



**A Cradle-Robbing Christmas**

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## **Dedication**

To my own sexy Santa, who fills my holidays with wonder.

## Chapter One

“Fifty bucks. Take it or leave it, lady.”

As the pawnshop broker’s voice reverberated in her ears, Gillian McKutcheon swallowed at the low figure. Fifty bucks? For a beautiful pair of diamond earrings? She had hoped for a couple of hundred dollars at least, a sum large enough to buy her son the new video game system he wanted for Christmas. Then again, she had no idea how pawnshops really worked. As a successful businesswoman, this wasn’t exactly a measure she’d had to resort to before.

She glanced assessingly at the man, wondering if she should try to soften him using her still-considerable sex appeal or if she should simply reason with him. In her almost thirty-seven years she had learned to deal effectively with different types of people, but this guy wasn’t a type she had encountered before. His voice was neither cruel nor sympathetic, but bored. He saw dozens of desperate people every day selling their personal treasures for a couple of bucks—so why should he care about her?

“Look,” Gillian tried again. Her hand holding the diamond earrings shook. “These are worth almost two thousand dollars...”

“People with two thousand bucks to spend on earrings don’t come to pawnshops.” His eyes, one glass, one real, flickered at her without emotion. “Fifty bucks.”

“It’s Christmas in two days,” she pleaded, her voice beginning to break. She placed the earrings on top of a glass case of wares. Next to the random assortment of knives, guns and electric guitars, they looked incongruous. “Please, I’m only selling these to buy my son Christmas presents.” She heard the desperation in her voice and hated it. She was Gillian McKutcheon, owner of the most successful catering business in Oak Falls, and she didn’t beg anything from anybody.

The pawnshop broker’s jaw fell slightly open. For a moment she thought he had been moved by her plea. Then he said, “*Presents?* Lady, I got people coming in here to buy their kids food. Your son needs *presents*? What, his last five laptops aren’t good enough anymore? Junior only needs the best, right?” He shoved the earrings back at her with disgust. “Fifty bucks and that’s it. I’ve got shit to take care of.”

He jerked his thumb at the shop window, which revealed a light snow falling down over her glossy blue Mercedes in the parking lot. “Fuck me, Christmas presents. I saw you drive up.”

She cursed her decision to park in front of the shop window. Well, that was a tip for her next humiliating pawnshop visit. Hide the car where they wouldn’t spot it and get ideas about her pampered lifestyle. She snatched up the glittering earrings and walked out without wishing him a generic *Happy Holidays*.

Her gloved hands were still shaking as she unlocked her car and slid in. Placing the earrings on the passenger seat, she took out the other treasure she’d come to pawn: her inherited opal ring, which had been passed from one woman to another in her family. A flashing fire opal of uncommon beauty, it was set in antique filigree gold. While she didn’t care about selling the earrings, this ring was dear to her. Parting with it would kill her but she was desperate for cash.

This was her first Christmas after a divorce that had left her humbled and financially

strapped. But she would sell everything she owned before she let her eighteen-year-old son know that. If Zach knew how many of her assets his father had taken with him, he would transfer from his elite university to a local community college in a heartbeat. And she wouldn't stand for that. Not when she had worked so hard her entire life to make sure he became the success his alcoholic father would never be.

Gillian leaned her head back against the upholstered seat and sighed, hoping no one drove by and saw her here. The light snowflakes covering her windshield masked her from outside eyes but there was still the danger of someone spotting her car in this parking lot. Oak Falls was a small town and she was well known. The last thing she wanted was people speculating about her financial problems. The gossip about the divorce was bad enough.

Divorce sucked. Especially when it was your husband who left you for another woman—a very young woman—and yet somehow it was *your* standard of living that went down. She closed her eyes. It had been ten months since Danny left her for a twenty-five-year-old cocktail waitress and the sting had yet to subside. Oh, it wasn't heartbreak or anything nearly so sentimental. She and Danny had been merely tolerating each other for years. Getting pregnant and eloping their senior year of high school hadn't exactly been a recipe for a wonderful marriage. What she couldn't stand were the divorce laws of their state that had divided up their assets so evenly. Throughout their marriage, she had created a successful business and worked day and night to lift their family into an affluent standard of living. He had lost one job after another and squandered his energies down at the local bar. Yet as her husband he was legally entitled to half of her business. Buying him out had left her with a serious cash flow problem.

It was just so unfair. Now *her money* was going toward his new family, a woman young enough to practically be his daughter and her three kids by other men. In the meantime, Gillian was hawking family heirlooms to buy her son some decent gifts.

It didn't exactly put her in the Christmas spirit, that was for sure.

She started the Mercedes and slipped in a holiday CD to cheer her up. As Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* filled the car, she checked her makeup for smudges in the rearview mirror. But she still looked good—her highlighted blonde hair in a ponytail, her ice-blue eyes unmarked by dark circles for once. A lifelong insomniac and workaholic, sleep rarely came easily to her but lately the snowy December nights had been putting her to sleep at a good hour; that was one good thing about the divorce—despite her financial anxieties, she had never looked better.

The local men had been hitting on her in droves since Danny left. Unfortunately they were all married. If the rumors reaching her ears were to be believed, adultery was the most popular pastime going in their small town, but she wasn't interested. For one thing, it violated her sense of personal integrity. For another, she already had enough trouble with women in Oak Falls who resented her success. And finally, she didn't find any of her admirers attractive.

Yet Gillian did long to have an intelligent, sexy and supportive companion—if such a man existed. She was a passionate woman yet sexual fulfillment had faded from her life years ago. Or rather hot, satisfying sex had faded sometime in her twenties when Danny had gotten too lazy to be attractive to her and she had gotten too ambitious to be attractive to him. Instead she had channeled her libido into a rich and varied fantasy life supplemented by high-class erotica and the best sex toys money could buy. As her

emotional life grew more barren, she filled the emptiness in her heart with such treasures as a new pair of Italian slingbacks or an emerald tennis bracelet. She was astute enough to recognize she was stockpiling luxuries where a man's love should be. Yet even now that she was free, she had only taken one lover in the ten months since her divorce. He was a client from up in the city who in the end simply hadn't held her attention.

She sighed and banished such bleak thoughts from her mind. She couldn't be thinking about her love life right now. She needed to focus on providing the perfect holiday for her son, who would be arriving home from college tonight. She also needed to focus on catering the annual Christmas Eve bash tomorrow for her biggest client, Rand Manufacturing. Not only was she anxious about delivering a superb evening, but this party was also her first big social event since the divorce. No doubt everyone would be watching to see how she, her ex-husband and his new girlfriend got along.

Backing out of the parking lot, she headed to the next pawnshop which was right down the road. Apparently this was the neighborhood for them. This time she carefully parked around the side of the building. Perhaps that did the trick, or perhaps she just got lucky, for this shop offered a hundred and fifty dollars for the diamond earrings. She took it.

Later that evening, she played with her opal ring before a roaring fire. After pawning the diamond earrings, she had braved the mall crowds to buy her son his ridiculously overpriced new video system. Without pawning the ring, she was only able to afford one game to go with it but Zach could provide others for himself. He was eighteen, after all, not a spoiled little boy. Her decision left her with a mild twinge of selfishness but as she turned the ring this way and that in the firelight, watching its sparkle reflect the dance of the flames, she was glad she hadn't pawned it. Nevertheless, she was determined to provide Zach with a wonderful holiday. Come hell or high water, this divorce was not going to affect their Christmas morning.

She rose from the sofa and examined the ornaments on the tree. Every year since Zach was a baby, she had collected a hand-blown glass animal ornament for the tree. They were crafted by a local artisan at the world market where she bought her more exotic vegetables. Zach had always looked forward to receiving a new one each year but this year she had hesitated before buying one. He was in college now and not even living at home. She had bought a glass polar bear anyhow but she had decided not to make a fuss about it. He would just think it was childish and silly.

She moved through the house, straightening a crooked chenille throw draped over the sofa. Her son was due home any moment and she wanted the house to be perfect. The holidays were important to her, a time of tradition and family appreciation. Tiny lights threaded the skeletal birch trees in her front yard to brighten the bleak winter evenings. A carved wooden figure of Father Christmas graced the dining room table and snowman-shaped guest soaps waited in the bathroom. She had even made her special chocolate cranberry truffles and Austrian butter cookies. Yet she couldn't deny that all her decorations and preparations had felt a little fallow this year. Without anyone else at home, it seemed her efforts went unappreciated.

Even tomorrow night's Christmas Eve bash would be scaled down. Rand Manufacturing generously threw this public party each year as a gesture of goodwill, but this year they had decided to trim costs by doing their own decorating. Usually her catering firm provided the decorations along with the food and while she understood their

motivation, the thought made her cringe. No doubt the company employees would put up cheap and tacky decorations that the party guests would then erroneously attribute to her. She had always provided the décor for this party and took pride in her ability to provide the perfect festive atmosphere. Or, to be more blunt, she was a bit of what her catering manager Suzanne called a control freak.

Glancing at the clock, she stacked up her favorite Christmas CDs by the stereo and lit evergreen-scented candles. She knew it was silly but she wanted the ambience to say *Norman Rockwell* when Zach came home, not *Sad Divorcee*.

The kitchen door flew open. “Mom! Mom!”

At last her son was home from college on winter break. Gillian headed for the kitchen as he lugged in his things, six feet of blond, snow-spattered teenager. Even as he hugged her, she noted the changes in him—a jacket she hadn’t bought for him and a new spiked hairstyle. “My philosophy professor already posted my grade and I got an A. My GPA is at least going to be a 3.6. Did you make those cranberry muffins I like? Oh, guess what? You remember how I told you my roommate might flunk out—”

On and on Zach babbled as he unloaded a suitcase, two pillowcases of dirty laundry, and a duffel bag on the kitchen floor. Like his father, he was loquacious. She hoped that was all he’d inherited from Danny. As she listened to him complain about his roommate, the dorm food and his spring break plans in Mexico, her eyes automatically noticed the dirty slush melting off his boots over the linoleum, along with his winter jacket casually discarded on the floor. The impulse to scold him rose automatically to her lips but she repressed it.

Suddenly Zach stopped talking. He was staring at the wall of the adjoining dining room. “Hey,” he said. “Something’s different.”

“Yes.” She sipped her wine for courage.

Until a few months ago, two silver-framed photos had hung on the wall. Now boxed up in the attic, their images were nevertheless engraved in her mind. One photo was taken at her high school Homecoming—she, stunning and seventeen in her formal dress, and Danny in his first tuxedo. They had been voted Best Looking Couple in their yearbook. She had been three weeks pregnant with Zach in that photo, though they hadn’t known that at the time.

The next photo was taken on their fifteenth anniversary at a local restaurant. In this picture she was a young-looking thirty-three, thanks to daily yoga, pilates and good moisturizing creams. Her blonde hair was still lustrous, her smile bright. As for Danny... Well, Danny wasn’t youthful at all. His once-thick hair was sparse, his sizeable beer belly obliterating his resemblance to the handsome football star who had stolen her heart along with her virginity.

Funny how he had been the one to have an affair. She had never thought anyone would want him. But apparently someone did—that someone being Misty Kellogg, a cocktail waitress at his favorite bar. Some people said Misty just wanted someone to help put food on the table for her three kids, all by different fathers who contributed no support. It didn’t really matter to Gillian. All she knew was that she had worked hard and kept up her looks while he had gone to pot, and yet he was the one who found love. It was so unfair.

“You took down the photos,” Zach said. He turned toward her with a puzzled face.

“Your father and I aren’t married anymore, Zach,” she pointed out. “It doesn’t make

sense to have pictures up of us as a couple.”

He nodded after a moment. “Good for you, Mom.” To her surprise, he turned and kissed her head. Then he began lugging his things upstairs to his room. “Can you do my laundry?” he yelled. “I’m meeting Jeremy and some other guys tonight.”

She sighed and smiled. Messy, self-centered, adolescent Zach—college hadn’t made him considerate or responsible yet. But she could not have been happier to have him home.



## Chapter Two

Late that night a ruckus outside woke her up. She lifted her head from the pillow as curses, laughter and then the sounds of a fall drifted up through the window. Frowning, she pulled a robe over her red silk pajamas, found her slippers and headed downstairs. Zach had gone out with his friends tonight but frankly she had expected him home a lot sooner. It was already after two in the morning. She snapped on the back porch light.

She barely recognized her son, bent over and struggling not to slip on the icy walk as a dark-haired friend tugged him toward the back steps. "So cold," he mumbled drunkenly. "Shit, is it cold."

"Zachary!" She was really angry now. His first night home on winter break he had wanted to go out with his friends. Well, fine. But stumbling home drunk in the dead of the night was not acceptable behavior.

"S'okay, Mom, I just..." Zach's slurring faded into silence as he suddenly slipped on the back steps. His buddy caught him, snickering wildly.

"Come on, Zach, get up. We're almost there."

Gillian found herself as furious at his friend as she was at Zach. "You think this is funny? He's eighteen, not even legally old enough to drink."

Of course she had been drinking and having sex when she was younger than Zach. That was more than apparent to anyone who could subtract his age from hers. It made her feel like a hypocrite at times, lecturing Zach on his behavior. Then again, she didn't want him making her and Danny's mistakes.

The friend raised his dark head then and looked up at her, immediately serious. "I'm sorry, Mrs. McKutcheon. But Zach is funny when he's drunk."

"Logan Chase," she said in righteous surprise. "I expected better from you."

Logan Chase had been the captain of Zach's soccer team when he was just a freshman. Tall, handsome and athletic, he was blessed with the striking coloring her mother used to call Black Irish—lustrous black hair and brooding grayish-blue eyes that had always seemed too intense for a high school boy. Serious and ambitious, he was in many ways her son's opposite. Logan too had an alcoholic father and it was perhaps for that reason that he had been her favorite of her son's teammates, a hard-working kid who hadn't let his negative home life deter him from a series of impressive accomplishments. In addition to being class president and an honor student, he had won a full-ride athletic scholarship to a nearby university. He and Zach hadn't been close friends in school, Logan being two years ahead of him, but Zach had always looked up to him. All the kids had, she recalled. Logan radiated a powerful leadership that had made the other kids want to emulate him.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. In the porch light she could see his cheeks were flushed pink from the cold and laughter. Snowflakes dotted his dark hair. "Look, I'm not the one who got him drunk. I was coming out of the bar when I saw him and some other guys arguing with the bouncer over their fake IDs. I gave them a ride home."

She arched her eyebrows in a way that brought her toughest clients to their knees during pricing negotiations. "And since when are you old enough to be in a bar?"

"Since I turned twenty-one a few weeks ago." He flashed her a winning smile.

She relented just a bit. If anything, Logan had saved him from getting into worse trouble. “Here, I’ll help you get him in.”

She moved gingerly down the porch steps in her slippers, suddenly conscious of her bathrobe, mussed hair and bare face. *I must look like holy hell right now*, she thought. Then she shook herself. What did she care what she looked like? She looked like a mom woken up in the dead of the night and that was what she was. Zach’s mom.

Logan shook his head. “No, Mrs. McKutcheon, I’ve got him.” Looping Zach’s arm over his shoulders, he hoisted him past her up the steps. He looked lean in his jeans and blue winter jacket, but Gillian knew his body was probably solid muscle beneath his clothes. He was a superb athlete.

Sure enough, he got Zach’s inert form up the steps by himself. Yet on the top step, he slipped on a patch of ice and stumbled, still holding Zach, straight onto her. She lost her balance under their combined weight and then all of them were sliding down the icy steps and into the snow.

She burst out laughing. Lying in the snow in her pajamas at two a.m. was definitely not the way she had expected to begin Christmas Eve.

“Mrs. McKutcheon, I’m sorry. Are you hurt?” Logan leaned over her in genuine anxiety.

“I’m fine... just fine...” Her laughter took on a slightly hysterical note but she couldn’t stop. She had wanted this Christmas to be perfect but in fact, the holiday would probably be as twisted a farce as the entire year preceding it. Here she was visiting pawnshops to buy gifts, Zach was coming home drunk, now she’d catch pneumonia—why not? It was certainly in keeping with the theme of the year. The snow was trickling through her hair and the stars overhead were twinkling as if in on the joke.

“Are you sure? You’re...” Logan’s voice faded.

Hearing a sudden thickening of his voice, she stopped laughing, raised herself up on her elbows and looked at him questioningly. Logan was staring at her bathrobe in a trance. Or rather, as she discovered when she looked down, he was staring at where her bathrobe had come open, exposing her thin pajamas. The snow was melting rapidly over the fabric, outlining her still round and decently firm breasts. Her erect nipples poked through the red silk as if saying hello.

Quickly she sat up and tightly retied her robe, mortified at showing such a private part of herself to one of Zach’s friends—even if it was an accident. “We’d better get him inside.”

“Uh, yeah.”

This time she kept her distance from Logan as he tugged Zach up the steps and into the kitchen. Gillian knelt down to remove his snow-caked sneakers, then lifted his legs.

“He’s pretty heavy,” Logan said. “I don’t know if you’ll be able to lift him.”

She sent him a scathing look. She was five-eight and in good shape from daily pilates. Did he take her for some weak middle-aged woman? “I’m stronger than you give me credit for,” she said shortly. “You’re going to need help getting him up the stairs.”

The first floor and staircase were dark, lit only by the faint red glow of the Christmas tree lights she had left plugged in for Zach. Occasionally her son’s unconscious head or arms bumped into a banister or corner but she didn’t care. It served him right for coming home so completely wasted. Zach had watched his father dissolve his own potential in the lure of a bottle. She had hoped he would become one of those kids who completely

abstained from alcohol as a result.

Apparently that wasn't the case.

She led the way backward down the hall to Zach's bedroom and kicked open the door. Together they surrendered her son's inert form to the still tightly dressed bed she had made up that morning. Zach hit the mattress with a soft grunt and surrendered to unconsciousness as she tugged a goose-down comforter over him. They quietly stole out of the room. Zach could sleep in his clothes tonight. With any luck, he'd wake up with a Christmas Eve hangover to teach him what a fool he'd been.

She shut the door and turned to find Logan standing next to her. She hadn't realized he was so tall. In the dark hall, it seemed he was standing just... a little too close to her. The diffused crimson light of the staircase was behind him, cloaking his face in shadow.

"Thanks," she said. "I really appreciate it." She self-consciously tugged her robe over her breasts, aware that her exertions with Zach had loosened it.

"My pleasure."

He didn't move. What was he waiting for? She tried to look calm and unruffled, aware that he could see her face better than she could see his. Yet with every moment that passed, the silence between them and the nearness of their bodies grew more awkward.

"You must be freezing," she said at last. She heard the inanity of the comment and cursed herself. "How would you like some cocoa?"

His snicker echoed through the dark. "I'm not ten, Mrs. McKutcheon. I drink coffee these days."

She smiled. "Well, excuse me, big man. I still drink cocoa and I'm a lot older than you. And you can stop calling me Mrs. McKutcheon. My name is Gillian."

"I already call you that," he said after a moment. "In my head, I mean."

Okay, this was getting ridiculous. Maybe it was her imagination but he seemed to be leaning closer and if they kept standing here, it would seem more and more like that awkward moment before a kiss...

"Why don't you go on downstairs?" she said. "I'll be right down."

She slipped past him into her bedroom and quickly shut the door.

*What the hell, Gill? Why would you even think about him kissing you? This is Logan Chase, who you baked cookies for before soccer games!*

She pushed back her hair and peered into her vanity mirror. Yep, she looked just as messy and disheveled as she had feared—bed-rumpled hair and no makeup save for mascara remnants smeared down her cheekbones by their joint tumble into the snow. Yet at the same time, her cheeks were flushed and her ice-blue eyes were glowing.

She looked like a woman in the throes of arousal.

Quickly she stripped off her robe and pajamas and pulled on a matching black satin bra and panties, jeans and a violet cashmere sweater. As she dressed, she told herself she was being ridiculous. She was letting her imagination run away with her. Logan was just being friendly. He had always been friendly to her back in high school. Whenever the soccer parents had hosted a banquet or fundraiser for the team, he had made a point of approaching her and asking about her catering business or telling her how nice she looked. She had attributed his interest to his own lack of a mother; everyone in town knew that his mother had run out on the family when he was four years old. And of course, being polite and well-mannered was the kind of kid he had been. Class president, Most Likely To Succeed, Soccer Captain—Logan had known how to schmooze with

adults to get the favors and privileges he wanted.

As she brushed her hair, she tried to remember more about him in high school. He had dated Alicia Stevens, a cute redheaded cheerleader who had come to all of his games. He had won some kind of debating team award—it had been in the newspaper. She remembered that. But mostly her memories of him were constricted to soccer games on cool autumn days, Logan dribbling the ball down the field before savagely kicking it into the goal. He had looked so handsome in his blue and gray uniform, his dark hair ruffled in the autumn breeze. One game she remembered very well—a tense low-scoring game against their chief rival. In the last moments Logan had scored the winning goal and in the ensuing post-game victory chaos, he had hugged his girlfriend Alicia, then the coach's wife ... and her. She could still recall the feel of his sweat-damp, trembling muscles in her arms.

She dropped the hairbrush and groaned. Oh god. This could not be happening. She could not be attracted to Logan Chase. It was wrong. It was unnatural. It was forbidden.

But it was so inescapably tempting too.

Okay. She would go downstairs, make the cocoa, have the kind of pleasant chat you had with your son's friends, then send him home. Then she'd banish this temporary hormonal slip into insanity from her memory. Probably his reason for dawdling was his own blood alcohol level; maybe he had been drinking too tonight and wanted to sober up before going home. Yes, that had to be it. Gillian dusted on some light makeup, enough to banish her midnight pallor, and hurried downstairs. The last conclusion she wanted Logan to draw was that she'd been upstairs primping for him.

The kitchen was empty. She stared around its sparkling tiles with disappointment, genuinely surprised that he had left.

Then a soft song began to play from the living room. She walked in the other room to find Logan waiting for her on the sofa. He had kept the room dark, except for the tiny lights of the Christmas tree, and turned on the stereo. The electric glow of the tree emphasized his long-lashed eyes and firm jaw, making him look very gorgeous and very young. In his dark green jersey and jeans, he looked exactly like the college kid he was. Compared to the middle-aged male clients she saw every day, his dark hair seemed so thick and lustrous, his body muscled and hard.

"I thought you left," she said, feeling foolish.

"And miss my hot chocolate? No way."

The double meaning stretched across his naughty grin was unmistakable. Okay. What she should really do, if she was a responsible and respectable mother, was yawn loudly and tell him that she suddenly felt very tired and should get to bed. Tomorrow night at the Christmas Eve party, she'd treat him just like any other friend of Zach's and forget she'd entertained sexual thoughts about him for even one minute.

The problem was, she didn't want to be responsible and respectable. She wanted to seduce and be seduced, to have a handsome young man undress her here in the glow of the Christmas tree and put his hands all over her body. What a fantasy that would be, his tight twenty-one-year-old body like a beautiful toy to play with all night long.

She took a deep breath and returned his smile. "Coming right up."

He followed her back into the kitchen. She regretted this; she knew the closer he was to her, the more foolish her decisions would be. She decided the best thing to do would be to treat him like a boy.

“So tell me about school,” she requested in a bright voice that didn’t sound like her own as she took two mugs out of the cupboard. “What’s your major again? I know you’re a junior.”

“Business. I’m actually a senior now since I’m going through on an accelerated program. Wait, so you really are making hot chocolate? I thought that was a joke.”

She stared at him. “What do you have against cocoa? My god, I have never seen anyone with such a complex over a simple beverage.”

“No, it’s fine. I just thought, you know, we could have wine or something.” He gave her a meaningful look.

She returned it with a skeptical look of her own. “Wine? After you’ve been drinking tonight and still have to drive home?”

“Am I driving home?” He glanced down at the floor, then looked shyly up at her.

Well, that was audacious. She turned back to the mugs, her cheeks burning. “If you’re too drunk to drive, you can sleep on the couch.” Her prim tone didn’t fool either of them but she wasn’t ready to articulate the true agenda floating beneath their words.

“Awesome,” he said casually. “Wine it is.”

Well, he was certainly persistent, she thought as she removed two wine glasses from the sideboard. Maybe this was better. She could always say later that she’d been drinking when she let him kiss her. She could say it was the wine that made her unzip his pants and take out his young, hard cock to play with it like the ultimate Christmas gift...

She searched for a bottle from her favorite Napa Valley winery. “So tell me about school,” she said before remembering that she’d already said that. “Do you live in the dorm or an off campus apartment?”

“Apartment. I’m a little old for the dorms. What kind of sweater is that? Cashmere?”

“Yes,” she said, caught off guard by the abrupt change of topic. Then Logan flustered her further by coming around the counter and picking up the waist of her sweater. He rubbed the fabric between his fingers.

“Nice. I always wondered what cashmere felt like.”

*Please stop touching me, kid, or you’ll get more than you bargained for.* But of course she knew her desire was exactly what he was bargaining for. Logan had exhibited determination, ambition and patience even back in high school so why was she surprised that he was so locked on target now? Was it because she was the target? She knew she was a pretty woman—it wasn’t as if the married men of Oak Falls let her forget it. But those were balding, paunchy men. This was an athletic twenty-one-year-old who could have any girl he wanted.

She looked up at his perfect skin and gorgeous mouth. Did Logan know how beautiful he was? She hadn’t known when she was young. Back then she took her flawless skin and firm muscle tone for granted. Now she had to work at it with eye cream and exercise classes. She dropped her eyes and found herself looking at his hard, taut chest.

Logan backed her against the counter, an unmistakable look of fevered determination in his eyes. Oh God, this was really happening.

“I’ve had a crush on you since I was sixteen years old,” he said.

Her blood soared up to her head with the swift heat of a missile. She sucked in her breath, feeling her whole body turn hot and tremble.

“Logan—we shouldn’t—you shouldn’t be saying these things,” she stammered.

Still he came in closer with that imploring gaze. “Mrs. McKutcheon...”

“For god’s sake, Logan, if you’re going to make a pass at me, call me Gillian!”

He slid his fingertips just beneath her sweater. The cold feel of his fingers on her bare skin made her heart jump.

“I never would have done this while you were married, but you’re divorced now,” he said.

She laughed shakily. The entire conversation was surreal, like a drug trip or a crazy dream. Was one of Zach’s friends actually persuading her to have sex with him?

“Divorced or married, I’m still old enough to be your mom,” she said with a righteousness she didn’t really feel. It seemed important to make the requisite denials and excuses. She just couldn’t seduce one of Zach’s friends. Or be seduced by, if that was what was happening. The entire idea seemed like some tawdry escapade she’d see on a daytime talk show—and one of the really sleazy ones to boot.

His eyes beseeched hers. The adoration in them was real, she saw. As sudden and inexplicable as this was, he was looking at her with an urgent infatuation she hadn’t seen in any man’s eyes since losing her virginity to Danny in high school. “Hardly,” he said. “You’re what, in your early thirties...”

“I’ll be thirty-seven in February, Logan, and you’re barely twenty-one.” She made her voice hard and skeptical to suggest the outrage she wished she could feel. “And ... you’re my son’s friend.”

“And what else?”

“What?”

“What are your other reasons for rejecting me?”

She tried dizzily to think. “Well, people would talk for one and it would make Zach furious and disgusted and I would lose my reputation and...” He ran a finger down the dip of her stomach. “For God’s sake, don’t touch me,” she whispered.

He leaned closer until his mouth was almost touching hers. “Keep going. What other reasons?”

Her nerves were screaming for physical contact. “Well, I would be taking advantage of you—of your youth—and you, you would be using me for sex, and... um...” Her mind frantically ran through all of the clichés.

“And you’re not attracted to me?”

“What?”

“It’s the one reason you haven’t given. That you’re not attracted to me.”

She blushed hard. “I...”

“Say it. Say that you look at me as just a kid and you don’t think of me that way.”

She bit her lip. Every inch of her body felt so exquisitely sensitive, her breasts swollen and aching to be touched. “You’re... you’re a kid. I don’t think of you that way.”

“Liar,” he said and kissed her.

A billowing desire swelled through her, overwhelming as a roar. Everything around her faded to leave only this one heady sensation of his hot sweet mouth moving on hers, his lips branding hers with a passion that incinerated her every sexual experience to that point. All thoughts of age and rules and social propriety fell away as he lightly traced her breasts through the cashmere. Logan kissed her with riveting skill, the delicate dance of his tongue drawing her into a vortex of desire from which there was no turning back.

Gasping, Gillian forced herself away. This was insane. She couldn’t let this get out

of control. Her son was passed out drunk upstairs and here she was kissing his school friend in the kitchen like a teenager. Yet it had been so long since a man had made her feel this excited, this flushed, this... this powerfully sensual.

*Not a man, she reminded herself, a kid. A kid you used to watch at high school soccer games just a few years ago!*

Before she could order him out, Logan took her hand and pulled her into the living room. She followed in a helpless daze, dumb with lust and desire as he pulled off his shirt, dropped onto the sofa and looked up at her with smoldering need.

He looked heartbreakingly handsome. As her eyes traveled rapturously over his body, from the thigh muscles outlined in his jeans to his bare, taut chest, she understood that this was the last moment—the only moment—she could turn back. If she was going to come to her senses and do the mature, responsible thing, now was the time. This was her chance to order him out and then banish him from her mind.

Instead she straddled him on the sofa and took his hips in her hands.

### Chapter Three

A jubilant grin lit up Logan's face. He reached for her waist and pulled her into a deep, long kiss that sent hot sparks through her blood. All the while she stroked his chest and stomach, reveling in the silky feel of his skin. It was wrong, so wrong to be attracted to the beautiful young man beneath her—yet she couldn't help but view tonight as a sort of Christmas gift for all of her sacrifices through the years. Maybe Santa himself had decided to reward her with one hot and secret adventure for all of the love and passion she'd forfeited to raise Zach in a stable home.

Logan sat up and pulled her onto his lap. His mouth traveled over her throat, sending shivers of anticipation through her body.

"Now I get to undress you, just like I fantasized about doing a thousand times senior year," he said. He pulled her cashmere sweater over her head, letting her long hair rain down on her back, and slipped his fingers into the black satin cups of her bra. "I've wanted to touch you for five years," he whispered, caressing her bare breasts.

She was breathing fast. "Logan, we can't do this. You're my son's friend."

But he didn't seem to hear her as his hands excitedly roamed her body. With trembling fingers, he unzipped her jeans and slid them off until she was clad only in her black satin bra and panties. "Man, you look even better than my best dream," he muttered. Pushing the cups of her bra down, he buried his face in her cleavage and sucked first one stiff nipple, then the other.

Gillian moaned. With that encouragement, Logan's fingers drifted between her legs. Holding her fast by the waist, he began to circle her clit in with a maddening tickle.

She squirmed with pleasure. "Logan, please," she begged. But she didn't know if she was begging him to stop or continue. Helplessly she realized that it had to end now or she would be having sex with a young man sixteen years her junior. She thrust herself backward but he held on to her waist, leaving the upper half of her body suspended from the sofa.

"So hot," he murmured, stroking her pubic hair. "I've been fantasizing about this since I was sixteen..." He balanced her hips on his knees and pulled her panties off, inciting a deep stain of excitement through her face. Trembling with anticipation, she spread her thighs for him. A warm, slow tongue ran up her exposed slit. Involuntarily she moaned and thrust her hips into his face.

"Oh yeah," he muttered. "You taste as good as you look." Eagerly he ran his tongue around the smooth skin of her vulva, then sucked her labia into his mouth. She moaned again as he gently tugged each of them with his lips, awakening an exquisite sensitivity she hadn't felt for years. Then teasingly he circled a fingertip just inside her wetness.

His practiced tongue slid up and tripped lightly across her clitoris, causing her to groan and push her soft mound further into his face. Logan might be young, but he knew exactly how to please her. She balanced herself on the living room carpet, her pussy electric with pleasure.

"Please," she choked. "Please." It was all she could say and all she had to say as he sucked her hardened rosebud into his lips. In one deep warm kiss, all of her blood rushed to her thighs, making her feel as if she was swooning. Unable to stop herself, she locked



her ankles around his neck.

As his tongue fluttered across her clit, she arched her back and cried out. After a long, loveless marriage and then a half-hearted affair, she'd almost forgotten how divine sex could feel. Yet this was so beyond sex. This was rapture. This was a mystical experience and a dirty movie and a sappy Hollywood romance all at once. This was wild, uncontrollable desire, this sensation in her pussy like a scoop of ice cream melting in the sun.

He began to lick her quickly with hard fast strokes as that familiar tingling began in her loins. Dizzily she tossed her head from side to side, out of her mind with excitement. As his hands cupped her swelling breasts, she shuddered with a powerful, relentless orgasm. Under the wet warmth of his tongue she throbbed again and again, moaning deeply.

Logan pulled her back onto the sofa. There was a wild, hungry look on his face, like a starving animal, as he tore off his jeans and boxer briefs. His stiff cock rose up to slap his stomach, engorged with blood. Dizzy and trembling, her every nerve alive with heat, she was helpless to resist as he positioned her on his lap again. At the first touch of his hard-on against her thigh, she began to moan.

He played with her pussy, brusque in his eagerness. His whole body was trembling, as if he couldn't wait to consume her.

"I've wanted this for so long," he said hoarsely, rolling a condom over his cock.

She answered him by sliding her long legs around his waist and guiding him deep inside her.

Logan exhaled a long, shuddering moan. His fingers dug into her skin as he held her tight. Then he began to move her hips on his shaft, lifting and lowering her with a powerful agility that ignited the friction between them. She moaned against him, submitting to the mind-blowing ecstasy of his thrusts. Both of their bodies were wet and shaking, her breasts clinging to his bare chest.

"You're making me crazy," he gasped. He drove into her again and again, the fire between her legs roaring ever higher. Her skin felt white-hot with intense bliss. As he sought her mouth in a desperate, half-mad kiss, she ground against him. Her second orgasm of the night rolled through her like a wave, making her whole body shudder.

Logan let out a low, animal groan as her pussy squeezed around him. He sped up the pace of his thrusts as he held her back from him, watching her breasts bounce as he fucked her. Then his face contorted with a spasm of pure lust and he bit her shoulder, rough with passion as his own orgasm spurted inside her.

Gillian fell back on the sofa, wet with exertion and trembling with post-orgasmic aftershocks. A little voice in her mind told her that couldn't have just happened—she hadn't really had wild animal sex with Logan Chase. It was just too preposterous, too wrong, too completely out of character for her. She was Gillian McKutcheon, the super-organized and always in control businesswoman who never made a mistake.

Yet the warm, tight body snuggling next to her told her that it absolutely had happened.

Logan traced her lips with a sweet, sleepy smile. "You've dominated my fantasy life for the last five years, Gillian. And not once did any of those fantasies come even close to tonight."

She pushed her damp hair back from her face. "I... Logan, I don't know what to say.

I hope you realize I've never done this before."

He rolled over and discreetly removed the condom before tucking it away in his jeans pocket. "Really? You're very good at it." A sarcastic smile flashed across his face.

She smacked his arm. "I meant, with someone your age. You're twenty-one. I'm old enough to be your—"

"Fantasy woman," Logan cut her off. "Dream girl. Number one crush. Unattainable lust object."

She rolled her eyes. "You definitely had too much to drink tonight."

"I don't drink much," Logan said after a moment. "Because of my dad."

She flushed as she remembered the last time she had seen his father—red-faced and wearing a stained shirt at the gas station where he worked. Then again, why pretend she didn't know his father had a drinking problem? He probably knew her ex-husband did.

"Right," she said. "I hope Zach makes that decision. I'm sure you know his father struggles with the same issue."

"Not as bad, though. My old man is a hardcore drunk. Zach's dad still holds it together, far as I can tell." He ran a finger down her arm. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

She smiled. "Given that we're naked together, I suppose it would be all right."

"Why were you even married to a guy like Zach's dad? We could never figure that out. Here you are, this total babe—"

"Hang on. Who's 'we?'" The plural pronoun disturbed her.

"Everyone. The other guys on the team, just... the guys."

She sucked in a horrified breath. "Do you mean to tell me that Zach's friends were discussing me, his mother, in front of him?"

"Well, not in *front* of him but otherwise, yeah. Everyone thought you were a total MILF."

"MILF?"

"Mom I'd Like to Fuck."

She closed her eyes. Gillian had never considered herself naïve by any stretch of the imagination but this conversation illuminated a world of adolescent boyhood she had never quite imagined. The idea that Zach's teammates had actually discussed her in a sexual context was unsettling. She had thought of them as wholesome, athletic boys, boisterous but basically good kids whom she cheered on game after game. She had catered their soccer banquets, hosted team dinners, baked snacks for the bus rides to away games. And all that time they had been speculating sexually about her.

Logan seemed to sense her discomfort. "I'm sorry if this bothers you, Gillian. But come on, you must know what teenage guys are like. You were the youngest, hottest mom out of all the moms—"

"Okay." She waved a hand to make him stop. "I've just never been reduced to an acronym before. So did Zach know about all this?" That was what mattered.

"Kind of but not really. It's considered bad form to lust after your friend's mom in front of him."

She turned her head to read his eyes. She could accept that Logan had wanted her as a sixteen-year-old boy, could even feel flattered by it. She had been a sexually active teenager herself once. What truly bothered her was his inclusion in the vulgar talk. Logan had always seemed so mature to her. Obviously that would be the face he would show

adults, she understood that—but the question was, how much of his present face was an act? Was he still a crass boy looking for a Mrs. Robinson trophy?

“Is that why you wanted me?” she asked finally. “Are you going to call all your old teammates now and tell them you got Zach McKutcheon’s mom in bed?”

“No!” He raised himself up to his elbows and gaped at her. “Christ, Gillian. I’m not like that. I wasn’t like that back then. All of those guys would try to make me give up stories about Alicia and I never did—and that was in high school.”

She recalled again his pretty redheaded ex-girlfriend. She still saw Alicia working at the supermarket occasionally, a fresh-faced girl who seemed to have the world by the tail. Once again Gillian wondered why he was so attracted to her when he could obviously have a gorgeous young thing his own age.

He poked her arm. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“That was?”

“Your husband. No offense but ... why? How?”

She flung an arm over her eyes and laughed. “No offense taken. I used to ask myself the same thing.”

“I would look at you and think you should be married to a doctor or an executive...”

“And instead I was coming home to the town loser. That’s what you mean? No, it’s okay. Danny and I got married too young, Logan. We got pregnant our senior year of high school and got married before we’d grown up. And... well, he grew up his way and I grew up mine.” She shrugged.

“But you became this successful, beautiful woman. Why didn’t you get a divorce and leave him for somebody better?”

There it was—the million dollar question. Even after asking herself so many times, the answer didn’t come easily.

“Because I was comfortable. Because I was scared. Because I wanted Zach to have a perfect home. Because I wanted to show the whole town that I was not going to be a teenage mother cliché.” She shrugged. “And because I never, not once, met anyone in this town who tempted me to make that kind of change.”

He took her hand and stroked her palm. The sensation sent a pleasurable warmth through her body. It had been so long since she’d felt the affection and comfort of pillow talk. “What if you had met me?”

She smiled crookedly. “Technically speaking, I did.”

“You know what I mean. Say you were still married and I brought Zach home tonight. Would you have noticed me? Wanted me?”

“I don’t know,” she said honestly.

She sat up and was immediately conscious of her nakedness. Logan’s body just inches away was taut and smooth, his skin as flawless as an angel’s. It was hard not to compare the differences between the two of them. She was in good shape but she had long since passed from the natural firmness of youth. She was almost thirty-seven and had borne a child and it showed. The slight slack of her belly and the generous fullness of her breasts were those of a mature woman. For a moment she looked nervously around for the chenille throw to hide under. Then she decided to let it go. Being naked together in the glow of the tree was much more erotic and sensuous than hiding under a blanket.

Logan picked up her hand and turned it back and forth, making her opal ring catch the lights of the tree. “Your husband didn’t buy you this.” It wasn’t a question.

“No, he didn’t,” she agreed, silently rejoicing again that she hadn’t pawned the ring.

“So who did?” He glanced up at her with a hint of jealousy.

“No one,” she said. “It’s a family heirloom.” She pulled her hand back, not wanting to remember her humbling afternoon at the pawnshops.

He made a speculative noise. “I remember that you had a lot of expensive jewelry. You seemed like the kind of woman men wanted to buy jewelry for.”

She laughed shortly. “Hardly. I bought it for myself. It used to be my weakness.” Along with cashmere, La Perla lingerie and vacations in Aruba.

“Used to be?”

“Can’t afford it anymore.” Her throat tightened. The pawnshop broker’s single contemptuous eye flashed before her.

“Oh.” He sounded surprised. “Not that it’s any of my business, but uh, the Mercedes in the driveway, this house...”

“That was before the divorce. Danny took half of everything, Logan—that’s how it works. I’ve been having some serious cash flow problems since summer. Just to buy Zach his gaming system I had to—” She broke off.

He turned toward her. “What?”

She hesitated. Logan’s view of her as a vibrant, sought-after woman, idealistic as it was, was as intoxicating as nectar. The last thing she wanted to do was destroy it with the ugly banality of the afternoon.

Yet she had always been honest and she wasn’t going to resort to deception now. “I had to pawn a pair of diamond earrings,” she admitted. “I wasn’t especially attached to them but—the sheer sleaziness of it bothered me. Me, Gillian McKutcheon, who bought a Mercedes brand-new off the lot last year, now hawking jewelry in pawnshops at Christmas.” She shuddered.

He squeezed her hand in sympathy. “I’m sorry, Gillian. I’ve had to pawn stuff before. It does make you feel kind of second-class.”

“That’s it exactly. Second-class.”

A surprising thought occurred to her then. No one in the world, herself included, would say that she had anything in common with this young college athlete. Yet past the surface differences, they had shared some commonalities. Both of them were ambitious, industrious people—and both of them had experienced the anxiety and loneliness of life with an alcoholic.

Logan caressed her knee. “I hope I didn’t sound like I was your stalker in high school or anything. That wasn’t it. It’s that, well, you became my image of the perfect woman. I kind of measured all other women against you.”

She threw her arm over her eyes again, blocking out the red glow, and laughed. “Logan, I am so far from perfect. I’m a control freak and a perfectionist and a workaholic.”

“Cody Elmer says you’re great to work for.”

She removed her arm and looked at him, dismayed. Cody Elmer was a twenty-one-year-old who worked for her occasionally as a server. Having yet another link between she and Logan made her nervous. “Oh, are you and Cody close friends?”

“We hang out from time to time. He’s got a major boner for you too.”

She held up a hand to stop him. “Okay, no more boner talk. I don’t want to know that about my employees and with the way you’re flattering me, my ego is going to burst

through the roof.”

“But it should,” he muttered, pulling her toward him to kiss her throat. “You’re so fucking sexy...”

He was hard again. She swallowed a smile, marveling at his youthful powers of recuperation, and took his shaft in her hand. She hadn’t had the chance to play with him enough earlier but now nothing could stop her from exploring his beautiful young body.

She shifted back, studying him as she stroked him. His erection strained toward her, its swollen head glistening with pre-come. Logan’s cock was as smooth as the rest of his perfect body; silky and hot, its mouthwatering girth filled out her grip. She ran her palm over his head, making him twitch, and took his balls in her other hand. Spreading the hard muscles of his thighs, she slid down to the carpet and pulled the chenille throw beneath her knees.

He was breathing fast. She loved how excited he got and how quickly. “Gillian, you don’t have to do this.”

“Have to?” She cocked a quizzical brow at him. “Logan, I want to.” Pleasuring a man with her mouth was one of the great powers a woman could enjoy. Pleasing Logan would be downright divine.

“Really?” He seemed amazed. “It’s just that most girls... I mean, they don’t like to... or they don’t know how to...”

Her smile deepened. “Relax and let me take over.”

She ran her tongue around his head, tickling his most sensitive nerves until he moaned. Still caressing his balls, she licked up and down his shaft, pressing his cock against his stomach and using her lips on it like a flute. He groaned again, shifting restlessly with anticipation. Then she inhaled him deep into her mouth, sucking and tonguing him until he cried out so loudly she feared Zach might wake up. Working faster, she pressed down on the skin beneath his balls, tightening the grip of her mouth around his cock at the same time. Then she tongued his head until he writhed helplessly on the sofa.

His hard thighs were holding her tight. She played his cock with her mouth as expertly as a virtuoso with an instrument, until he thrashed and muttered fervent pleas. His balls tightened in her hand and then she felt his orgasm unleash deep in his body, shooting up through his cock and exploding into her mouth. She swallowed his warm, sweet juices with avid pleasure, reveling in her ability to give him such ecstasy.

“Oh... god.” He tumbled to the carpet and collapsed, looking like a gorgeous young sacrifice.

She smiled, spreading the throw out beneath both of them. Lying next to him, she could stare straight up into the tree. The hand-blown glass ornaments she had collected for Zach each year reflected the twinkling lights. For the first time that season, she experienced the joyful sense of miraculous possibility that each Christmas seemed to bring. She hadn’t thought it would return to her this year.

Logan hooked an arm around her and pulled her down on his sweat-dampened chest. “I always knew you were the woman of my dreams. Turns out I was right.”

He ran his hands over the softness of her stomach. She flinched, wishing her body was firmer and younger, then decided to just appreciate the sensual pleasure of his touch. Logan obviously enjoyed her body so why ruin the moment with her vanity and self-consciousness? The chenille throw was soft under her bare bottom and his chest was still

damp beneath her cheek. She kissed his nipple, then noticed something stunning. The eastern living room window was beginning to lighten with coming daybreak.

"It's almost dawn," she said, sitting up. "I've got to get to bed." All of the day's tasks ahead of her—picking up more liquor for the party, checking on the children's afternoon celebration, finalizing dinner arrangements with Suzanne—flooded her mind.

"Yeah, I guess Zach wouldn't be too pleased to find me in your bed when he wakes up." He gave her a final squeeze then got reluctantly to his feet, groping for his clothes.

Gillian wrapped up in the chenille throw as she escorted him to the door. Dressed in his winter jacket again, Logan looked so absurdly young to her, like a fresh-faced college student who had just interviewed for a position as a server. She smoothed back her sex-tangled hair and hoped the growing light didn't show up her uneven skin tone too severely.

Logan turned to her on the top step. "Sleep tight," he whispered, hugging her against him. "I'll see you tonight at the party."

They shared a tender kiss goodbye and he headed off to his car.

As she headed inside, she noticed the unopened bottle of wine and adjoining empty glasses. Smiling wryly, she realized she wouldn't be able to blame her tryst with Logan on wine or anything but her very human need for tenderness and passion. These last few hours might have been both foolish and scandalous, but they had also gifted her with a beautiful Christmas Eve she would never forget.

## Chapter Four

Late that morning Gillian awoke with a vague anxiety buzzing through her body. She sat up with a jerk, staring at the crack of daylight outlining her industrial-strength bedroom shades. A natural insomniac, she possessed every tool and trick in existence for outwitting both daylight and nocturnal worries and inducing thick, restful sleep. But now a nameless alarm was ringing inside her and it took her a moment to remember yesterday.

Her humiliating afternoon at the pawnshops.

Zach stumbling home drunk last night.

Making love to his old soccer teammate Logan Chase until the sun rose.

She fell back into bed, hugging a pillow close to her and wishing it was him. Shame and exhilaration coursed through her body. Had last night—or this morning, rather—actually happened? It seemed more like a dream or erotic hallucination. Logan's hard young physique stretched out beneath her in the electric glow of the Christmas tree...

A hot twinge fluttered inside her at the memory.

Quickly she got out of bed, pulled on her robe and slippers, and descended the stairs. A deep snore penetrating Zach's bedroom door told her he was still asleep. That was good. She knew there was no way he could have woken up and heard them last night but she wasn't ready to face him yet. Standing in the same living room she had held Logan, she could only shake her head with bewilderment. What had gotten into her last night? Her son's friend—she had actually had sex with her son's friend. Maybe not a close friend, since Logan was a few years older and attended a different university, but a friend nevertheless. She could only pray that Logan would be discreet and never tell anyone what had happened.

She made a cup of coffee. Yes, last night had been mind-blowingly stupid. But maybe she was entitled to do something stupid. She was tired of being responsible Gillian McKutcheon, the one who ran her catering company, paid the tuition, paid the bills... It seemed everyone around her was always making mistakes, so now she had made one of her own. A damned fun one too.

But it was over now and she had to remember that. Last night had been superbly naughty, a frisky escapade straight out of a dirty cable movie, but it was a once in a lifetime thing. Today was Christmas Eve and she had other priorities—a son home from college and the annual Rand Manufacturing party to cater tonight.

She glanced at the clock. Her manager, Suzanne, would be arriving at the restaurant at eleven to start prepping for the children's party. The kids had all afternoon to eat cookies, play games and visit with Santa; there was even a grab-bag exchange. That was simple enough for Suzanne and the servers to handle, the most complicated dish being chocolate fondue with marshmallows and fruit for dipping. Gillian had baked the frosted cookies and dropped them off yesterday before her pawnshop debacle. She wouldn't bother attending this afternoon, but she did need to pick up extra liquor and soda for tonight. She also needed to drop off a seasonal cheese log of Brie, smoked Gouda and herbed Havarti, with more fresh fruit and crackers and of course she had to check on the decorations... Logan finally faded from her mind as she bent over her list for the day.

The kitchen phone rang. "Merry Christmas Eve," sang her catering manager,

Suzanne. "I'm already at the restaurant, getting tonight's hors d'oeuvres ready. Feeling nervous?"

Gillian always got a little anxious before a major event, even an annual repeat like the Rand Manufacturing party. "So so," she admitted. "I'm going to pick up more vodka and wine then stop by. So tell me now, how are the decorations?" It still bothered her that she hadn't been able to do them herself.

"They're okay," Suzanne said neutrally. "What time are you stopping by?"

"Mid-afternoon maybe. I need to be back in time to get dressed."

"And what are you wearing on this all-important chance to show up the new girlfriend?"

Gillian laughed dryly. Suzanne knew her all too well. "Tight red dress. It's killer." For a moment she longed to tell her that she wasn't only making an effort to outclass Danny and Misty. No, she had another reason to look her most gorgeous tonight—impress Logan. Maybe it had been a fleeting adventure between them but she didn't want his final image to be of her wrapped in a blanket at daybreak with her makeup worn off and her long hair in disarray. No, she would provide him tonight with a much more dazzling vision to engrave on his memory.

But she said nothing. Zach could wake up at any second. Besides, this was probably an encounter best kept to herself.

"Misty's always good for a trainwreck of an outfit," mused Suzanne. "Remember the gold lame hot pants she wore to the Harvest Festival? She keeps trying so hard to be you, but she can't even shop in the right stores."

Gillian smiled wryly. It was true that many people had said in Misty Danny had picked a diminished, inferior version of Gillian—another tall blonde but one who was younger, less confident, less sophisticated. She was heftier than Gillian but over the last ten months had been visibly aping her clothes and hair. It hadn't worked. Rather her poor fashion sense and badly bleached hair had only exacerbated the obvious differences between them.

"She *is* a mess," Gillian sighed. "Though I would never say that to anyone but you. I know everyone thinks I hate her but I don't."

"Why should you? Danny obviously picked a woman who wouldn't make him feel small." Suzanne gave an order off the phone to one of the servers. "I just hope she acts with a modicum of dignity tonight. You know how threatened she gets when you and Danny are in the same room."

"Don't I, though." Gillian glanced at the clock. "Look, I'm going to brave the supermarket crowds. I'll see you in a bit."

She hung up and stared into space. For the first time she wondered how her ex-husband would react to seeing her with a young man like Logan Chase. Not that she expected Logan to spend a lot of time with her tonight—surely he would be having fun with friends his own age—but Danny had always had an especially acute perceptiveness when it came to her and other men. Just a casual conversation could anger him if he was drinking. Or was Logan so young that he would simply pass under Danny's radar? She didn't know. She only knew that Danny was extremely sensitive about his pride and it got worse when he was drinking.

Danny had often accused her of emasculating him. It was a useless defense for his own failures, Gillian knew, but she also knew that the deeper he sank into incompetence,



the harder she had worked to compensate. Danny had always found it difficult to hang onto a job and for a time she had tried to involve him in her catering business. But he simply didn't have the chops. He wasn't flexible enough to deal with last-minute changes and he crumbled under pressure. He possessed no intuition for a client's needs and had no sense for plate presentation or table decoration. When he was put in charge of supplies, he wound up losing everything from linens to serving utensils to china.

Sometimes she suspected him of deliberately sabotaging her business, but she could never prove it. In the end she had had to let him go. Gillian knew a lot of men, maybe even most men, needed to feel stronger or more powerful than their wives. She also knew that the more financially successful she'd become, the more people viewed her as a threat or a bitch—including other women. What she didn't understand was how Danny could blame her for his failures. She had never stopped him from making something of himself. It had been his choice to get loaded every weekend and lose job after job. Yet in the end, she couldn't blame him for finding Misty. She hadn't loved him or even respected him by the end. So maybe she was the real failure for not ending their marriage years before.

She poured a glass of orange juice and took it upstairs. Enough worrying about Danny and Logan. She had real matters to concentrate on. Danny was the past and Logan—well, he was the recent past. It wasn't as if the mind-blowing chemistry they'd experienced last night could develop into anything real.

Or so she told herself as she went upstairs to dress.

The supermarket was an overheated chaos of shoppers frantically procuring last-minute items for Christmas. Gillian fought to be patient as she picked up extra vodka, along with some snacks that she knew Zach liked. With each aisle her cart entered, yet another person asked her about the Rand Manufacturing party. At last she escaped to the customer service desk to pick up lottery tickets as stocking stuffers.

"Mrs. McKutcheon! Oh my god, I haven't seen you in so long!"

At the sound of that high-pitched squeal, Gillian's muscles tensed. She turned, preparing herself to face the last person she wanted to see: Alicia Stevens. As in Logan's high school ex-girlfriend, Alicia.

The Christmas Eve rush apparently wasn't preventing Alicia from taking the time to greet an old customer. Standing in the supermarket uniform behind the service counter, Alicia looked impossibly fresh for a girl working the holiday madness. She looked, in fact, exactly like the cheerleader she had been in high school, her young face bright and her thick red hair in a long ponytail.

Gillian forced a welcoming smile onto her face, which felt as if it might crack.

"Well, hi there, Alicia. I didn't realize you still worked here."

"Only over Christmas break. I'm a sophomore at State already, can you believe it?" Alicia's pretty eyes were guileless. "So what's new? You look great, Mrs. McKutcheon."

"Thanks, Alicia. Not too much—catering the Rand party tonight, as always." Gillian just wanted to get out of the store. All she could think of was that she and the ponytailed teenager in front of her had actually shared the same lover. It was either disturbing or preposterous and probably both. "I hope to see you there later."

"Absolutely!" Alicia sang and Gillian pushed her cart away.

Yet no sooner as she turned by the ATM, then she realized she had forgotten the lottery tickets. Quickly she parked her cart and headed back to the service counter. Alicia was still chatting to her coworker, her high voice carrying over the grocery store noise.

“Oh my god, she is so *nice*,” Alicia was saying. “I feel so bad for her, the way her husband just walked out on her. I bet this is her first Christmas alone.”

Gillian froze. Was that girl talking about her?

“I mean, that is like my worst fear, getting old and getting dumped,” Alicia continued. “Can you imagine? Everybody over twenty-five in this town is married. She’ll probably be single for the rest of her life.”

Gillian bristled. How dare that little bitch discuss her in that manner? And who the hell was she calling *old*?

“It is hard for middle-aged women,” her coworker agreed enthusiastically. “I always feel so bad when guys that age hit on girls our age.”

“Oh, I know,” Alicia said. “But it’s, like, evolutionary. Men are biologically programmed to want younger women. We studied it in psychology.” She sounded smug.

That little wench. Gillian straightened her shoulders, intent on schooling that ignorant ponytailed princess on exactly who wanted her and why—

“Hey, beautiful.”

She wheeled around, startled. Logan’s gray-blue eyes were gazing down into hers. He was standing close to her, too close for public comfort, and the lust and adoration pouring from his eyes was hot enough to melt the snow outside. She gulped and took a step back. As she did, she saw his friends waiting behind him—all guys his age whom she recognized as his old classmates. Some of them had played on Zach’s soccer team too.

“Uh...” Flustered, she struggled for eloquence. She hadn’t counted on seeing him here in the supermarket, surrounded by half the town. “What are you doing here?”

“Picking up beer and snacks for the pre-party tonight. My buddies and I always get together on Christmas Eve for drinks and talking about old times.” His words were perfectly innocent but his face left no question about the mental images running through his mind.

Gillian quickly broke their gaze before she jumped him right here in the supermarket. She looked desperately over his shoulder. With a pang of alarm, she noticed that his friends were all studying her. Cold panic blossomed inside her. “Why are your friends staring at me?” she hissed. “You told them about last night, didn’t you!”

“No, I haven’t told anyone yet,” he said in a low voice, “and they’re probably staring at you because you’re hot. Ease up, Gillian.”

Funny how she could have sex with him until the sun came up, yet still instinctively twitch at him calling her *Gillian* and not *Mrs. McKutcheon*.

She took a deep breath and tossed her hair back. As she did, she noticed Alicia watching them with a puzzled expression from the service counter. “I should go,” she said. “I have a lot to prepare for tonight.” She began moving her cart away.

“Gillian, wait.” His eyes were anxious. “Did I do something? Are you mad at me?”

“No, I just... We’re in public.” She forced out another smile that belied the warning tone of her voice.

“So? We’re just talking.”

“I know, Logan, but there are dozens of people around—”

“It’s not like I’m a minor, Gillian. You couldn’t get arrested for what we did last night.”

“Logan! *Sssh!*”

“I’m just saying.”

Her heart was booming like a drum. Suddenly she felt hot and flushed under her expensive coat. She glanced carefully around the store. “I’ve got to go,” she muttered.

Logan’s brooding eyes bore into hers. He hadn’t moved one step from where he stood, yet the tension of his body radiated the suppressed urge to hold her tight. “You aren’t going to be working tonight, are you? I mean—you’ll be free at the party, right?”

She nodded. Thank God that was one thing she had made sure of. Suzanne, the bartender and wait staff were experienced enough to handle the party. It would have been just too humiliating to serve Danny and Misty at the party in her catering whites.

“Okay. We’ll talk then.”

“No, we won’t,” she corrected him swiftly. “My clients will be there, so will Zach and my ex-husband—”

His eyes widened with incredulous hurt. “So what am I, some piece of ass you’re ashamed to acknowledge in public?”

“No!” she insisted reflexively. But of course that was exactly the role she expected him to play. What else did he expect?

“I can’t believe this. You totally used me last night.”

“No, I didn’t.” Another surreptitious glance around revealed that Alicia was staring very closely at them and so were his friends. The urgency of their lowered voices had caught everyone’s attention. Oh god, she was so close to getting busted. “Look, we’ll talk later, but right now I’ve got to get home.”

“Wait, so I will be allowed to talk to you in public? Or should I slip over in the dead of the night when no one will notice? Just want to make sure I have your commands straight.” His gray-blue eyes flashed with anger.

“Logan,” she hissed. “If you don’t stop acting like a child, we won’t be talking at all.”

He stared at her in outrage then abruptly turned on his heel and returned to his friends. Moodily he stalked past them to the liquor section. After giving Gillian a puzzled glance, they followed him.

Oh god. That had not gone well. Ignoring the stares around her, Gillian hurriedly pushed her cart toward the least-motionless checkout line. A minor Christmas miracle occurred as a new cashier opened up another line, motioning her in. As she gratefully unloaded her groceries onto the conveyor belt, it occurred to her that she still hadn’t bought lottery tickets for stocking stuffers. An unreasonable rage ran through her. Already Logan was affecting her life, or perhaps it was more accurate to say that he had infected her. For that was how she felt... infected with a delirious fever whose only cure was the same as its cause.

## Chapter Five

The heavy blue gloom of a late winter afternoon was descending over Oak Falls as Gillian drove over to the restaurant Rand Manufacturing had rented for this party. Tiny colored lights twinkled on almost every barren tree and front porch, inflatable snowmen wavering in the wind. Main Street was crowded with cars circling the local churches for Christmas Eve services. As she navigated through the traffic, Gillian pushed her acrimonious exchange with Logan out of her mind. Yes, he was hurt and angry but she couldn't do anything about that now, could she? It was Christmas Eve. Her son was home from college and she had one of her biggest events of the year tonight. Soothing Logan's pride would just have to wait.

"I brought the cheese log and vodka," she said breathlessly, entering the restaurant kitchen from a back service door. She dropped everything on the counter and removed her gloves. "How's everything going?"

"Just peachy," Suzanne told her, chopping artichokes. "A couple kids collapsed from the arsenic cookies, but nothing we couldn't handle."

"Suzanne, that is so sick." But she couldn't help snickering.

Her catering manager had worked for her for four years now and Gillian still hadn't quite gotten accustomed to her dark humor. Suzanne was definitely a horse of a different stripe. After the restaurant where she worked closed, she had brazenly called up Gillian and told her to hire her. "Everyone says you're a great caterer but you need help, hon," she said frankly. "And I'm exactly what you need to expand this operation into something phenomenal."

Gillian had been aghast at her audacity. The truth was, she did need additional support but didn't trust anyone to do as good a job as she did. Nor did she care for Suzanne's brazen manner. She had been suppressing the truth for so many years—the truth about her failed marriage and her romantic starvation—that just being around someone so outspoken made her uncomfortable. Yet a big assignment had forced her to take on additional help and Suzanne had come on board. Since then they had become close friends.

"Oh, lighten up. If you can't make arsenic jokes around the holidays, when can you?" Suzanne flashed a wicked grin at her. Then her face changed and she put down her knife and came closer, studying Gillian's face.

"You're in love," she announced. "Or you got laid. Something's happened."

"Ssh!" Gillian hissed, glancing wildly at the catering staff passing outside. "Not now, Suz."

"Yes, *now*. What happened? When I saw you yesterday morning you were leaving to hit the pawnshops and welcome Zach home. Where the hell did you meet someone?"

Gillian looked back at the staff, her heart thudding nervously. Was she really so transparent? If so, being at the same party as Logan tonight would mean trouble. "I swear I will tell you later, Suzanne."

"I can't believe it. You turn down everyone in Oak Falls and then you take up with a guy who runs a pawnshop."

"No... no, it's more complicated than that," she muttered. Just saying the words

aloud—*I had sex with my son's friend*—would be more than she could manage right now. “I’m going to check on the party.”

Quickly she walked out of the prep room, her boots clicking on the linoleum. The swelling sounds of a Christmas carol greeted her ears as she pushed through the swinging doors. This stage of the party was going smoothly; Santa was still on his throne, listening to the wishes of the few remaining children in line to sit on his lap. Scattered wrapping paper littered the floor from the grab-bag gift exchange and crumb-laden plates had been abandoned everywhere. Some Christmas cookies still waited on the dessert table, but not many. The hassled-looking parents drinking coffee at the tables told her the kids had had a good time.

But the decorations. Oh God. Why, oh, why had Rand Manufacturing tried to save money this year by providing their own? They were a nightmare of gaudiness. The poinsettias garnishing each table were okay, but the giant plastic candy cane lights mounted on the walls were just tacky. Red, green and silver confetti was sprinkled everywhere, which was a food preparation disaster waiting to happen, and red rope lights ran the length of the walls. But the worst abomination was a giant fiber optic Santa Claus glowering down over the room from the ceiling. Its mouth opened in what she assumed was supposed to be a smile, but it looked more like a homicidal grimace.

“Mrs. McKutcheon, can I get you something to drink?”

It was Cody Elmer—the same Cody Logan had mentioned as having a crush on her last night. He worked for her as one of her regular servers and she had always thought of him as a nice enough kid but now she couldn’t look him in the face. “No thank you, Cody. I’m not staying long.”

“You’re coming back soon, I hope.”

Something in his tone made her look at him. Cody was waiting for her reply with a certain intensity in his eyes. Had her night with Logan marked her with some special Mrs. Robinson pheromone? Or had this romantic intention always been in his eyes and voice and she had simply been oblivious to it?

“I’ll be back later,” she said coolly. The last thing she would ever do was flirt with one of her employees.

“Have any special Christmas plans?”

“My son is home from college,” she told him, emphasizing the word *son*. “I’ll be spending a lot of time with him.”

“I can never believe you’re old enough to be Zach’s mom,” he said, tilting his head in a smile.

Oh yeah, he was flirting with her. She must have been blind to have missed this before. She gave him a perfunctory smile now and said pointedly, “I think the dessert table might be ready for clearing, Cody” and walked back into the prep room.

“We’re doomed,” she said to Suzanne. “Did you see those decorations? We have to make sure everyone knows they’re not ours. Otherwise it will kill our reputation. Maybe I’ll make a thank you announcement to Rand and mention their lovely decorations. Did you see that thing on the ceiling?”

“The fiber optic Santa? Yeah, I saw it. It looks like the serial killer of the North Pole.” Suzanne pushed a serving tray away and turned to her with a determined look in her eyes. “Spill it, Gillian.”

“Not now!” she hissed. “The servers are right outside the door.”

"You mean like your fan Cody?"

Gillian paused uncomfortably. "Oh, you heard that? I thought he sounded a little..."

"Smitten? He's had a thing for you since you hired him, Gillian. But I didn't think *you'd* noticed it."

Gillian blushed. "He's just a kid."

Suzanne gave her a *don't be dumb* look. "Gillian, don't act naive. You remember what guys that age are like."

After last night, she did. The crimson heat deepened in her face. "Suzanne, you have to remember I got married two months before my high school graduation. While everyone else was off at college getting laid, I was home changing diapers. Guys that age, as you put it, aren't exactly familiar territory."

"You're still a smart cookie, Gillian. But why are we talking about Cody and not your new bedwarmer from last night? Don't pretend nothing happened. You're a whole new woman today."

Gillian dropped into a chair and covered her face with her gloved hands. That powerful, sensual reaction to Logan swept through her body in an intoxicating rush as she recalled the touch of his hands on her waist. "I'm a bad new woman today," she said in a choked, muffled voice.

Suzanne's footsteps crossed the floor and stopped in front of her. Then she gently pulled one of her gloved hands away. "Now Gillian, come on," she said in an uncharacteristically gentle voice. "What could you have done?"

"Slept with one of Zach's friends."

Her whisper echoed through the prep room like a gunshot. There, she had said it. She had confessed aloud her expulsion from respectability. Surely now the censure would begin.

"Is *that* all? Sheesh, you had me worried." Suzanne heaved a heavy sigh and returned to the artichokes.

Gillian dropped her hands. "Are you kidding me, Suzanne? You can act jaded about a lot of things, but not this. I had sex with my son's friend. Right there under the Christmas tree while Zach was passed out drunk upstairs. Good God, I'm like one of those women you see on *Jerry Springer*."

Suzanne didn't seem phased by it. "Or like a lot of women right here in this very town who do the same thing and just don't talk about it."

"I..." That was exactly what she had told herself last night. "Do you really think so? You see that in the movies, the horny kid and the seductive older woman, but in real life?"

"All the time," Suzanne told her. She gave her a pointed look and arched an eyebrow as she sipped her water.

Gillian sucked in her breath. "Suzanne, you dirty dog. Who? When?"

"A couple of years ago on vacation in St. Thomas. We were staying at the same hotel and one night on the beach..." She shrugged, dropping the artichoke hearts into a pan. "It's nothing that hasn't been going for centuries. Women get judged more harshly so we keep it a secret. Men get high-fives so they're open about it."

Gillian slumped back in her coat, suddenly tired. Maybe Suzanne was right and she really hadn't done anything wrong. Yet at the same time... "But Suz, your guy wasn't friends with your kid. Besides..." She blushed. "I knew Logan when he was sixteen. I

helped organize their fundraising drive for new soccer uniforms.” That dark red stain returned to her cheeks.

“He probably had a thing for you back then.”

“That’s what he said.” It was an absurdly flattering thought and a turn-on too, but that just made her feel even more perverted. “What am I going to do if he tells Zach? Boys that age boast all the time, don’t they?”

“Some do, some don’t. Who is he and how old is he? You’re at least keeping it legal, right?”

“Suzanne, give me some credit.”

Gillian described Logan as best she could—the disappearing act his mother had pulled long ago, the alcoholic father who’d raised him, and his role as the captain of Zach’s soccer team. A return of last night’s heat filled her cheeks as she described his brooding eyes and ambitious intensity.

“He’s not a stupid kid,” she said adamantly. “I know that sounds deluded but he’s always had a maturity beyond his years.”

Now Suzanne looked skeptical. “Gil, come on. Boink him, fuck him fifty-five ways to Sunday, but don’t start pretending he’s relationship material.”

“I wasn’t,” Gillian said, offended. “I’m just saying that he’s not your standard immature kid.”

Suzanne only gave her a sympathetic smile that infuriated her. “You’ve been alone a long time now, Gillian... and I’m including the final years of your marriage in that. I’m glad you’ve found yourself a hot little holiday fling. Just don’t make the mistake of making it into something it isn’t.”

A hot wave of indignation swept up Gillian’s throat. How dare Suzanne lecture her as if she were a lovestruck schoolgirl? Did she think her fling with a beach boy made her some kind of expert on younger men? She cooled her ice blue eyes with the haughty superiority that had made so many vendors and clients cower before her. “I’ll be the judge of what it is and isn’t, thanks,” she said cuttingly. She rose and slipped on her cashmere-lined gloves. “I’m going to go home and get ready. I’ll be back by seven o’clock.”

Rather than apologize or continue to challenge her, Suzanne only turned back to grating cheese over the artichoke hearts. They’d had words before; as two women with equally strong personalities, they’d learned to let their disagreements cool and evaporate rather than get to the point of drawing blood. The swinging doors opened to let two servers carry in the empty cookie trays from the party. One of them was Cody Elmer. As Gillian glanced at him, he gave her a shy but longing smile.

Oh god. She really had been blind before. It was as if Logan had opened a whole new universe of erotic possibilities. She turned away and walked out without a word.

The house was dark when she pulled into the driveway. But as she unlocked the kitchen door, she could hear television noises from somewhere in the house. Zach was awake, which brought her to the lesser scandal of the day: reprimanding him for last night’s drunken behavior.

Of course, given her own scandalous behavior last night, she felt like a raging hypocrite scolding him. Getting drunk at eighteen was hardly the same as making love to a boy sixteen years one’s junior, was it?

Her heart gave a little skip as she saw the twinkling glow of the living room. Zach had plugged in the holiday lights, duplicating the ambience that had played so fetchingly

over Logan's naked body last night. Not that he could possibly be aware of that, of course. She hung up her coat, kicked off her shoes, and made her way into the small but comfortable den, where Zach lay on the couch in front of a flickering *Seinfeld* rerun.

From his matted blond hair, she could tell he hadn't done much since rolling out of bed. His expression was half-defiant and half-miserable. She suppressed a smile when she saw the aspirin and ginger ale next to him.

"And how are we feeling today?" she asked, nudging his feet over to sit down.

"I already know what you're going to say." Zach's voice was flat.

"You do? Why don't you tell me then."

His eyes flickered toward her. "Look, Mom, I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have come home so wasted I couldn't even walk. But it was my first night of winter break and I haven't seen those guys since last summer and..." He hesitated, then plunged on. "I mean, it's what I do at school all the time anyhow so go ahead and lecture me."

She composed her response carefully. She wasn't naive; she knew what college students did for fun. At the same time, she didn't want to give him her *carte blanche* approval for getting falling down drunk every night.

"I was hoping that instead of a lecture, we could have a talk," she said.

He sullenly shut off the TV.

"I know you drink at school," she said. "What I don't know is how responsibly you drink, how often you drink or how much you drink."

"It's not a big deal," he said. "I can handle it, you know I can."

"Like last night?" she asked. "Jeremy Myers was supposed to bring you home but am I correct in guessing he was as drunk as you?"

Zach's lips tightened. "I didn't know he was going to get so hammered."

"You almost put yourself in the hands of a drunk driver, Zach. Luckily Logan Chase found you and brought you home." Just saying his name made her heart flutter. She could only hope her voice did not betray her.

"Mom, I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"You also tried to get into a bar. Logan said the bouncer almost called the cops over the fake ID you were using."

He sighed heavily. "Everyone has a fake ID at school..."

"Zach, don't make me point out the obvious. Your father spent our entire marriage in a bar. You can see where that got him in life. I know you want better things for yourself, so don't throw away your future." She stood up. "I'm going to make dinner and get ready for the party. What are you hungry for?"

He groaned. "Not hungry at all."

"You need to eat. I'll make mashed potatoes. That should help settle your stomach." It had always helped settle Danny's when he was hungover but she didn't tell him that. Instead she headed into the kitchen, turned on the lights and pulled out the potatoes and milk. The truth was that she welcomed a diversion from thinking about Logan and what might happen between them tonight at the party.

Upstairs in the shower, smoothing bath gel over her stomach, the sweet memory of Logan's mouth swept over her in a rush. But she banished it quickly. She forbade herself to think about him. To avoid daydreams of his wet and naked body next to her, she reran tonight's menu through her mind. There was the smoked salmon crostini with the roasted garlic aioli, the Tuscan chicken, the festive-colored tomato and spinach tortilla wraps...



Toweling off and patting on scented powder, she moved on to the dessert menu. Shortbread cookies, Christmas tarts and gingerbread... *You're working tonight*, she kept telling herself. *Don't blow it by making a fool of yourself over some kid.*

Yet as she pulled on her red lace underwear, Logan crossed her mind in a vivid and visceral flash: it was as if his ghost was kneeling before her, pulling her panties down with his teeth. Somehow she was filled with the mysterious conviction that he would be the one to take them off later that night. As she fastened her matching red lace bra, a nervous joy fluttered deep in her body. Maybe this was crazy, maybe it was even an early midlife crisis, but it was also the most exhilarating and erotic experience of her romantically barren life.

## Chapter Six

An hour later, her hair and makeup were flawless and she was dressed to kill in a tight red velvet dress that showed off her every curve to mouthwatering perfection. Yet her reflection in the mirror only kicked up her anxiety. Wasn't tonight bound to be a disaster no matter what? Having to smile through all of the malicious questions about her divorce, having to grit her teeth and be friendly with Danny and Misty, having to treat Logan as neutrally as any of her son's other friends at the party... Not to mention the customary anxiety she always felt on an important catering job. Slipping ruby earrings into her ears, she squared her shoulders. Normally she prided herself on her composure in the most tumultuous of situations, but her intuition told her that tonight could be especially contentious.

When she headed downstairs, Zach was sprawled again on the den sofa. The empty plate of mashed potatoes waited next to the remote control. He was still in the sweatpants and t-shirt he'd worn earlier. She frowned. "What time do you think you'll be arriving tonight?"

His eyes flickered toward her. "Do I have to go to this party?"

She raised her brows. "Have to? No, you don't 'have' to but this party is our annual Christmas Eve tradition, Zach. And I think your father is expecting to see you tonight."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure he'll really care if I don't go. Or notice."

What had gotten into him? Zach had always been such a polite kid. Over the summer her friends with older children had warned her that he would return from college with a rebellious attitude—it happened to all college freshman, they said. But she couldn't believe her affable, easygoing son would turn so intractable. Was it just the hangover making him grumpy tonight or could she expect this kind of difficult attitude from now on?

Gillian glanced again at the aspirin near him. No matter what, she was *not* going to let him turn into his father. Not when she had worked so hard his entire life to set him on a healthy, positive path.

"Take a shower and stop by the party, Zach," she said succinctly. "You'll feel better, trust me."

Well, this was another first, she reflected as she drove to the party. No matter how bad things had been at home they had always gone to this affair together. Never did she imagine she'd been arriving alone to a cherished family tradition. But of course this was how it would be in the future. She had already lost her husband and one day she would lose her son, as Zach married and began the classic alternating holiday pattern with his own in-laws. She sighed, her memory returning to Alicia Stevens's thoughtless words at the supermarket that afternoon. *She'll probably be single the rest of her life.* Most of the time she liked not having a full-time man around; Danny had always been more of a burden than a helpmate or companion. But holidays were different. Holidays were meant to be shared with someone you loved.

The restaurant parking lot was packed, a holiday carol drifting out into the cold as two guests headed inside. A plastic neon reindeer head blinked in the cold night, reminding her of the awful decorations Rand Manufacturing had put up. As she drove

around back and parked by the kitchen entrance, she mentally reminded herself to put out a general disclaimer.

A wolf whistle greeted her as she got out of the Mercedes and dropped her car keys in her velvet evening bag. "You look amazing," a tentative young voice told her.

She knew without looking it was her newly discovered fan Cody Elmer. "Thanks, Cody," she replied, favoring him with only a brief glance. She swept into the kitchen without another word but his admiration bolstered her confidence. She wasn't especially vain but it mattered a great deal to her that she look her best tonight. After ten months of gossip, this party was her chance to destroy any public misconceptions that she was the discarded, jilted ex-wife.

And of course, she wanted to look good for Logan.

Suzanne was dressed in her catering whites; one of the benefits of hiring her was that she didn't mind working the Christmas Eve event. She despised evening gowns and high heels. She imitated Cody's wolf whistle. "Look at you, lady in red!"

Gillian twirled for her. She knew they weren't going to mention their earlier tension and that was just fine with her. "What do you think? Is it too much?"

"I think Danny's going to choke tonight when he sees you." Suzanne brazenly admired the velvet-covered support enhancing her décolletage. "I've already seen Misty's get-up and trust me, it's not good. Why can't someone teach that girl how to dress?"

Gillian made a face. "Who cares about them. I've got finer fish to fry."

"You mean you've got *younger* fish to fry." Suzanne gave her a sly look. "So about your new love pony. Will he be in attendance tonight?"

"He said he'd be here. I'll point him out to you." A glimpse of a brown head in the doorway made her spin on her heels in time to see Cody vanish. "Did he hear us?" she hissed.

"So what if he did? You're allowed to date."

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I want my staff knowing I—" Once again, the actual words made her choke. "I just don't want people knowing I was with someone so young, Suzanne. You know how people would talk."

"People have been talking about you anyhow," Suzanne pointed out. "Wouldn't you rather be the sexy older woman who seduced a sexy younger man, instead of the lady who got dumped for a younger woman?"

Gillian winced. Sometimes Suzanne was just too blunt. "I'd rather just be discreet."

One of the other servers emerged with a trembling lip. "Suzanne and Gillian, this guy tasted the artichoke thing with the serving spoon and then he put the spoon back in—"

"Then get it in here now." Suzanne always remained calm in a crisis. It was one of the reasons Gillian valued her so much. "Look, Gil, everything here is under control. Get out there and have fun. Don't worry about gossip and *don't* forget to show me who he is."

Normally Gillian would make an entrance by emerging through the front door, then pausing to let everyone admire her appearance. She knew how to work the party scene, she'd done it often enough. But tonight she was just nervous enough to want to avoid flagrant attention. Instead she slipped out through the kitchen entrance. As she headed over to check on the buffet, she could feel the rise of chatter as the other guests noticed her. The eyes landing on her felt like a swarm of insects on her bare arms.

"Bring out more of the Tuscan chicken," she told another server. "Oh and Cody, tell Suzanne not to bring out the desserts until later. A lot of people here had cookies and fondue at the kids' party. They won't be wanting more sugar for a while."

She was checking on the liquor supply at the bar when the first guest approached her. It was Sherri Meyers, a bank teller who specialized in disseminating all of Oak Falls' hottest gossip. "Gillian, Gillian, don't you look like an angel in that dress," she breathed with false admiration.

Gillian arched her brows. "Angels don't wear red, Sherri—devils do."

Sherri ignored her comment. "Now, honey, where is your date? Please don't tell me you came to the party alone. That would just break my heart."

Gillian gritted her teeth. She knew she shouldn't let gossipy dried-up bitches like Sherri Meyers get to her, but their fake pity routines were just too galling. It was known all over town that she wasn't dating anyone. Sherri simply wanted to rub her nose in it. Maybe she was paranoid but it had seemed to Gillian this year that a lot of women had secretly rejoiced when Danny dumped her.

"Actually I have met someone new." Gillian enjoyed the surprise and displeasure that came into Sherri's eyes. "But it's nothing I want to go public with yet."

"Oh..." Sherri's voice faded. "How nice for you."

Walter Rand, the president of Rand Manufacturing who sponsored the party, appeared next to her. "Look who's here, my favorite caterer!" he boomed. Walter always spoke several decibels above everyone else, as if asserting his role as the richest man in town. "And don't you look stunning! You don't dress like that when we have meetings," he added and laughed uproariously.

Gillian faked a thin laugh. "Nice to see you, Walter."

Walter slid an arm around her waist. She suffered it because he was her biggest client, but she longed to shove him away. "I'm always telling my wife I'm going to leave her for you." Another raucous guffaw escaped him.

Gillian didn't laugh. Instead she checked Sherri's face, dismayed by the nasty gratification she saw there. Sherri had gotten what she came for: a spiteful piece of gossip she could twist and repeat. Now she could insinuate that Gillian's success was due to her having an affair with the repugnant and married Walter Rand, thereby suggesting that she was both incompetent and an adulteress.

Gillian politely stepped away. "Let's not give anyone ideas, Walter. We all know how talkative Sherri here is."

"What? Why, I can't believe you, Gillian! I would never repeat a word anyone said!"

The conversation faded on her ears then as a blast of intuition made her skin prickle with an exciting tension. She turned to see Logan in the doorway, his grayish-blue eyes locked intensely on her.

Conflicting expressions of defiance and yearning battled on his handsome young face. His eyes were still hot with injured pride over their supermarket argument. He hadn't liked the way she spoke to him, that much was obvious. Yet it was also obvious that he ached for her just looking at her. She could see the desire in his eyes. Logan was too young to hide his feelings deftly yet; all of them showed on his face like changing colors, lust, uncertainty, pride and need.

She swallowed and stroked back a loose blonde tendril that had caught on an earring. Their fierce attraction made her blood swim fast as their eyes locked and she tried

desperately to think of what to say. Yet a dark shape stepping in front of her spared her from making a decision—her ex-husband, Danny.

“Merry Christmas,” he said gallantly. He smelled faintly of whiskey but he wasn’t yet drunk. His thinning blond hair had been cut recently, emphasizing his balding temples and he had clearly gained a few pounds living with Misty, but he was dressed nicely tonight. “You look great as always. Where’s Zach?”

“Home,” she said, trying to think of a positive way to spin their son’s absence. “He’ll be here later. He partied a little too hard last night.” She added an apologetic smile to take off the sting.

Yet Danny only chuckled. “That’s my boy,” he said. “An old rabble-rouser like his dad. I bet he’s been going through sorority girls at that college like Kleenex.”

A faint distaste curved her mouth downward. “He’s in college to get an education, Danny, not act like a rock star.”

Danny rolled his eyes. “Hey, I just want him to have the chances I never got.”

*Is that why you haven’t paid one dime toward his tuition?* Gillian thought. But there was no point in saying it. She knew that she and Danny saw their missed “chances” very differently—hers for travel and education, his for parties and pretty coeds. Now they were hoping to vicariously experience both through Zach.

Of course in her own way, she had recaptured a small piece of her own lost youth last night. She blushed, stealing a glance toward Logan. He was at the bar now with his friends and all of them were looking at her. Her stomach plummeted. What exactly had he told them? Oh no. Her suspicions had been on target last night—she was just a trophy to him, a MILF conquest to brag about to his old teammates. And Zach would find out and despise her forever.

“Hi, Gillian.” That anxious, thin voice belonged to Misty, come to clutch Danny’s arm tightly to her side. “Are you here alone?”

Gillian chose to take the high road, giving her a gracious smile. “I’m working tonight, Misty. My company is catering this party.”

Suzanne hadn’t lied. Misty was as awkwardly dressed as ever. Tonight she had stuffed herself in a tight green sequined dress and the result was not attractive. She looked, Gillian thought bluntly, like the Jolly Green Giant in drag.

“Hi, Mrs. McKutcheon!”

Gillian turned to see Alicia Stevens, Logan’s ex-girlfriend, waving at her from the door. She waved back. The party was getting well underway now, the dance floor filling with awkward couples who hadn’t yet consumed enough champagne to lose their inhibitions. Watching her from the tables and around the bar were many interested, curious eyes. Gillian realized with resignation that many of them were waiting for this conversation between the jilted wife and her ex-husband and his much younger girlfriend to erupt into flames. That was small town life for you, she thought. Everyone wanted a juicy scandal to make themselves feel better about their own romantic or professional disappointments.

If only they knew what I got up to last night, she thought with a smile. She turned to greet another old client, one of the married men who’d made a pass at her since the divorce. She had no interest in him but collecting male admirers around her could only remind Logan that she wasn’t over the hill yet. “Hello, Leon, how are you?”

Another client, also male, drifted up. Her tight sexy dress was a big hit tonight. As

Misty led Danny away, and she chatted up man after man, her eyes strayed occasionally toward the bar. Logan was sitting alone now and watched her from his stool with burning eyes. He didn't like her flirting with these men, that was obvious. She smirked to herself until she saw Alicia Stevens slide onto the stool next to him, looking beautiful in a silky blue sweater. Then her heart gave a sickening thud.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but I need my boss for a moment," Suzanne said with a smile, sliding in between her admirers. "Gill, can I see you in the kitchen?"

"Thanks a million," Gillian muttered as she followed her out of the party.

"You had that plastic smile on—I figured you needed rescuing." Suzanne's curious eyes searched her face relentlessly. "So? Is your boytoy here?"

"Shush," Gillian hissed reflexively. She looked around the kitchen. All of the servers were frantically busy, Cody Elmer included. "Yes, he's here. Right now he's sitting at the bar in a black shirt, talking to a redhead."

"Great. I'll check him out while I replace the bean dip for the tortillas."

As Suzanne headed out, Gillian pulled her compact from her bag and checked her makeup. What a strange Christmas Eve this was so far. Casually chatting to Danny and his new girlfriend while ignoring the college student she'd been naked with at dawn... If she had foreseen this last Christmas in a crystal ball, she'd never have believed it. She reapplied her lipstick, then headed back out to the snakepit.

Now that the party was in full swing, she could judge it fairly. Yes, the gaudy decorations were atrocious and too many people were marking her lack of a date with spiteful glee, but the same holiday warmth that made this annual party so special still held sway. A long line waited by the buffet, always a good sign, and the DJ was keeping the dance floor full. At least one of her Christmas worries was over: the Rand party was officially a success again.

Avoiding Logan's eyes at the bar, she crossed over to the buffet to check on the salmon crostini. Suzanne joined her a moment later. "The dark-haired, Irish-looking one?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yep."

"Oh, Gil, he's gorgeous. Nice work. You're going to have to give me all the details later. Will there be a repeat performance tonight?"

"Oh no, it was just a ... just a one-night stand." Before thinking better of it, she glanced over her shoulder at the bar. Logan's eyes smoldered through the dark. Her stomach gave a strange flutter and she turned back around. "He's adorable but let's be honest, it was strictly a sex thing."

"Sex thing? Who's having a sex thing?"

The angry male voice behind them made both women turn around. Danny was eavesdropping with a sheen in his eyes that told Gillian his whiskey was catching up with him.

"One of the ladies we know at the bank." Gillian disliked lying but her ex-husband was the last person she wanted to know about Logan. They might be formally and completely divorced, but he still tried to follow her love life through Zach.

The lie worked; Danny lost interest in the story. "Did I tell you how fantastic you look?" he told her urgently. He leaned over to kiss her cheek and she fought the instinct to pull away. "And you smell fantastic too."

"Thanks, Danny," she said wryly. She could see the desire in his eyes that had

survived their long fade into indifference and the mutual tension of the divorce. Or perhaps it was simply his awareness that he had, as Suzanne put it, traded in a Lexus for a used truck. “How’s your holiday season been?”

He groaned. “Those kids. They won’t shut up. All day, all night, talking about Santa.”

The mental image of Danny surrounded by Misty’s three small children amused her. “All kids get excited around Christmas. Zach was no different.”

He shook his head. “Nah, he was never as bratty as these kids. Holy crap, are they loud.”

She glanced over at Misty. Just as she expected, the girl was watching them anxiously. *Oh relax*, Gillian wanted to tell her. *You couldn’t pay me to take his lazy ass back. I already paid to get rid of him, remember?*

If only.

“Speaking of Christmas and Zach,” Gillian began, “I did want to make sure you didn’t get him the video game thing. I told you I was getting it—you remembered, right?” She highly doubted Danny would spend that kind of money on a single gift but it didn’t hurt to check.

Sure enough, he scoffed. “You think I’d spend three hundred bucks on that crap? The kid’s spoiled enough as it is.”

She tried to gauge the exasperation in his eyes. “Uh, Danny? What did you get him?” She had always bought Zach’s gifts in the past, and it occurred to her now that Danny might have failed miserably in his first gift-buying holiday.

He stiffened. “I can handle buying a fucking Christmas present for our son, Gillian. You don’t need to supervise it like you do everything else.”

She held up her hands to placate him. “I was just wondering,” she said neutrally. “No need to get defensive.”

But Danny’s initial holiday spirit had already shifted into resentment. “You’re ruining him, Gillian. Sending him to that fancy school full of rich kids. You’re making him think he’s better than us.”

*You mean you’re worried he thinks he’s better than you.* “Zach is not spoiled. We agreed long ago we wanted him to have the kind of education neither of us had a chance for.”

He shrugged arrogantly. “That’s important to you, Gillian, because you’re a snob. But I’m not materialistic like you are.”

“Paying bills and feeding our family is not materialistic,” Gillian hissed. “I was the one who worked for everyone we had, you asshole. And you sure didn’t mind taking half of it, did you?”

His jaw set in hard disdain. “I knew it. Can’t get through a single conversation without rubbing my face in it, can you? Well, whoop de fucking doo. You make a lot of money cutting up vegetables and baking cupcakes. It’s not exactly rocket science, Gil.”

An electronic whine sliced the air. They turned along with everyone else to see Misty by the DJ booth, microphone in hand. Gillian stepped away from her ex-husband, relieved to be spared further sparring.

“Attention, everyone,” Misty sang. She signaled the DJ, who put on a new record. Gillian tensed as she heard one of her favorite Christmas songs begin: *All I Want for Christmas Is You* by Vince Vance and the Valiants. “I want to dedicate this next dance to

my honey. Sorry, Gillian. He might have stuffed your stocking last year but this year he's stuffing mine!" She laughed raucously at her own vulgar joke.

Immediately every eye in the place was on Gillian. Gazes of sympathy, pity and glee fixed on her as the moments seemed to drag on in an agony of self-consciousness.

*That little bitch*, Gillian thought. Misty had caused this scene out of pure spite that Danny was talking to her. Was she really so small-minded? Wasn't it enough that everyone in town knew she had broken up their marriage? She felt her cheeks flaming as ruby-red as her dress with mortification. Hell, Misty could keep Danny and spawn ten more brats for all she cared. What she couldn't abide was this skin-crawling *pity* she saw in everyone's eyes.

Then someone walked up to her. Turning, she saw Logan looking handsome and cool with resolve. "I'd like to have this dance," he said.

Well, that banished the collective pity. Now everyone was staring at them with shock.

"I... Logan, please..." she said in a low voice.

He took her hand and led her to the dance floor. She had no choice but to make a scene or follow.

"You shouldn't be doing this," she hissed as his arms slid around her waist with far too familiar intimacy. Over his shoulder she caught sight of Alicia Stevens staring at them with a dropped jaw.

"I'd be crazy not to. You're the most beautiful woman at the party."

They began to move to the song. She bit her lip, her heart fluttering with wild joy at the feel of Logan's body against her. She avoided the stunned faces watching them, all too aware of the social ramifications of this dance. For the rest of the night, people would be talking about it. Yet she couldn't look into his beautiful grayish-blue eyes either. She tried to concentrate on taking a long deep breath. Her nervous system was electric from the touch of his thighs, his chest.

He tightened his hold on her waist, pulling her closer against him. She felt as if she were drowning and on fire all at once.

"It's okay," he whispered in her ear. "We have every right to do this."

She laughed shakily. Rights. Who but a very young man would talk about rights? She was old enough to know that rights didn't matter. Small town minds didn't care a fig for justice, they only cared about propriety and conformity. She, Gillian McKutcheon, was breaking every social taboo by dancing with this handsome twenty-one-year-old—and it wasn't just a dance, was it, the way he held her so tightly with his smooth cheek against hers...

His hands drifted lower, resting dangerously close to the top of her ass.

"Logan..." she said warningly.

"I get hard just hearing you say my name," he whispered. Then he shifted his hips against her just enough to show her it was true.

She closed her eyes and swallowed. She knew she probably looked like a lust-stricken fool with her chin on his shoulder and her eyes closed, but it was that or let everyone see the pure animal desire in her gaze.

"I'll never live this down," she murmured, as much to herself as to him. Unable to stop herself, she twined her fingers in his thick dark hair.

"Come on, Gillian. It's going to get a lot worse than this."



That opened her eyes. She pulled back and looked into his deeply smitten gaze. “And what does that mean?”

“It means that this is nothing compared to what people will say when they see us having dinner or shopping together or whatever.”

She was so surprised that it took her a moment to form a response. “And why would people see us doing that?”

“Because as much as you want to act like last night meant nothing, it meant a lot. And we both know it.”

Oh god. He had to do this, had to toy with her heart. Well, she wouldn’t let him. “What I know is that it was a nice little adventure and—”

“There was nothing *nice* or *little* about it.” He dipped his forehead down against hers and stared into her eyes. “It was mind-blowing,” he said softly, his lips just a breath from hers. “And now I am completely under your spell.”

Just as she realized that he had maneuvered them over to the mistletoe, he kissed her. The electric heat of his lips illuminated her body like an erotic flash of lightning. She broke away with a gasp.

Danny’s flushed and angry face appeared next to them. “What the hell are you doing to my wife?” he growled. Misty was behind him a moment later, trying to pull him back, but he waved her off. “Answer me, you little fuck!”

“Danny, get away from us!” Gillian snapped. “This is none of your business!” A toxic brew of outrage, anxiety and mortification coursed through her blood as she struggled for some kind of damage control.

“I don’t believe this!” he roared. “This is how you celebrate Christmas now that we’re divorced? Dating children and acting like a whore in public?”

Logan turned calmly and placed a well-aimed swing at his jaw. His fist cracked against him so fast that Gillian only truly registered what had happened when she saw Danny on the ground.

The DJ killed the music. Everyone at the party gaped at them in the ensuing silence as Misty helped Danny to his feet and tugged him backward.

“I’m going to fucking kill you for that,” Danny threatened. But the words made him seem more ridiculous than menacing as he wiped confetti and glitter off his forehead.

“Just shut up, Danny, and leave us alone.” Gillian was surprised to hear the calm strength of her own words. “It’s Christmas Eve. Let’s at least be civil if we can’t be friendly.” She turned to snap her fingers at the DJ, gesturing to begin a new song, and then caught sight of Zach across the room. Her newly arrived son was staring at her with a face of shocked betrayal, his chest heaving. A sickening jolt of horror spread through her body as they stared at each other. Then Zach slipped out into the night and she pushed through the crowd to chase after him.

## Chapter Seven

Two hours later she was standing alone in the supermarket employee parking lot as snowflakes swirled down past the streetlights. Her tears had eaten through her makeup and the falling snow had ruined her hair. She had driven all over town looking for Zach, had gone home and driven by his friends' houses and even checked the local bars, but his car was nowhere to be found. Everything had closed down for the holidays, including the supermarket. Now she stood alone in the silence and let the dire truth of her new reality sink deep into her bones.

She had had sex with her son's friend. That was bad enough, but hey, she suspected that women did such things a lot more than they admitted. Then she had publicly danced with him—if danced was now a synonym for skin-grinding, heart-melting, eye-scorching desire... Anyone watching them would have known they were moments from tearing each other's clothes off and everyone at the party had been watching.

And she was falling hard for him. It was ridiculous and inconvenient and hopelessly masochistic, but there it was. It wasn't just the sentiment of the Christmas season or her lonely years of pent-up frustration. It was him. It was them. Something tender, lustful and *real* was growing between them and she could no longer deny it. There was only one choice to make: reclaim what was left of her dignity and resign herself to loneliness or take Logan's hand and let him lead her into sexual heaven and social hell.

She glanced at her cell phone. Six missed calls. Suzanne had called, probably to convey her worry and Danny had called as well, probably to convey his rage. Logan hadn't called—he didn't have her cell phone number—and neither had Zach. She looked closer at the time and date on her phone. It was after midnight. It was officially Christmas and she was sobbing alone in a snow-covered parking lot until the tears froze on her cheeks. Quickly she slid her phone into her purse and headed back to the car to repair her makeup. She had a son to celebrate Christmas with and a party to finish. However else Logan had changed her, she wasn't going to stop being a good mother or a consummate professional.

The restaurant parking lot was laced with snow when she pulled in. Only the catering van waited under a streetlight; it was almost one a.m. She parked out front and emerged to the silence of Main Street. Everyone had long since headed home for the night. She headed in the customer entrance, suspecting it'd still be unlocked.

The lounge was empty and dark, littered with the glitter and mess of the party. Only the tacky glow of the plastic candy cane lights illuminated the confetti-dappled dance floor and looming Santa throne. One thin streak of light sliced the carpet from the kitchen doors, held open by a chair; the distant refrains of a popular song drifted to her ears. With swift and stealthy silence, she cut across the floor and rapped loudly on the door.

A startled yelp gratified her. Cody Elmer popped his head around a cabinet door, his dark eyes wide with fear. Then he saw her and his expression relaxed into relief with a hint—was she imagining it?—of sexual anticipation.

"Oh, hey, Gillian," he said with a sigh. "Christ, you scared me."

Gillian? When had she stopped being Mrs. McKutcheon to him? Probably when he'd seen her holding his former classmate so tightly, that was when. No doubt this was just

the first in a long line of minor infractions that she'd be facing.

She arched an eyebrow. "Perhaps if you locked the front door as you should have, you wouldn't be so scared."

He had the grace to look abashed. "Right, sorry. I actually wasn't sure if I was alone here. Usually the owners stick around until we leave."

He was right about that. She conceded this with a nod. "Christmas Eve is a little different. I know you weren't working for us at last year's event so I'll let this go, but in the future, you must secure the exits."

Cody's embarrassment was slowly transforming into an expression of suggestive pleasure. He eyed her up and down in her tight red dress. "So... it's nice that you came back," he said seductively.

Oh God. So this was how it was now. She was the neighborhood Mrs. Robinson. Or cougar or MILF or whatever the hip new term was. "Cody, I came back to make sure everything was closed up correctly," she said coldly. "I'd already told Suzanne she could leave early. And now that I'm here, you can do the same. It looks like you got most everything loaded into the van."

Abashed, he dropped his gaze. "Okay," he muttered. "I'm out of here." He switched off the radio, collected his coat and looked back at her. "Merry Christmas," he ventured timidly and headed out the back door.

With a deep sigh, she looked around. Cody had done a good job cleaning up; only a few bowls and trays were left. He was a good worker, dependable and thorough. The question was whether she could still command his respect while leering images of her and Logan danced in his head.

Oh, screw that. She was in charge here. She would demand his respect and everyone else's no matter who she was sleeping with.

But first things first. She headed out to the lounge and locked the front door, then flipped the lights to survey the damage. Yes, the place was a mess, the carpet covered with glitter and discarded napkins and lost earrings. That wasn't her problem; the cleaning crew would get it tomorrow. But the glowing candy canes and empty Santa throne made her very sad in the silence. She killed the lights, collapsed into Santa's glitter-sprinkled chair and stared out at the empty dance floor where she had made such a public spectacle of herself tonight.

She had wanted this Christmas to be so perfect. Instead it had been a sordid junket of pawnshops, hangovers and fistfights.

A quiet rap made her jolt up in the throne. A tall profile of black hair and winter jacket was outlined in the kitchen door: Logan. He had come in from the back entrance.

She sat straight up, her heart pounding with what she couldn't deny was an exhilarated thrill. "What are you doing here?"

"Saw your car in the parking lot. I've been driving all over town looking for you."

Logan slowly advanced toward her, hands in his pockets. Snowflakes dotted his black hair and his smooth cheeks were flushed from the cold. He looked so young to her after the middle-aged men that had asked her to dance that night. So very young and handsome and... unattainable. He was too good for her. That was the only way she could phrase it. She might look good for her age, she might be a kick-ass businesswoman and a great mother, but she was still a thirty-seven-year-old divorcee with cellulite, debt and a jaded, weary spirit. Logan, on the other hand, could have his pick of beautiful fresh-faced

girls. He was just beginning a future that spread before him like a shining promise.

She pushed her snow-dampened damp hair over her shoulder, aware she was not looking her best. "I'm sorry about tonight," she began. "What with Danny and... everything. Does your hand hurt?"

He shrugged. "Don't worry about it."

"Logan, let me see your hand. You hit him pretty hard."

Impatience rippled over his face. "Gillian—it's okay. I'm not a child, I know whether my hand needs medical attention or not."

She flushed. While she was hardly an expert on younger men, she doubted they found it arousing to be mothered. "I'm sorry."

He approached Santa's throne. "I want to say something to you."

Her gut clenched. No doubt he was about to say the words she had unconsciously dreaded since last night—*I thought about this and this is not going to work out. Last night was nice but we have nothing in common, it's not like we can have a future together*—all of those banal yet painful clichés. She steeled her face to look poised.

"My mom left when I was four," he said. "I really don't remember much about her. Since then my dad has been drunk all the time and I have pretty much raised myself. Now here I am head over heels for this older woman who's got sixteen years on me. I know what everyone's going to think and I realized it's probably what you're thinking too."

He came close to her and looked in her eyes. "Gillian, I'm not looking for a mother. I'm not trying to relive the nurturing I never got. I've been attracted to you since I was sixteen and it has nothing to do with your butter tarts or domestic talents. I want you the way a man wants a woman—physically, passionately."

A warm burst of happiness flamed through her body. She opened her mouth to speak and he shushed her.

"*And* I want you as an equal," he said. "If we're going to have a relationship, you can't treat me like a little boy or an apprentice. We go forward as equals or we don't go forward at all."

Now her mouth did fall open. Where did he get off calling himself her equal? He was a college kid and she was an adult who'd raised a child and started a business. She'd experienced lessons in life he couldn't even guess at. Did he honestly consider himself her equal?

Logan seemed to read her mind. "I know you've got a lot on me," he said hurriedly. "I'm not trying to diminish all of the things you've accomplished, Gillian. I really admire you. I'm just saying that we need to be on an equal footing in terms of respect. I won't be your pet or your boytoy."

Her mouth closed. Her natural impulse was to assure him, "Of course you won't." But she didn't truthfully know if she could guarantee that. For all of her adult life, she had been in charge—of her home, of Zach, of her business, even of Danny to an extent. She called the shots, made the decisions, shouldered the responsibility. It was very rare that she related to anyone as an equal.

Yet it was only fair that Logan be treated with the respect he demanded. She knew that. He was young but that didn't mean she could treat him as a toy. Besides, he truly was an impressive person. He had lived his twenty-one years with a drive and dignity she rarely saw in anyone of any age.

"Deal," she said finally.

He nodded once without smiling. That smoldering energy burned in his eyes as he knelt before her on Santa's throne. To her surprise, he removed her heels and began rubbing and kneading her stockinged feet with a skill that made her sigh with pleasure. She relaxed and settled back in the wide wooden chair. Tonight might have been a disaster but there were worse ways to begin Christmas than with a foot rub.

Placing his hands on her ankles, he gently spread her knees before kissing each one.

"It's after midnight," he reminded her. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas."

She leaned forward and he met her in a kiss. With tender need his mouth covered hers, a warm and sweet panacea to cure all the cold fears that had settled in her tonight. She didn't hesitate this time. Instead she kissed him back with the avid hunger rising in her blood. The whole town knew her secret now, haughty Gillian McKutcheon was lusting after her son's friend, and she didn't care. She was going to leap into sexual insanity and never look back.

She pulled back to stroke his smooth, cold-flushed cheeks. Studying him was better than looking at a moonlit beach or museum's worth of paintings. He was so beautiful it made her heart ache.

"I love looking at you," she said honestly.

His lips twisted in a poignant smile. "I love being able to look at you up close, instead of sneaking looks across the soccer field. You're even more gorgeous than I remembered."

She laughed wryly. She knew that the snow had ruined her hair and her makeup, all of her careful preparations to hide the tiny detriments of age. Yet the adoration in Logan's eyes was real. He didn't look at her with the bitterness of her ex-husband or the leering speculation of men around town. His eyes glowed with affection and admiration. She actually did look gorgeous to this young man but even more than it boosted her ego, it warmed her heart.

Logan kissed her again, his sweet mouth opening hers for the soft entry of his tongue. She submitted to the enchantment of his lips, the heart-stopping magic of such a simple act between them. His kiss offered his devotion better than any words could say. It was in the tenderness of his mouth, the way his fingers stroked her hair back from her cheeks.

A flame of lust began to dance within her. All of her Christmas Eve anxieties, from the gaudy decorations to the public mortification to Zach's outraged expression, melted away as her desire for Logan spread across her skin like wildfire. She kissed him harder, tugging at his black shirt so that she could feel his warm bare chest against hers.

Instead Logan sank back on his heels. With a naughty smile, he pushed her dress up her thighs.

She leaned back into the throne. "We shouldn't be doing this here." No doubt this was one of the worst faux pas a caterer could commit: having sex on site after the event.

"Everyone's home asleep." Logan hooked his fingers into the waistband of her red lace panties and steadily pulled them down her legs. His mouth followed their path, kissing her navel. "Come on, Santa Gillian. Give this kid a gift."

She shifted restlessly with arousal. "Shouldn't you be sitting in my lap for this kind of talk?"

"I'd rather be between your legs," he said and tossed her panties aside. Breathing

faster, he trailed his fingertips through her soft mound of hair.

Gillian spread her legs, an involuntary whimper escaping her as his hand cupped her pussy. He lightly slapped her flesh, bringing a shock of arousal through her system, then played with her aching, swollen lips. She gazed imploringly at him, begging him with her eyes to push his fingers deep into her wet sex. Instead he snapped the tops of her thigh-high stockings against her skin. Somehow the fleeting pain made the sensations collecting between her legs even more intense as his fingernail grazed her clit.

"Kiss me," he whispered. She leaned forward to obey, feeling the hot brush of his lips like a welcome shiver. Their kiss grew deeper, the delicate push of his tongue growing stronger and more demanding. All the while, his fingers skillfully tickled her clit until she broke the kiss in a ragged moan.

"You're driving me crazy," she panted.

"Consider it revenge for driving me crazy in high school," he retorted and returned to his knees.

Roughly he ran his tongue up her stockings, the oddness of the sensation turning silky when his tongue hit her bare upper thighs. She moaned again as he licked the crease of her hips, his soft thick hair brushing her pussy. "Logan... oh my god..."

Gently he took her in his mouth and sucked her clit until she cried out with need. An intense feeling of pressure was mounting inside her, a certainty that she was going to break against his mouth like a storm. She clenched her hands in her hair from the sweet torment of his tongue flicking snake-like against her clit.

"Don't stop," she cried. "I'm so close..."

Logan deftly slid two fingers into her slickness, pressing them forward to stimulate her most sensitive spot. As he rubbed her G spot with exquisite skill, he sucked her clit, drawing forward all of that unbearable pressure until her orgasm exploded in wet throbs against his face. She arched against the throne in pulsing ecstasy, pushing against him.

"Oh my god," she whispered. "That was..." Words deserted her.

Logan picked up her panties and helped her slide off Santa's throne. She shakily adjusted her dress, her eyes glazed and her hair a damp mess of glitter. She was completely, utterly, fulfilled.

Logan took her tousled hair in his hands, tenderly moving it from her flushed face. "Go home and get some sleep," he whispered. "It's Christmas. You need to be with Zach."

She nodded sleepily. Logan helped her clear out the remaining equipment, then she locked up the restaurant. Outside in the falling snow, he pulled her into a deep, wordless hug. Holding him in the streetlight, she knew that she would handle whatever social or family fallout came her way. Having such a sweet and passionate man in her life was worth it.

Oak Falls was silent as she drove home, the glowing Christmas decorations spilling their light into silent streets. It was after two a.m. and she could only hope that Zach had come home and gone to bed. She was gratified to find his car in the driveway. But when she walked in the back door, he was waiting at the kitchen table.

"So," he said.

His voice was shaking. This wasn't going to go well.

She put down her purse and pulled a bottle of seltzer from the refrigerator. "So," she said. She glanced at him. His face was contorted with anguish. "I'm sorry, honey. I know

tonight had to be weird for you.”

“Weird?” he croaked. “You were hanging all over one of my friends tonight, Mom! In public! Do you know what everyone’s saying?”

“Quite a bit, I’m sure.”

She gathered her resolve and fixed him with a cool, compassionate gaze. “I know you think of your parents in a certain way. That’s natural. And seeing me with Logan had to have been very disturbing.”

“You guys were practically dry-humping each other on the dance floor,” he said sullenly. “Jesus, Mom, are you that hard up for a man?”

She frowned. “I’m not going to tolerate your disrespect, Zach.”

“Respect? *Respect*? You’re almost forty years old, Mom, and you were... you were...” He struggled to get the words out as his face turned red, throwing his blond hair into contrast. “Why should I respect you?”

Her face hardened. “Because I’ve raised you, fed you, clothed you and sent you to one of the finest colleges in the country? Because I stayed with a man I didn’t love just so you could grow up with both parents?”

Zach reeled back, his face draining of color. “I know you weren’t happy with Dad but ... you never loved him at all?”

She sighed. “I thought I did when we were in high school, Zach. But we were young and the truth is, neither of us knew what love was. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to hurt you, honey. But you’re eighteen and you have no idea how life can turn out—the mundanity and the sacrifices you end up making for someone you love.”

Her son blinked rapidly, muttered something incomprehensible and shoved his chair back. She didn’t stop him as he went up to bed.

## Chapter Eight

As the church bells of dawn services tolled across town, Gillian tossed restlessly in bed. Sleep came in thin, intermittent stretches, while anxious dreams jumbled her mind. As the brightness outlining her bedroom shades grew stronger, she abandoned the pretense of sleep altogether and got out of bed. Zach was spending Christmas day with her and Christmas night with Danny and Misty; she could sleep after he left. Right now she needed to salvage what was left of the holiday spirit and make sure her son had as wonderful a day as she could provide.

She sat on the edge of the bed and replayed their tense conversation last night. If she had ruined Christmas for him, she'd never forgive herself.

A soft knock on the door made her look up with surprise. "Yes?"

Zach's blond head popped in. "Are you up?"

"Yes," she said after a moment. "Come on in."

He brought her a glass of orange juice. She accepted it graciously and took a long, grateful sip before setting it on her nightstand. "Merry Christmas, honey."

"Merry Christmas, Mom."

He sat on her bed. She could tell from the workings of his facial muscles that he had something to say and so she waited without comment. Zach had always had trouble expressing himself when his emotions were aroused. She had learned over the years to be patient.

"I saw the glass polar bear ornament," he said at last. "Thanks. I didn't think you got one this year."

"You're welcome," she said cautiously. She hadn't thought he would notice such a thing. Maybe her son wasn't quite as detached from their family as he appeared. But she knew that wasn't really what was on his mind and so she waited again.

At last he said, "I just wanted to say that, you know, it's all right with me."

Her brows shot up with surprise. Was her son really going to accept this so easily?

"I don't like it," he said moodily. "But I know Chase is a good guy and... well, I always knew you and Dad weren't happy for a long time. I want you to find someone else, Mom. But why Logan?"

She chose her words carefully. "I don't know exactly what's going on between us," she said. "But it's something I want to explore and I hope you'll be okay with that. He is a good guy, Zach. He's just... a little young."

He scoffed. "A little?"

"He's only a few years younger than Misty," she pointed out gently.

"Yeah, I know. Why did both my parents turn out to be chicken-chasing pervs?"

She opened her mouth to protest then realized he was snickering. She smacked his arm. "Enough 'chicken' talk, whatever that means. It's Christmas and you've got presents to open."

Then Christmas really began. She put on their favorite CD of carols, poured them each a glass of eggnog, and turned on the tree lights. Watching Zach open his presents as eagerly as a child didn't feel as odd as she'd thought it would without Danny by their side. Yet she couldn't ignore the obvious reduction in gifts under the tree.



“Mom, this is so great. Thank you so much.” Zach was thrilled with his new video game system.

She couldn’t hold her tongue any longer. “Honey, I’m sorry I could only get you one game to go with it. In fact, I’m sorry in general that I couldn’t get you as much as I usually do. This Christmas—”

“This Christmas has been great.” Zach got to his feet and looked her in the eyes. “Mom, I know Dad took half of everything we had. I don’t expect you to shower me with gifts. That’s not what the holidays are about.”

She smiled gratefully. “I know they’re not, though I do love spoiling you. But I appreciate your understanding.”

He took a deep breath. “In fact, I’ve been thinking. School is school. If I transfer to the community college—”

“No, Zach, absolutely not!”

“Mom, don’t be a snob. I don’t need a fancy name on my college degree. The community college isn’t that bad.”

She adamantly shook her head. “Not the point. It may be a fine school, for all I know. But I want you to have the complete college experience, Zach, living on campus, joining clubs, meeting new people and having new experiences. If you live here and go to community college, you won’t have any of that. You’ll just be hanging around Oak Falls with your old high school buddies and living at home.”

“But my tuition is through the roof—”

“Let me worry about that,” she said firmly. “You’ll have adult responsibilities soon enough. Right now I want you to concentrate on getting the best education you possibly can.”

He studied her for a moment. Then he smiled. “Okay.” He pulled her down next to the tree. “It’s time for you to start opening your gifts.”

To her surprise, there was more than one box under the tree with her name on it. Usually Zach got her one gift each year; as he had gotten older, he had bought an additional gift and signed the tag from Danny. They tended to be ill-conceived presents, sweaters in horrible colors that didn’t fit or kitchen appliances she already possessed. But they had all touched her heart nevertheless. She knew most men weren’t good at buying women’s gifts; her son’s effort and sensitivity were the true gifts she received each Christmas.

This year, however, was a little different. As she opened one box, then another, she was amazed to find clothes she actually liked, along with a beautiful silver bracelet. Clearly he had saved a lot of his spending money to pamper her on this first post-divorce Christmas. Then she noticed something about the two sweaters. They both suited her to a T. The fabric, the cut, the color—everything. It was as if another woman had picked them out.

“Zach,” she asked slowly as suspicion dawned. “Did you pick these out yourself?”

Her son blushed to the roots of his blond hair. “I, uh, I had some help.”

Unbelievable. So apparently her son didn’t spend all his time at college drinking. That was good to know. “What’s her name?” she asked, watching him with a smile.

“Kara.” He blushed deeper.

A deep delight blossomed in her. So Zach was not entirely his father’s child after all—instead of living out Danny’s dreams of sleeping with one sorority girl after another,

he had chosen a steady relationship. With a girl who obviously had good taste—Gillian liked her already.

“You didn’t have to keep her a secret,” she chided him. “Why didn’t you tell me about her?”

He shrugged helplessly. “I just felt so bad for you, Mom... First Dad found someone else and then I felt like if I brought home my girlfriend, you’d be the only one alone on the holidays.”

She blinked back tears of appreciation. She had done so much better with Zach than she ever knew. He was ten times the man his father would ever be. “That was sweet of you,” she whispered, hugging him. “But she’s more than welcome here. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Obviously not, since you’re hitting on my friends.”

“Zachary!” She smacked his arm hard.

The sky had turned dark with impending snow. Zach built a fire as she fixed a late brunch of frittatas, fresh melon, roast potatoes and coffee cake. Gillian glanced at her watch. “What time are you expected over there for dinner?” she asked. “I don’t want to ruin your appetite.”

Zach groaned. “Are you kidding me? You can ruin my appetite or you can ruin my Christmas by making me eat Misty’s cooking.”

“Your appetite it is.”

She was just finishing the frittatas when the doorbell rang. They looked at each other. “That better not be your father,” she grouched. “I have you for a few hours still.”

Zach trotted down to the back porch. She pricked up her ears, expecting to hear Danny’s voice or perhaps Suzanne’s. Yet the door shut and silence resumed in the kitchen. Maybe one of the neighbors wanted him to shovel their walk. Then the door opened again.

“Mom?”

She turned. Zach was standing with Logan on the welcome mat. Seeing the two of them together, her son and her lover—two friends—gave her a start even as a jittery thrill raced through her.

“Merry Christmas,” she said. Her natural impulse was to step forward and deliver a blistering welcome kiss—but Zach’s presence kept her by the sink.

Logan seemed to struggle with the same constricted impulse as his eyes traveled up her body. Instead he smiled awkwardly and handed her a wrapped box. “Merry Christmas, Gillian.”

Her excitement at seeing him turned to shame. She hadn’t gotten him a gift or even a card; she hadn’t even thought of it in the rush of the last thirty-six hours. “Thank you,” she said, embarrassment coloring her cheeks. “I, uh...”

Logan sniffed the kitchen air with a plaintive expression. “It smells good in here.”

“You’re just in time to eat,” she told him. “Unless you ate already?” It occurred to her that she had never inquired after his own holiday celebration. She assumed he had relatives beyond his lush of a father.

“Uh, no. Just a bowl of cereal this morning.” He smiled sheepishly.

She and Zach exchanged a significant look. “Logan...” she said. “What do you and your dad normally do for Christmas?”

He shrugged. “He stayed over at his girlfriend’s last night. He hasn’t been home

yet.”

“So you’ve spent Christmas alone?” Gillian exclaimed, horrified.

He laughed shakily. “It’s nothing new, Gill. Aw, don’t look so shocked. It’s how I grew up. I didn’t have Norman Rockwell holidays like I bet you guys do.” He looked wistfully around the house decorations again.

A lump of sadness settled in her chest. In all of her worries over providing the “perfect” Christmas for Zach, she had forgotten that many people had far sadder, emptier holidays that featured no one at all. But instinct told her to refrain from turning maternal on Logan. He was proudly independent like her; they had that in common. “Tell you what,” she said, turning to pour him a glass of eggnog. “Brunch is almost finished. If you guys can clean up the wrapping paper and ribbons from the carpet, I’ll get the table set.”

*This is definitely the strangest Christmas ever*, she thought as they ate. Who ever would have guessed that their holiday meal would feature her, Zach and Logan Chase as her new man? It was just too odd to believe yet it seemed mysteriously natural as she and Zach regaled Logan with humorous stories of Christmas mishaps past. After brunch Zach and Logan disappeared into the den to play his new video game.

At last darkness fell and Zach departed to visit Danny and Misty. “I’ll, uh... spend the night over there,” he announced awkwardly and disappeared out the door.

The fire crackled in the echoing silence of the house. Sitting just two feet away from Logan on the sofa, Gillian suddenly felt as nervous and jittery as a girl on her first date. She could feel the passion in his gaze, yet couldn’t meet his eyes.

“You never opened your gift,” he said.

She blushed and hated herself for it. “Logan... You really didn’t have to get me anything.”

“But you’ve given me so much,” he said, lifting her hand and kissing it in an oddly old-fashioned gesture. “I just wanted to give you something back.”

She felt she was going to cry. It was a painful truth that at nearly thirty-seven this was her first experience of a man’s generosity. How pathetic that was, she thought—and how bewildering that the man to give it to her was not her husband or a mature man her age but a twenty-one-year-old not quite out of college.

He handed her the present, wrapped in royal blue paper and tied with a red ribbon. With trembling fingers, she opened the box. To her astonishment, two beautiful fire opal earrings sparkled up at her.

She gasped. “How—when did you get these?”

He leaned close to her. “I looked around the local pawnshops yesterday but your diamond earrings were already gone. I guess stuff like that goes fast around Christmas. So I suffered the mall madness to get you something to match your ring.” As she stared in shock at the earrings, he rubbed her neck with those firm, strong fingers that seemed to already know her body so well. “It killed me to hear you talk about pawning those earrings, Gillian. You’re obviously a woman who values tradition. You shouldn’t have to sell your family heirlooms to give Zach the kind of gifts he wants.”

She was stunned. “I... I don’t know what to say.” It was the most thoughtful, generous thing anyone had ever done for her.

“Do you like them?”

“I love them.” She blinked away tears. Her fingers shook as she fumbled with the box.

He helped her take them out and slip them into her ears. She reached for the compact in her purse to view them in the mirror, turning her head this way and that. The fiery lights of the opals reflected the gleam of the firelight and matched her ring perfectly.

She was still tongue-tied. "I... You shouldn't have done this, Logan, I... They must have cost a fortune."

He put two fingers over her mouth. "Gillian, don't. I'm not your ex-husband and you don't need to manage me or take care of me. I'm a man. Let me take care of you."

Now she was afraid she really would cry. "But Logan, I don't even know how to thank you."

"Then show me." He took her hands, squeezing them, and placed them on his legs. The hard curve of his thigh muscles sent a punch of desire through her. "Show me I'm not just a dumb, infatuated kid to you. Show me you feel the same way about me that I feel about you."

She looked tenderly at him before giving him a soft, light kiss. After a moment's pause, Logan's mouth opened slightly. Her lips mirroring his, she held her breath as his warm tongue fluttered against hers. Slowly they kissed and then kissed again. His hot mouth probing hers eagerly now, she returned his ardor as excitement swept through her body.

Logan pulled back and tugged his sweater over his head. She watched in open admiration as his perfect, hard chest came into view. If he had looked gorgeous in the light of the Christmas tree the other night, he looked even more divine tonight by firelight. Quickly she removed her own clothes until at last they were naked and facing each other before the crackling flames.

She kissed him again. As Logan's hands cupped her exposed breasts, she moaned in his mouth. Eagerly she ran her hands up his hard thighs, cherishing the muscles tightening beneath her fingertips. Yes, she would love to show him how she felt about him, over and over again.

Logan kissed her throat, running his tongue over the delicate beat of her pulse. She sighed, arching her back. Caressing each of her soft breasts, he returned to her mouth with a kiss that was urgent and more demanding. Gillian pressed herself against him, her nipples rubbing his chest. Sliding her hands over his tight buttocks, she drew him toward her again, feeling the hardness of his erection against her. A hot arousal flooded her pussy.

"I can't wait," she whispered, stroking his cock. "Fuck me now."

He didn't need to be asked twice. Tearing into a condom wrapper, he quickly sheathed himself, his gray-blue eyes burning with sexual need.

Yet as Logan climbed over her, she shook her head and slid away. "I want to be in charge tonight." Before he could speak, she straddled his lean hips. Logan's face contorted with yearning as she moved his engorged head against her clit with a naughty smile. All the while she ran her hands over his skin, reveling in the beauty of his body in the firelight.

"Gillian—I can't take it..."

With one expert lift of her hips, she slowly lowered herself down onto his shaft, closing her eyes as he slid up into her tightest, warmest core. No man had ever felt so breathtakingly hard inside her. She fought for control, forbidding herself to come, as the delicious tension in her pussy swelled to a pulsing demand.

She balanced her hands on his chest. Her eyes locked on his gorgeous face, she began to twist and turn on his cock. He groaned with torment but she continued to tease him, squeezing his shaft with her muscles until he reached forward for her hips. She slapped his hands away.

"I'm in charge, remember?"

Growling, Logan reached instead for her nipples. She arched her back, enjoying the combined sensation of his hands on her tits and his cock in her pussy, and then she began to ride him hard. Desperately, hungrily, she rode him with a smooth, rapid rhythm, loving the blissful friction of his cock against her walls.

"Don't stop," Logan moaned. "Ride me just like that..."

She could feel his balls high and tight beneath her. Her clit was throbbing with mounting ecstasy and as she reached down to stroke herself, Logan let out a howl of mindless joy. He grabbed her hips and began to move her pelvis up and down on him.

A wet, blinding heat exploded through Gillian, electrifying her nipples and clit. "Oh god," she groaned as her pussy clamped around his cock in throbbing spasms. With a fierce groan, Logan pushed up into her tightest depths and came spurting into her with a shout of release.

Still trembling from the force of her orgasm, she collapsed against his bare chest. Her entire body seemed to glow with a sensual, indolent ecstasy.

Logan stroked her hair. "You okay?" His voice was hoarse.

The firelight beat on her wet skin like an inferno. Fanning herself, she rolled away from its heat. "Fine," she panted. "Just way too hot."

"No kidding." Logan's black hair was rumpled and damp as he wiped his face. "Want to cool off?"

She nodded, already dreaming of a glass of cold wine.

Instead he scooped her into his arms. "Uh, Logan," she said with alarm as he headed into the kitchen. "If this is some trick with ice cubes, I don't..." She began to panic as he carried her through the back door. "Logan, what are you doing!"

"Cooling you off," he said and then the icy winter night was upon them, dancing along her naked skin like the kiss of a snow queen.

"Are you crazy?" she shrieked. "Put me down!"

Laughing, he jumped into a soft drift of new snow, still holding her in his arms. A white sprinkle momentarily blocked her vision until she brushed it from her eyes and got to her feet, huffing with indignation. She was too astonished to truly register the cold. All she knew was that she was naked outside on a snowy night for the first time in her life.

"You're insane!" she shouted. "It's got to be forty degrees out here!"

A small snowball rocketed into her hip, cutting off her next words. She spun around to see Logan's devilish grin. "Oh, you did not just do that," she growled.

"Oh, yes, I did," he mimicked in an identical tone. He aimed another snowball at her thigh.

"You little demon." She scooped up a fistful of snow, packed it together and sent it whistling at his chest. "That'll teach you to respect your elders."

"Hey, that hurt!" he protested.

She aimed another one at his legs, then darted behind her car, quickly compiling a small artillery of snowballs. She got off three in quick succession, hitting Logan in the arm, stomach and chest, before he was upon her. Shrieking, she ran back across the yard

and took cover behind the garbage cans. No sooner did she raise her head to spot his location than a snowball caught her in the ear, disintegrating all through her hair in icy trickles.

"You are so dead," she challenged and met him head-on in the yard.

Instead Logan pulled her back into the snow, covering her with his long, warm body as he held her tight. Every detail from his thudding heart to his well-muscled thighs felt acutely clear against her. Beneath her, the snow melted and gave way as he kissed her long and deep.

"You're crazy," she panted when they broke apart.

"This is where we started two nights ago," he murmured, kissing her neck. "In the snow, when I was trying to carry Zach and knocked you down."

She laughed, immune to the cold and the snow and everything but this playful, erotic joy between them. "Such an auspicious beginning."

He cupped her breasts. "It got me a beginning with you and that's what matters." He jumped to his feet, leaving light snowflakes to flutter down on her nipples and stomach. "Come on. I don't want you to catch pneumonia."

Inside Gillian located a bottle of wine and brought it upstairs to her Jacuzzi. This had been one of her first gifts to herself years ago when her catering business took off. She had never shared it with Danny, using it instead as a sensual retreat in which to enjoy her solitary fantasies. Now as she and Logan sank into its hot, bubbling waters, she realized how little all of her gifts had meant to her when she enjoyed them alone. It was much more gratifying to share the good things in life. She stretched out her legs to rest on either side of him and contentedly closed her eyes. She knew that she probably looked like a wreck right now between the heat of the fire and the snow but she no longer cared.

Logan picked up her feet and rubbed them underwater. "You make me feel like a kid again."

She half-opened her eyes. "That's supposed to be my line to you."

His mouth curved in a bittersweet smile. "Look, I might be young in years but I've been the grown-up at home since I can remember—making sure the electricity bill got paid, doing a paper route to buy my own clothes, making sure my father didn't burn the house down by passing out with a lit cigarette. I never got to be silly or spontaneous. Just responsible."

Gillian was touched. "I understand. I went from chemistry class to motherhood. Being with you is the most fun I've had in ... I don't know how long."

"Then here's our first New Year's resolution: to have more fun next year." Logan clinked his wine glass against hers.

"To have more fun." She squeezed him between her knees as they sipped.

It was getting late. Together they climbed out and towed off as she drained the Jacuzzi. To her sleepy surprise, slipping into her big luxurious bed with Logan felt natural as if he belonged right there beside her. As she succumbed to the relaxed fatigue within her, Logan took her hand. "One more resolution."

She smiled sleepily. "What's that?"

"That we make all of next year's holidays as good as this Christmas."

She laughed nervously. "Uh, Logan, that's projecting far in the future. Let's see where this is going first."

"I know where this is going," he said, kissing her hand. "Straight to the stars. But I

won't push you. Promise me a date for New Year's Eve and Valentine's Day at least."

She rolled back on her pillows and smiled at him. "New Year's with an option for Valentine's."

"You're a tough negotiator."

She stroked his cheekbone. His handsome face on the pillow would have been an unfathomable idea last week. Tonight it was the sweetest gratification of her heart. "That I am. But don't worry—I'll go easy on you."

He snuggled tight against her. "Merry Christmas, Gil."

"Merry Christmas and sweet dreams."

He kissed her shoulder. "You already did that when you made my adolescent dreams come true."

Gillian curled herself into his warm arms. Drifting off to sleep in a man's embrace was another first for her, something she had never done with her ex-husband or former lover, but it felt wonderful. She suspected that a future with Logan would bring many firsts for both of them, among them the ability to experience the sense of playful adventure that both of them had felt lost forever. Perhaps they would last as a couple and perhaps this passion between them would one day cool to a loving friendship; she knew well how much two people could change at any age. But she knew that whatever their fate, they would bring a fulfillment and joy to each other beyond compare.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Veronica Wilde is an erotic romance writer whose work has been published with Liquid Silver Books and Samhain Publishing. A copywriter by day, her true passion is writing fiction—particularly anything related to the paranormal. She currently resides in Arizona with her boyfriend and three cats.

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