself."

"I'm very proud. I managed to do something no one has done in years."

"Oh?"

"Convince my stuffy friend to break out and have some fun."

"Me? Stuffy? I left Clydeswell because *it's* stuffy."

Andrea put on her *oh, sure* look. "We both know that's not the only reason you left."

A pang of annoyance ran through Tiffany, but she gave her chattering friend an indulgent smile and stepped into the shop. "Are you sure I'll be able to find something on short notice?"

“Absolutely. A lot of people make their costumes, so it’s not like the store will be totally empty.”

After drifting through the shop looking at the inventory, Tiffany didn’t see anything she liked. Finally, the shopkeeper asked them if they needed help. After Andrea introduced the older woman as Mrs. Henderson, the smiling woman bustled into the back room with a promise to find a perfect costume.

“What if it’s too small?” Tiffany looked down at her friend.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot. You’re an Amazon.” Andrea nudged her with an elbow and smiled. “All five feet six inches of you.”

Tiffany nudged her back. “Well, I’m surprised you found anything, shorty.”

They laughed, and Tiffany felt lighthearted. As she’d driven into Clydeswell that morning she hadn’t expected to find the town much the same as when she’d left it. From the number of new shops on the outskirts of town, including a small development of houses that looked less than a couple of years old, she could tell Clydeswell had grown. Nothing drastic or earth shattering, though. She welcomed the embrace of old feelings, both pleasant and not so pleasant as she had traveled to Andrea’s house. Though she couldn’t say she looked forward to a noisy party this evening, she decided to keep an open mind as long as possible.

“You should see what Zack is wearing tonight,” Andrea said.

“Your *brother* Zack?”

“Yep. You’re not going to believe it.”

“Uh-huh.” When it came to Andrea’s brother, she’d believe anything.

Moments later Mrs. Henderson presented Tiffany with a dazzling princess costume that Tiffany admitted looked good on her. “Wow, this almost looks real. Like something from the middle ages.”

“Perfect,” Andrea said. “You’ve got to rent it.”

Taking the plunge, Tiffany handed over her cash. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Mrs. Henderson, tell Tiffany that I’m right about Zack’s costume. It’s perfect on him, don’t you think?”

Mrs. Henderson brightened. “Oh, you bet. Of course he didn’t have to rent it from here, but I think his idea for the costume was splendid.” She waggled her eyebrows as she smiled. “Zack is quite the looker.”

“Zack?” Tiffany said again in disbelief.

Andrea leaned on the counter near the register and sighed. “Well, I think he’s still my stinkin’ older brother, but it seems a lot of women around here think he’s a hunk.”

Mrs. Henderson added her own sigh. “That’s for sure.”

Tiffany couldn’t wrap her idea around the concept. Andrea hadn’t shown her any pictures of Zack in years, and even those had been bad shots where she couldn’t see him that well.

Zachary Blayne didn’t rate up there with Tiffany’s favorite people in the world. All through her childhood and teen years, he found ways to tease the life out of her. Not that he did anything cruel. Unpopular certainly defined his status in school. He also was one of the most accident-prone kids on the planet. He’d set his garage on fire when he was fourteen when his chemistry set exploded. Lucky for him, he put the fire out before extensive damage occurred.

After she left Clydeswell, she heard he earned his fire science degree in college in Michigan, spent some time as a firefighter in Detroit, then returned to his home town and joined the fire department. Hard to believe he now put out fires instead of starting them.

As they left the shop, Andrea smiled with what looked like triumph. “Perhaps tonight you’ll meet Prince Charming.”

Tiffany stopped on the sidewalk and leveled a fierce expression on her friend. “I swear if you’ve set me up with some ridiculous man in a tu-tu, I’ll—”

“No, no.” Andrea held her hand up. “I told the guy that wanted to meet you that you weren’t interested.”

As emotions sometimes did, Tiffany’s bounced from happy to let down. She hated feeling contradictory. “Good. All I want is a nice, calm time tonight. Nothing crazy, nothing hysterical.”

But as they got in the car, Tiffany saw another cunning smile cross her friend’s face, and she wondered what plan Andrea had cooked up.

* * *

“Welcome again, everyone, to the Firefighter’s Charity New Year’s Ball. Are we having fun? Great! Now let’s party!”

Tiffany winced as the D. J. ‘s voice echoed in the huge room inside the town hall. The speakers blared out a dance tune from her high school days, and all around her bodies gyrated as they took the D.J. seriously.

Tiffany snatched a paper cup of watered down punch and took a sip. Her nose wrinkled.
Sour. Yick!

All her old feelings about parties and being surrounded by people resurged to the surface.

She hated New Year's Eve.

Especially when it meant spending the evening with the people of Clydeswell. She left them behind ten years ago to start a life in Denver where no one knew her. *Awkward* Tiffany Kent with braces and glasses and a gangly walk didn't fit in with the atmosphere of the mountain town. Even now she felt the walls closing in on her like elevator doors.

Get a grip, Tiffany. You're an adult now and that garbage is all in the past. No one will recognize you in this costume anyway.

She scanned the huge room, cataloging the variety of costumes at this masquerade. All around her people partied, their faces hidden by masks. Some wore pointy party hats while others donned whatever went with their ridiculous outfits. Laughter and the constant throb of music worked on her already blossoming headache. In one way she should be happy this was a masked ball. Hiding their identities made some people act like fools. That, in itself, could be entertaining.

She *should* have fun and mingle. She *should* drink punch and forget that she spent another New Year's Eve not alone...but lonely.

She held out her arms and looked at her medieval princess costume. Good thing her former classmates didn't recognize her any more than she did them. Andrea once told her that many of her graduating class still lived in Clydeswell. Of course that didn't surprise her one bit. Some people liked the predictability of the same old drudge day after day. Some people hadn't endured years of feeling misunderstood and unpopular.

Not that she could be uncharitable about Andrea staying here, who lived in Clydeswell with her high school sweetheart and raised two rambunctious and healthy boys. Life hadn't always

gone well for Andrea. She left Clydeswell long enough to attend college and marry the wrong man before she realized she left the right man back in the little town where she grew up.

Very Waltons.

Tiffany grimaced. When had she become so cynical? Did living in the city do this to her, or did she leave something behind in Clydeswell, too?

She glanced at the ornate clock high on the wall near the double doors that lead into the back flower garden. An hour to go. She swallowed the lump in her throat and inhaled a deep and maybe cleansing breath. What did she expect? That a fairy princess costume would remove her from wallflower status? She'd asked two men to dance with her. One rejected her, and the other was whisked away by his jealous girlfriend before Tiffany could get him to the dance floor. Everyone else looked paired up, and that left her...nowhere.

She sighed. At least Zack hadn't turned up. That would have capped the evening.

Just remembering the last time she'd seen him, ten years ago, in this room on New Year's Eve, brought back uncomfortable feelings.

No, Tiffany. Don't go there. No time for old regrets.

She could envision his smile, metal mouth and all, and the way his glasses kept slipping down his nose. His pitiful attempts to make conversation had mixed with her awkwardness until they had nothing to say. She shoved the memory away.

Instead she scratched her head and cursed the person who designed her costume. The heavy tiara made her scalp itch, the netting around the neckline felt like it rubbed her skin raw, and her slip felt ready to slide down her legs any minute. Her panty hose threatened to cut off her entire circulatory system.

Despite her discomfort, she couldn't leave. Only one thing this entire night kept her watching the crowd, though she never would have admitted it out loud.

A fantasy.

As her gaze searched the mass of three hundred or more people, she wondered if she would see *him* again. In her secret heart she often fantasized about a man in uniform, and this guy defined the word *hottie*.

Over the last hour the mystery man crossed her vision twice, and she marveled at his costume. Who would have thought of wearing full-blown firefighter's turn out gear to a firefighter's ball? She smiled. No sparkling Mardi Gras extravaganza for him.

Tiffany's heart did a little stutter. There, dancing with Andrea, was her fantasy man.

Okay, so she didn't know for certain if the guy qualified as a god in the flesh. His red helmet, heavy coat, boots, and black mask over his eyes covered his attributes well. She knew it wasn't Andrea's significant other. Dressed as a fire extinguisher, Andrea's firefighter husband stood by the punch bowl chatting with a man wearing a piglet outfit.

As she watched Andrea, dressed as a fairy godmother, dance in the arms of the firefighter, she felt sharp, undeniable envy.

"Hope you're having a great time, Andrea," she murmured.

"Hey princess."

Tiffany jumped, startled by the male voice right behind her. She whirled and met the obnoxious sight of Benny Litteral. Instead of wearing a costume, he came as himself in a tuxedo.

Good heavens, he's gone to seed. This man didn't resemble the handsome football player she remembered from high school. "Hey, Benny."

Benny reached for her hand, and she snatched it out of his reach.

“Aw, come on, princess. Don’t you want to dance? Don’t you feel lonely?”

Where’s a big, strong fireman when you need one? “Not at all. I’m enjoying this all by myself. I’m not dancing tonight and besides, I’m about to leave.”

Benny, all six feet of him, seemed to expand as he took a deep breath. His round, red nosed face and watery eyes reminded her of an overgrown lovesick puppy.

“I think you’re just playing hard to get, and I don’t believe you,” he said.

He sniffed, pushed a hand through his greasy hair, and reached for her. “Let’s do it, princess.” Before she could let out more than an incoherent gasp, Benny wrapped his arms about her and danced her toward the garden doors. “You know, that mask doesn’t hide you very well.”

As he maneuvered her through the doors, she said, “Neither does yours.”

His face froze for a moment, his jaw slack. Then he laughed, his guffaw loud enough to hurt her ears. “Hah! Good one! My mask!”

Great. The idiot doesn’t know an insult when he hears one.

When she knew him in high school, Benny was a large, good-looking kid with overactive hormones. Back then most of the girls thought of him as gorgeous and he was popular with everyone. Like every other boy in Clydeswell, though, he hadn’t given Tiffany a second look. Now Benny packed extra weight around the waist and jowls, his hair thinned considerably, and his breath made her wince.

She pushed against his chest, but he held her fast. “Benny, let go.”

He executed a twirl that sent them into the shadows outside. When his hold tightened around her ribcage, she gasped. “You’re hurting me.”

Embarrassment and anger ran through her.

“Come on,” he rasped as his bad breath wafted over her nose. “Let’s have some fun. Haven’t seen you in so long, and boy are you pretty now.”

Okay, so now he’d found a way to make her feel ten inches high by reminding her of her ugly duckling past. “Benny, I’m warning you—”

He moved fast for a bulky man, and before she knew it, he pinned her against a garden wall and tried to kiss her. Panic hit at the same time as repulsion ignited her survival instincts. Tiffany turned her head so his lips brushed her cheek, and she aimed her knee at his groin. He moved his leg in time, and her attempt to unman him bounced off his thigh without hitting target.

“Let her go,” a deep, masculine voice said.

Benny froze and his hold loosened somewhat. She took a gasp of air.

Suddenly Benny stumbled backwards and tripped over a lawn chair. He landed on his butt with a grunt.

Her legs trembled, and she sagged against the wall. Startled, she couldn’t even laugh at Benny’s comical expression. Then Tiffany saw her rescuer, and she really did lose her breath.

Her fantasy firefighter stood before her, his mask gone. *Hottie* didn’t begin to describe him. His eyes blazed, his mouth thinned in irritation. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen a more ferocious looking man. His rugged features said he never took prisoners, and he never gave up. He stood with his feet apart and his fists clenched at his side. Over six feet of uncompromising male looked down on Benny. Then the fireman’s gaze switched to her, and his mouth softened the slightest bit.

“You all right, Tiffany?” he asked, his voice a rumbling baritone laced with velvet.

He knows me?

“Yes.” She answered barely above a whisper, still bemused by the events.

Benny stumbled to his feet. The firefighter stepped in front of her and faced Benny. His protective move sent a tiny thrill of primitive female appreciation straight through her.

“Hey, what did you do that for, Zack?” Benny asked, his voice sounding hurt. “I wasn’t hurting her.”

“It sure as hell looked like you were,” the fireman said. “Dancing is one thing, but cornering an unwilling woman and trying to kiss her is another.”

Zack. Zachary Blayne? Andrea’s chemistry set, skinny, nerd-certified brother?

“Go home before Tiffany presses charges.” Zack took hold of Benny’s arm. “Come on, I’ll call you a cab.” Zack looked back at her. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Um...yeah.” Her voice wobbled and she hated it. She straightened and cleared her throat. “I’m fine.”

Zack tugged Benny toward the door, and she realized that while Benny outweighed Zack in girth, the firefighter appeared to overshadow the former footballer player in sheer muscle and height.

“I’ve got ‘em.” Another large man appeared in the doorway, this one dressed as a court jester with hideous lime green tights.

Zack nodded as Benny was switched from the hold of one man to another. “Thanks, Rob.”

Rob Estemer, a real police officer that Tiffany had known all her life, peered at her with concern. “You want to press charges against this slob?”

She shook her head, and a shiver ran through her. She rubbed her arms. “No. He didn’t really hurt me.”

“If you change your mind about pressing charges, let me know,” Officer Estemer said.

Seconds later a protesting Benny disappeared from her view. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Though chills raced through her body, mortification filled her cheeks with heat. So did nervousness. And when she was nervous, she said silly things.

“My hero,” she said without thinking. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure to serve a princess.” His words, soft but husky, sounded sexy and the slightest bit teasing.

Zack came toward her, concern written all over that no-nonsense, striking face. She would recognize him anywhere, but she couldn’t believe that the klutzy boy from high school had turned into the most gorgeous man she’d ever seen. Her heart thundered as he stopped near her. As he towered over Tiffany, she felt the heat of his nearness warm her down to the soles of her feet.

“You’re freezing. Why don’t we go inside?” he asked, his voice now smooth and with no trace of anger left.

“No, thanks. I’d like to stay out here and gather my wits. I can’t believe he did that.” Her irritation remerged. “And I can’t believe I let him pull me out here.”

“It wasn’t your fault. There was no excuse for him to treat you that way.” Zack’s voice possessed a raw edge. “When I saw him clutching you in his arms it scared me.”

“Scared *you*? It looked like you were ready to punch his lights out.”

He smiled, the curve of his lips tender and warm. Her pulse went into overdrive. “Yeah, but I hate to see a woman manhandled.”

“Andrea,” she said as she remembered her friend’s abusive first husband.

His eyes darkened with apparent memories. “You got it.”

Silence settled between them, and she felt an urgency to learn more about him, but also about what she'd missed in the years since she left Clydeswell. "What made you come out here?"

"I saw him drag you away while I was dancing with my sister."

"Oh."

Feeling ridiculously speechless, she gazed into his dark chocolate brown eyes. She remembered that as a kid his long lashes and tousled dark curls seemed nice. His lashes were even longer now. She glanced at the big helmet on his head and wondered if he still possessed hair.

Big deal, Tiffany. Lots of bald men are sexy.

He removed the thick gloves that were a part of his costume, then took off the helmet and tossed it on the lawn chair. Scratching his head, Zack grinned. "Damn thing makes my head itch."

Tiffany's heart triple timed. Thick, black hair curled over his head in lush waves. His smile widened until it reached eight on the Richter scale for shake-me-down-to-my-shoes status.

"Here." He stripped off his big jacket. "This will keep you warm until you're ready to go inside."

His navy T-shirt proclaimed Clydeswell Fire Department in white letters. His narrow hips and long legs were encased in dark cargo style pants. His forearms bunched, his wide shoulders and powerful arms flexing as he slipped the huge coat around her. She almost said something about him catching cold but then noted he wore a turtleneck under the T-shirt. She inhaled and caught a masculine scent of musk and sandalwood that mixed with the aroma of moisture in the air.

Zack kept a hold on the collar, and his nearness made her feel lightheaded. She swallowed hard, and her gaze snagged on an interesting fact. His top lip wasn't thin, but it was smaller than his sensually carved lower lip. She wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

Put on the brakes, girl. You've only just met him again.

Everything seemed to pause around them, and she recalled the time they stood outside in this garden area ten years before.

"Tiff? Are you sure he didn't hurt you? You're very quiet."

No one but Andrea called her Tiff, but the shortened version of her name sounded sexy as hell coming from him. "Hmm? Oh, no. I mean, I'm fine. Everything just happened so fast I'm trying to take it all in."

He released the coat collar, and disappointment welled in her. *Double darn it.*

"Why don't we sit over on that bench? I don't know if you're tired, but Andrea has been dancing my feet off."

She chuckled as she settled next to him on the hard stone bench. "You're probably wishing her husband wasn't working tonight so she couldn't snag you for the duty."

"You've got that right."

A pause slipped between them, and she noticed that she didn't feel the cold with his huge coat around her. She savored the warmth. She took a chance and glanced at him again. He smiled. *Good heavens, did any man deserve to have such straight, white teeth?* Delighted, she grinned back and their gazes tangled. Supernova heat stirred in her belly, and she recognized what she felt right away. Unadulterated attraction.

Zack cleared his throat. "I've never seen Benny quite that out of control. You seemed to have a strong effect on him."

“I think anything in a skirt would get Benny’s attention. Apparently his hormones haven’t slowed down much.”

“He’s usually pretty tame these days, but I haven’t been to a New Year’s Eve party in so long, I’ve probably missed his usual display.”

“So Andrea dragged you here, too?”

“Yes and no.” He crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall. “Finally got a night off. I’ve always worked New Year’s Eve.”

Curiosity got the best of her. “Why?” He shrugged, his eyes guarded. Maybe she treaded where she shouldn’t. “Oops, I’m sorry. None of my business?”

“Long story, but I think I have time. After all, it almost the New Year.”

Snuggling deeper into his coat, she said, “I may not be here then.”

Something that looked like disappointment filled his face. “Why? Does your carriage turn into a pumpkin?”

She laughed. “I have a blue Saturn.”

“In that case, I think you should stick around and see the show. Andrea promised a great finale this year.” His gaze turned curious. “This is the first year I’ve seen you here. In fact, I haven’t seen you since New Year’s Eve ten years ago. Andrea said you went to Denver and promised never to return.”

“So she’s kept you filled in on my life?”

“You could say that.”

“I’m visiting because Andrea’s been to Denver plenty of times. I was starting to feel guilty. That and her constant nagging helped.”

A laugh rumbled out of Zack's chest. One of those good, hearty sounds that suggested long winter nights in front of a fireplace on a bear skin rug. Her skin tingled all over and anticipation made her reckless.

"So why did you skip the annual New Year's Firefighter's Ball every year until now?"

Tiffany asked, wondering if she knew the answer.

Nah. It doesn't seem likely he would miss this big party because of what happened ten years ago.

He shifted a little closer to her. "Because Andrea told me that if I didn't attend and dance at least once, she would skin me alive. And you know she could do it."

"And you've stayed away every year before? I don't believe that. Andrea would have bugged you relentlessly until you succumbed." She leaned closer and lowered her voice.

"Inquiring minds want to know."

For all of a few seconds Tiffany wondered if she pushed too far. His expression went pensive, then a little closed. For a long time he didn't speak, and she thought he might not answer.

"I'll tell you why," he finally said. "I hate New Year's Eve with a passion. About ten years ago this young lady with braces and glasses wouldn't let me kiss her. It about broke my heart."

Tiffany's heart sped up. "Braces and glasses, eh? Was she wearing a princess costume?"

Heat gathered in his eyes, and the passion in that stare about melted her panty hose. She gulped and panicked. Standing up, she moved away from the bench and sucked in a draught of cold air.

He followed, and he gripped her shoulders in his large hands. "No, she wasn't wearing a princess costume then. But she is now."

She drew in another breath. "She's changed a lot in ten years."

"So have I."

"Do you still blow up chemistry sets?"

He laughed. "Not anymore."

She turned, and her hands landed on his chest. Zack felt warm and strong beneath her fingers, and heat spilled all through her.

"I never believed I fit in around this town until I went away to college and got some maturity," Zack said. "I realized that most kids have the kinds of experiences I have when they're growing up. Life changes when you grow up. How popular you were or weren't in high school doesn't matter any more."

"You're right." Tiffany realized something else. She'd held on to the past for far too long, allowing old memories to dictate her future. "I guess I stayed away because I had this weird idea that if I came back people would treat me the way they did when I was a kid."

"Have they?" His brows drew together in a frown.

She laughed softly. "No, not at all. Benny's a good example. I mean, when he was a football player he wouldn't look twice at me. He was too busy chasing cheerleaders."

Zack's frown deepened. "Were you interested in him?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Are you kidding? No way. As far as I was concerned, most teenage boys were reprehensible."

"Including me?" A smile touched his lips, but it looked sad.

Remorse hit her hard. "I'm sorry. I was a hypocrite. I treated you as poorly as people treated me. I was two-faced."

He slowly tucked her hair behind her ears, his gaze lingering on her mouth. Her breathing quickened as she recognized the interest flickering in his eyes.

“There’s no need to apologize. When we’re teenagers we have to make mistakes to learn. Believe me, I made plenty of the same kinds of errors,” he said.

Tiffany’s mouth popped open as she realized that Andrea *had* set her up once again. “Wait a minute, Andrea told me there was this guy dying to meet me. I told her I didn’t want to be set up. That guy couldn’t be you.”

Zack gave her another knee-melting smile, and he drew her closer, his hands cupping her shoulders. “Actually, it was. I wanted to see for myself if everything Andrea said was true. She said you were pretty.”

She blushed. “Well...um...you know how your sister is prone to exaggerate.”

Warmth filled his expression, heating his eyes and widening his grin. “She does about some things, but in this case she was dead wrong. You’re more than pretty. You’re beautiful.”

Her stomach fluttered and her pulse kicked into overdrive. She couldn’t form a single coherent thought for a moment. “Thank you. She didn’t tell me that you’re...” Tiffany swallowed hard. “She didn’t tell me how much you’ve changed.”

Mischief sparkled in his eyes. “I haven’t changed a bit.”

“Huh.” She grasped his right biceps and squeezed. Iron hard muscle flexed under her fingers as she touched him, and she snatched her hand back before she could be tempted to explore. “What would you call this? Pudding?”

“So I work out.”

“I’ll say.” She her gaze to travel over him with appreciation. “Anything else about you that’s altered over the years?”

“Why don’t you stick around after midnight and we’ll talk and maybe even dance. Get to know each other again.”

His idea sounded so delicious, and a new, thrilling excitement bolted through her. She hadn’t felt this energized in a long time. “Well...I don’t know.”

“Maybe I could do something to change your mind,” he said huskily as he drew her nearer.

Delightful anticipation made her blood sing, but so did remnants of fear. “Did it really break your heart when I didn’t let you kiss me all those years ago?”

“Yeah. I had this tremendous crush on you all through high school.”

“What?”

“Yeah. You didn’t know it? I’m surprised Andrea didn’t tell you.”

Surprise winged through her. “Wow.”

Zack laughed and his hands slipped down until they landed on her waist. When she didn’t flinch, he pulled her into his arms and against his chest. Every amazing, masculine inch of his body pressed against her, and Tiffany knew she didn’t want a repeat of ten years ago. She slid her arms about his neck.

“Are you going to run from me again?” he asked softly.

Mere inches kept their lips from joining. “Not a chance.”

When his mouth brushed hers, she inhaled. “Oh.”

“Oh? Is that good or bad?”

“It’s...oh...my...God.”

“Emm. I think I like the sound of that.” He spoke against her mouth, and each brush of his lips set a fire inside her she knew only he could extinguish. “Welcome home, Tiffany Kent.”

When his mouth covered hers in a mind-melding kiss that started slow and then went thermonuclear, she realized that she wanted to stay in Clydeswell for the first time in a long time. Maybe, with this man in her life, it wouldn't be so difficult to come home again.

Minutes later, after they shared two more powerful kisses, she realized she had a death grip on his T-shirt as she wadded it between her fingers. Releasing him slowly, she felt the wonder of meeting him again after all these years.

"This is crazy," he whispered. "We haven't seen each other in forever and here we are necking in the garden like teenagers." With gentle fingers, Zach caressed her cheek. "What do you think? Would you consider spending more time in Clydeswell now we've met up again?"

"Without a doubt. In fact, Andrea said something about Clydeswell Museum having an opening in their restoration department. I might just apply for the job."

"Oh, yeah?" Another grin curved his mouth. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Very possibly. Of course, I might need more persuading to stay longer. You know, to see if this is the right move for me."

Right then people inside the ballroom began to chant the seconds to midnight, and when they screamed out Happy New Year, Zach proceed to persuade her very nicely indeed.

THE END