



HARLEQUIN®

33

mini™

A photograph of a muscular man from the back, wearing a red Santa hat with white fur trim. His hands are clasped behind his head. The background is a blue, textured surface.

# Wrapped and Ready

Julie Kenner

# Wrapped and Ready

Julie Kenner



HARLEQUIN®

mini

Julie Kenner has always loved making up stories—particularly those with a happy ending. But she took a convoluted path to romance writing.

After working as a lawyer for eight years, she decided to try to focus some of her creative energy. Since Julie is a happily-ever-after aficionado who unabashedly cries during heartwarming commercials (especially any by Kodak or Hallmark), romance writing was a perfect fit.

When she and her husband moved from Los Angeles back to her hometown of Austin, Texas, Julie started to seriously write.

Though her first manuscript will never see the light of day (it's now in a box in the garage), her second sold to Harlequin Temptation after placing first in the Tampa Area Romance Authors' Contest.

Julie still practices law full-time, losing herself in her stories on evenings and weekends. When she's not working or writing, she loves spending time with her four cats (Madam, Tequila, Tiger, and Squeaky) and with the neighborhood cats who tend to hang around her house, all of which have been given names by Julie and her husband, Don (such as Black Kitty, Talkie-cat, Blue Eyes, and Fluffy).

She and her husband also love to travel — whether to small towns in the Texas hill country, or to more distant venues such as Ireland, London, or Paris.

Julie's a movie buff, enjoying everything from the lightest romantic comedy to the most action-packed adventure! You can see a list of her favorite romances (and her mother's favorites!) on her web site, [www.juliekenner.com](http://www.juliekenner.com).

Julie loves to hear from readers, and you can write her at P.O. Box 151417, Austin, TX 78715-1417 (if you'd like free goodies, send a SASE), or send an email to [julie@juliekenner.com](mailto:julie@juliekenner.com).

Can volunteer elf Annie turn department-store heir Brent from snooty Scrooge to sexy Santa?

A girl from the "wrong side of the tracks," Annie Silver's always been something of a loner, depending only on her best friend, Faith Howard, for friendship and her family for love. In school, she excelled academically, but she never tried to make friends with the "in" crowd, content to watch them from afar. And, in particular, she watched Brent Carrington.

Christmas is her favorite holiday, and every year she's worked holiday shifts at Brent's family's department store. This year, however, she's got something more than holiday work in mind. Now that she's about to leave her hometown of Bishop, Ohio, for Manhattan, she's determined to have what she's always wanted—Brent.

## Chapter One

Annie Silver smoothed the skirt of her supershort elf costume, wondering if perhaps she should have changed before the annual holiday party for the staff of Carrington's Department Store. Except for two other elves and Santa, everyone else wore typical workday attire.

And although Annie had been perfectly comfortable guiding children to Santa's lap or working the gift-wrap table, now she felt decidedly out of place.

She was pondering the possibility of sneaking off to raid the women's casual wear department when Faith flounced over, looking gorgeous as usual in a loose red dress that cinched at the waist. In one easy movement, she handed Annie a fresh glass of wine and leaned in close. "It's not easy being green," she whispered, then burst into peals of laughter.

"Thanks." Annie flashed her friend a wry glance. "You're making me feel so much better. I'm standing out like a sore thumb, and people are staring."

"No, Paul's the sore thumb, since he's Santa and all in red. You can have a green thumb. Except there aren't any plants around."

Annie couldn't help it; she laughed. "Whatever. They're staring."

"So what? You look hot. Green, but hot. And isn't that what you wanted?"

"I suppose." As she had every year since high school, she'd signed on as a temporary holiday employee because she absolutely adored everything about the Christmas season. This year, though, she was interested in one particular fringe benefit that came with the job—Brent Carrington. He'd never once noticed Annie. Not through four years of high school, not when she'd worked summers during college in his family's department store, and certainly never at the annual holiday party. This year, Annie hoped that would change.

Faith downed the last of her wine, then smirked. "Oh, please. Could you be more nonchalant? You've been planning this for months. You want him." She stepped back, her assessing gaze skimming up Annie's body. "And I'd say tonight you've got the goods to get him."

"I hope you're right," Annie said, even as her gaze scanned the guests, hoping for a glimpse of the man in question. Come January, Annie was leaving her hometown of Bishop, Ohio, for the Big Apple. But before she left, she intended to give herself the one thing she'd always wanted but couldn't have—Brent Carrington.

They may have grown up in the same town, but they had never lived in the same world. That was a simple fact of life. Brent was a *Carrington*—pronounced with nose in the sky and much pomp and circumstance. Annie's dad drove a truck and her mom waited tables. Their name might be Silver, but their lifestyle sure wasn't.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Annie said.

"I can." Faith squeezed her hand, and Annie gratefully squeezed back, accepting some of her friend's innate strength. "You played by the rules your whole life and it didn't get you anywhere. Good little Annie who nobody even noticed. And now you've finally grown up and decided to go after what you want. It worked for that job in New York, and it'll work for Brent Carrington, too."

Annie pulled in a deep breath, hoping Faith was right. She'd always been the good, quiet student. Straight A's. Doing exactly what the teacher said. No cutting corners. No taking wild risks. She hadn't even signed up for a pottery class because she was afraid that the grading was too subjective. And if she got a B—or, heaven forbid, a C—she'd lose her chance at a much-needed scholarship.

But while she might have been an academic success, elsewhere, she was a complete failure. Assertiveness had never been her forte, and she'd spent most of her youth on the sidelines. Mentally, she lifted her chin. Maybe the old Annie did, but not the new Annie. The new Annie had been gutsy enough to fly to New York, knock on doors, and wait in reception areas to get the interviews she wanted—and the ploy had worked.

She only hoped her ploy to get a single, passion-filled night with the one man she'd ever wanted would work as well.

A waiter passed by, and Faith grabbed a stuffed mushroom, then gestured across the room with it before popping it in her mouth. "Tha's him."

"What?"

Faith swallowed. "Over there. By Santa's village. Brent's here."

Annie sucked in a breath, a warm flush enveloping her entire body just from the thought of seeing Brent again. She was almost afraid to turn and actually look at him, for fear she'd melt right into the floor.

"Go on!" Faith gave her a little push on the shoulder.

"I don't think I can." At the moment, she was having trouble even forcing words past her lips.

Faith rolled her eyes. "Forget nerves. This is your last chance. Brent's the only guy I've ever known you to be truly hot for. You want this, and you deserve it. A last fling before you fly off into the sunset." She grinned. "So go get him, girl."

Faith was right; she did want this. She wanted Brent. "Wish me luck."

"Luck."

Trying to keep her breathing under control, she turned until she was facing Santa's Village. She didn't see him, and battled a wave of fear that he'd turned and left after Faith had spotted him. "Where is—?"

And then there he was. The words caught in her throat, and she closed her mouth. He'd moved to a far wall, secluded from most of the revelers, and was leaning casually against it. As she worked up her courage to approach, she let her gaze skim over him, taking in his lean physique and broad shoulders.

The Carringtons had always been the royalty of Bishop, and Brent's classic features certainly fit that bill. A perfect jawline, now sporting a five o'clock shadow, and ears she longed to trace with her fingertip. Even his

hair was perfect—dark brown and in place, except for one unruly bit that hung on to his forehead, as if telling the world that despite his breeding, Brent Carrington had a wild side, too.

But it was his eyes that had always intrigued her. Deep blue, like the ocean. Eyes that could look into a woman's heart and tell exactly what she needed. He'd never once turned those eyes on her. Tonight, though, Annie intended to make Brent look at her—and really see her.

Gathering her courage, she approached, hoping against hope that he would at least remember her. She moved closer, imagining that they'd come to the party together, and that he'd signaled for her to return to his side.

Stopping in front of him, she looked up, smiling tentatively. "Hi Brent." She'd hoped for a husky, sexy voice, but the words came out in a squeak.

At first, his face registered confusion, and she fought a flash of panic. But then his eyes cleared, and he moved toward her so he was no longer leaning against the wall.

"Annie Silver," he said, the corner of his perfect mouth pulling up into a smile. "You look fabulous."

"I'm glad you think so," she said, mentally crossing her fingers. Then, fortified by the several glasses of wine she'd downed over the last two hours, she pressed on. "Because I have a little something in mind for tonight."

"Oh?" So far, he hadn't bolted. Score one for her team. "What's that?"

"An early Christmas present to myself, actually." She sucked in a deep breath. *Now or never*, she thought,

drawing courage from the hint of interest she saw reflected in his eyes. "What I want in my stocking is *you*."

## Chapter Two

"Excuse me?" Brent's body tightened as Annie's lips curved around the word *you*. "I'm your present?" That couldn't be what she meant. Today simply wasn't his lucky day.

But she was nodding, and damned if his groin wasn't tightening in response. Which meant that Brent's day—hell, his entire week—was suddenly looking up.

"You heard me," she whispered.

He'd heard her, all right. Hell, every fiber in his body had heard her—and reacted accordingly. He just hadn't believed his ears. But if he'd heard right, Annie Silver actually wanted him in her bed. Considering the sultry expression in her pale gray eyes and the flush on her cheeks, he was sure he'd nailed the situation.

The only question that remained was *why*? Not that he was stupid enough to put a hold on the situation by asking.

"I...I'm sorry," she stammered, and he realized he hadn't answered aloud. "This was stupid. I should go—"

"No." The word burst from him. Reaching out, he grazed his fingers over her bare arm, delighting in the little moan that escaped her lips. "You can't say something like that to a man, and then leave."

"Too impolite?" A smile touched her mouth, and he was glad to see she'd relaxed just a bit. Good. He didn't know what was going on in her head, but if the evening was going to lead where he hoped, he wanted her relaxed.

"We all have to live by the rules of polite society."

"What if I don't feel like being polite?" she asked, moving closer still until he could feel her heat.

"Sweetheart, that's all right with me." His body tightened, and his erection pressed painfully against the confines of his slacks. He fought not to grab her around the waist and pull her close. They were somewhat secluded behind Santa's Village, but they were hardly alone.

"It is?" Surprise laced her voice, and once again he was struck by the dichotomy between the boldness of her actions and the hesitancy in her eyes.

"Come on." More roughly than he intended, he took her hand, leading her toward the elevator. He needed to get away from prying eyes and questioning glances.

He wanted what she wanted—no question about that. But he didn't intend to take it until he understood her motives. He didn't know if that made him chivalrous or self-indulgent, and he didn't care. Just now, he wanted to get to the bottom of this. Because only then could he lose himself inside of her. And that, frankly, was one damned strong motivating factor.

She followed in silence until they stopped, waiting for the elevator to appear. "Where are we going?"

"Someplace quiet." He had no idea where, though. The store was filled with employees. Not one square inch would provide any privacy.

"Brent!" His father's voice underscored the point. "There you are."

Trying for nonchalant, his lips curved in greeting. "Father." He nodded toward Annie. "You remember Annie Silver."

"Of course," he said, pleasantly. But the tightness in his father's face indicated another emotion. Winston Carrington III might be polite, but he was also a snob.

"Nice to see you, Mr. Carrington," Annie said. "And, uh, it was great bumping into you, Brent." She took a step away, and Brent realized her nerve was fading again. "I...uh...should go find Faith."

No way was he letting her get away. In one fluid motion he reached for her elbow, urging her back toward him. "I thought you promised to help me." He smiled at his father. "The champagne's running low. I'm going to go see how much we have left."

"Excellent." Winston gave him a hearty slap on the back, even while he frowned in Annie's direction. "I'll see you later, son. And tomorrow, I want you managing the toy department."

"I know, Father," he said flatly. The last thing he wanted was to spend his Saturday within 15 feet of Santa's Village and all the Christmas hokeyness his father had crammed into the store.

Then again, Annie would be there, so that would take some of the edge off the punishment. He cast a quick glance her way, taking in the so-short elf costume and green tights. The outfit hugged her curves, leaving nothing to the imagination, while at the same time managing to seem tame. Her hair hung down to her

shoulders in a mass of curls that he supposed destroyed the elfin image somewhat. But he was happy for the trade, especially since he intended to lose himself in those soft, brown waves.

The elevator arrived, and Brent ushered Annie on, then pushed the down button. He'd helped the caterers carry the last case of champagne up from the basement two hours ago, so he knew no one would disturb them.

As they entered the darkened room, he turned away from her to lock the door behind him. In that brief moment, she scampered away, ending up underneath the one low window that backed the alley.

The moonlight filtered in through the wire mesh, setting her skin to glow. Especially in her costume, she looked ethereal, beautiful. He was hard as a rock just from looking at her. Now he wanted to touch her...stroke her soft skin...tease her nipples....

"I'm sorry," she said, her eyes meeting his. He saw regret reflected there. Regret and uncertainty, but also a bit of pride. In one fluid motion, she pulled herself up and headed for the door. If she went through it, he wouldn't stop her. Her seductive words and glances had brought him to his knees, and he had no idea what her game was, but there was no way in hell he'd ever force a woman.

She dragged her teeth across her lower lip. "I was being silly." She shook her head as her fingers flipped the deadbolt. "I should never have—"

Abruptly, she quieted, her eyes wide as she turned to stare at him. "It won't open."

In an instant, he was by her side, her nearness disconcerting even as he focused on the door. "The time lock," he said, the words coming out in a rush as memory returned. "Father installed a time lock. Part of the new security system."

She sagged against the door. "When..."

"The morning. Seven, I think."

"Oh." Her lips formed a perfect circle, encasing the single, small sound.

"Tough break, huh?" He leaned against the wall, brushing her shoulder with his. Unless he'd missed his guess, she still wanted him. She'd just been overcome with a bout of conscience. But that wasn't something Brent intended to let get in their way. Not if he could help it.

"Someone might find us."

"They might, but..." He trailed off into a shrug. The implication was clear enough. It was a big party. No one would miss them.

She turned to face him, her eyes wide and soft and hesitant. He intended to erase all her hesitations. "Then we're stuck until morning."

"Afraid so." She closed her eyes as he traced her cheek with his finger, then dipped down to follow the delicate curve of her neck. "Any ideas how we can possibly entertain ourselves all night...?"

A small shiver shook her body, and when she opened her eyes, the longing he saw there cut straight to his gut.

"I shouldn't have started this."

"But you did." With infinite patience, he traced her cheek, delighting when she moaned under his touch.

"You started it, and now I want to finish it. So what's it going to be, sweetheart? Naughty? Or nice?"

## Chapter Three

*What did she want?* Brent's question hung in the air, and Annie fought to find a coherent answer.

Earlier, it had all seemed so simple—she wanted Brent. But she'd never expected her desire to be reciprocated. Hell, she'd expected him to balk. She'd flirt and tease and tempt him, but she hadn't actually expected him to say yes so easily. Had she?

But he *had* said yes. In fact, his affirmative response had been quite enthusiastic. Which meant that her foolhardy, wine-induced plan was suddenly a reality. And she had absolutely no idea what to do.

"Annie?" His amused grin made him look even sexier than usual. "I sure hope you answer me tonight, because I really don't want to waste this opportunity."

She stumbled backward, unable to think. His scent did something to her insides. Something wonderful, yes, but it made it hard to keep her thoughts in order. "I should never have—"

"Come on to me so strong you just about melted my insides?" Amusement danced on his moonlit features. "So you said. But you did. And I liked it. And now I want to know what you want to do about it."

He'd moved toward her as he spoke, and now she was backed up against a stack of boxes, unable to escape.

What she wanted was to press against him and demand that he kiss her with all the passion she saw reflected in his eyes.

But what she should do...well, that was something entirely different. Before, she'd just wanted Brent. But bumping into Brent's father had reinforced how different their lives were—and that she was playing with fire. Ultimately, she'd be the one who got burned.

She couldn't conjure words, and when his finger curved under her chin, tilting her head back, her silence was assured. A little voice in the back of her mind screamed that she should protest, run, *anything*, to get away.

But she wanted this, Lord help her, she did, and when he lowered his lips to hers, all she could do was moan and open her mouth in silent invitation.

His arms tightened around her waist, pulling her against him into the warm curve of his body. "Are you sure? If you're not, say so now, because, dammit, Annie, I've wanted this for too long. I don't think I can stop if this goes much further."

"Wanted this?" Wanted *her*?

Common sense told her she should stop this. But instead of protests, she heard her own voice, husky and raw, whispering, "I'm sure. Don't stop. Please, don't stop."

He took the invitation to heart, tasting and teasing in a frenzy of passion that left her breathless. Her own enthusiasm matched his, and she wriggled closer as his hands cupped her butt, pressing her tight against him, so

tight he would have entered her had it not been for their clothes.

"Please," she whispered.

"Please, what?"

She met his eyes, wanting to lose herself in the pleasure those rich blue irises promised. "Touch me."

He needed no more persuasion, and his hands went to work on her costume, undressing her slowly and sensually. Somehow, he managed to lose his own clothes, as well, and before she knew it, he was right there, hot and ready. And she was so very willing.

"I want you, Annie."

"I know." She could see and feel the hard evidence of his desire. "I want you, too."

Silently, she demanded that he enter her, but instead he stroked her breasts, his mouth warring with hers, his sex teasing and tormenting her.

"This is your show, sweetheart," he whispered, and she realized he was waiting for her. It wasn't enough to say she was sure, she had to show him, too. Brent wasn't about to do anything she didn't want to do.

She broke the contact only long enough to fumble for her purse and pull out a condom. He moaned as she sheathed him, but his moan was even more primitive when she placed his hands on her hips, urging him to lift her up, then bring her down, burying himself in her slick heat.

She gasped, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his body as they moved together. Her back was still against the boxes, and she oddly wondered if they would topple over during their lovemaking.

But soon all silly thoughts left her head, leaving her thinking only of Brent, and the way his body felt against hers. A glorious pressure built inside her, and she cried out, shaking and trembling in his arms as he thrust deeper and harder, finding his own climax before they both sank to the ground.

She cuddled next to him, delighted when he kissed the tip of her nose. In a few moments, he surprised her by pulling a sheet over them. "Linen delivery," he explained. "I'll buy this sheet in the morning."

Spent, they snuggled together, and she tried to stay awake, but the warm, coziness of his arms overwhelmed her and she fell asleep, his gentle kiss on her forehead the last thing she remembered.

\* \* \*

Light was creeping in the tiny window when she awoke in the circle of his arms, and for a moment she just lay there, breathing his musky scent, and wondering if she'd ever again in her life feel so cherished. So loved.

*Loved?*

The veil of sleep vanished, and she was fully awake. What on earth had she done? In her ridiculous fantasy, she'd planned on a seduction where she was in charge. She'd get her wish—Brent in her bed—and she'd get him out of her system.

Except nothing had worked out the way she'd planned. Instead of getting him out of her system, he was more ingrained than ever.

Damned inconvenient, considering she was moving to New York in just a few days—and since nothing long-term could ever develop between a Carrington and a

Silver. Heck, he'd practically admitted as much when he'd confessed to noticing her in the past, but never approaching her.

No, the best thing to do was cut her losses.

Carefully, she rolled out from under his arm, then stood up and climbed back into her costume. Brent stirred once, but didn't awaken.

Before she could change her mind, she headed for the door. Without the time lock, the door opened easily, and she paused to look back at him. She wanted to stay, but staying meant complications. And right now, she needed to follow the path she'd already set for herself. Say her goodbyes, pack her bags, and move to New York.

And she might as well start right now.

With tears welling in her eyes, she pressed her fingers to her lips, then blew him a kiss.

"Goodbye, Brent," she whispered. "And thank you."

## Chapter Four

Brent stretched, seeking Annie's warmth even from the depths of his dreams. *Nothing*. His eyes flew open, and he bolted upright, a choice curse escaping his lips.

She was gone. The most wonderful night of his life, and the woman he'd shared it with had walked out on him.

Frustrated, he banged the back of his head against the stack of boxes, trying to decide what to do next. Not that there was really any question. For years, he'd wanted a taste of Annie Silver, and now that he'd had one, he didn't intend to give her up. She was sweet and warm and her honest passion had driven him to the brink. He'd never met a woman like her, and he wasn't about to let her walk away without a fight.

Unfortunately, Annie seemed to have a different idea. But Brent hadn't suffered through an M.B.A. program without learning a few things about negotiating. And the first rule was to know your opponent. He knew Annie. He'd watched her for years, wishing he'd been brave enough to assert himself against his father and ask out the smartest, sweetest girl in the school. But he never had, and now he was kicking himself for it.

And the one thing he still didn't know was why she'd come on to him in the first place, or, more important, why she'd walked away.

But he did know someone who might.

\* \* \*

"Give it up, Faith. I know you know what she's up to." Faith and Annie had been inseparable since elementary school, and even now they were roommates.

Faith held up a finger as she handled the bill for one of the regulars at her little café by the river. As soon as the customer left, she focused on him. "What do you mean 'what's she up to'?" She looked him up and down, clearly taking in his rumpled outfit. "Seems to me you figured that out last night."

If she was trying to fluster him, it wasn't going to work. "I figured out that she wanted a fling. Believe it or not I'm pretty astute at picking up on those subtle little clues."

Faith's mouth twitched, and he knew he'd scored a few points.

"What I hadn't figured on was her bolting. What the hell's up with that?"

"How should I know? Nerves, maybe?"

"She wasn't too nervous to try to seduce me."

"Maybe she thought you didn't want to be seduced." As soon as she spoke, Faith's shoulders slumped, and her eyes darted away. Brent picked up on the signals easily enough—she hadn't meant to reveal that little tidbit.

But why would Annie want to seduce him if she didn't think he'd want her? Or maybe she thought she could convince him—he was a guy after all—but that the most

that would happen would be one night of hot and heavy lust. Something simple they could walk away from.

But nothing about last night had been simple. He'd never experienced the kind of closeness he'd felt with Annie, and he was certain she'd felt it, too—and it had scared her enough to send her scurrying away.

The door to the apartment over the café burst open, and Annie bounded in. She stopped cold the second she saw Brent. He clutched the countertop, fighting the urge to go toward her, to hold her.

She swallowed, the flush on her cheeks making her look more adorable as she calmly walked toward them. "Brent. Hi." She licked her lips. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you. And trying to figure out why you left."

"I..." Her eyes darted to Faith, but her friend only held up her hands and backed away.

"Don't drag me into this. I already said more than I should have."

Annie's shoulders slumped. "Faith..."

"Don't blame her," Brent said. "I threatened her with bodily harm."

Her expressions shifted, and though she tried to hide it, he could see the flash of amusement under her tight features.

"Neither one of you should be talking about me," she said.

Brent moved closer, overcome by the urge to touch her. "Why not, when you're such an enticing subject?" He

took her hand, cutting off her answer. "I want you, Annie. I thought I made that perfectly clear last night."

Her lips pressed together before she lifted her eyes to his. "We had our one night." She took a deep breath. "I'd appreciate it if we could chalk it up to hormones and wine and a party atmosphere and just be friends."

"Not gonna happen." He urged her closer, pleased when she didn't fight his gentle tug. "You started this, sweetheart. And I don't think we're anywhere near finished."

\* \* \*

Annie's pulse beat an unsteady rhythm as Brent's deep blue eyes bore down on her. When she'd come up with her plan to seduce him, she'd never imagined the kind of connection that had sparked between them in the basement.

She'd run because she was scared. And now, because nothing between them could be permanent, she had to keep running.

"It can't work, Brent," she said as soon as he'd steered her into a corner booth.

"What can't?"

"You. Me. There can't be anything permanent here."

"Why not?"

"This isn't Twenty Questions."

Leaning across the table, he clasped her hands. "I want to know. Why can't it work?"

She tried to remember all the reasons—it was hard to think with him touching her. "For one, we come from totally different backgrounds."

He made a noise in the back of his throat, and she wondered if that argument had missed its mark.

"My job, for another. I'm moving in January."

That excuse seemed to resonate a little better. "I thought you loved the library."

"I do. Except that my master's is in rare books. Not a whole lot of use in Bishop." She sat up a little taller, still proud of herself for landing her new job. "I'm going to work at the Metropolitan Museum. I'm moving to New York."

His eyes widened, and he grinned, as if she'd just said she wanted to move in with him, rather than that she was moving all the way to Manhattan. Odd.

"So you really did want one wild night. And now you're just going to walk away."

*No!* That might have been her plan, but now so much had changed. Except...she wouldn't give up her dreams, not even for Brent. So in the end, she simply said, "Yes."

"How long before you move?"

"Right after the holidays."

He slid closer, following the curve of the bench seat until his hand rested on her knee, his warmth tantalizing even through the jeans she'd changed into. "Then I suggest we make the most of the time we have." He traced a finger up her thigh, the light touch sending shivers through her body.

"What—?" She broke off, unable to concentrate. "I don't understand."

"You wanted a hot time. So that's what I'm proposing. We'll have a fling hot enough to melt Frosty the Snowman." He caught her eye, his grin full of decadent

possibilities. "I'm proposing a full-blown Christmas affair."

A fling? Days and nights in Brent's arms before she left for the harsh streets of Manhattan? Leaving would be harder, the more accustomed she became to being in his arms. But right then, she didn't care about later. She only cared about now. And about Brent.

"All right," she said, flashing him what she hoped was a seductive smile. "Until I leave, I'm all yours."

## Chapter Five

*All yours.* Her words echoed as they drove to his apartment. As soon as she'd uttered those two simple words, his entire body had reacted, practically bursting into flames merely from the anticipation of touching her again. He had no idea how this woman could affect him so deeply. He only knew that somehow they had made magic together, and he intended to keep the magic alive.

Pushing open his door, he ushered her in.

"This is nice," she said politely, her gaze skimming over the bare walls and boring furniture.

Brent shrugged. He'd never intended to make the apartment home; he'd simply detoured when his father had insisted he come back home after receiving his M.B.A.

Silently, he took her hand. Their night in the basement had been wild and fast. This time he intended to take it slower. With nice little amenities like a mattress. And pillows.

When they reached his bedroom, her eyes danced with mischief. "And this is even nicer."

"Glad you think so. I thought we might be spending some time here."

She glanced at her watch. "Not too much time, unfortunately. I'm working the evening shift at the gift-wrap table."

He slipped his finger into the waistband of her jeans and tugged her closer, delighting when she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Yeah? Well, right now, I'm interested in unwrapping."

"Oh? Maybe you better demonstrate so I know just what you have in mind."

His fingers fumbled at the button of her jeans, then slowly tugged the zipper down as she drew in one short, quick breath. "I think that can be arranged."

As he slipped his hands down inside her jeans and over her hips, he wanted to take it slowly and sensually, but there was no way he could finesse the moment. Not with her sexy little wriggle as she helped him urge the jeans down over her hips and thighs. Then, when she was standing there in only her sweater and panties, well...certainly there was no going slow then.

And when she peeled the sweater over her head and stood before him in just her underwear, Brent groaned, deep and desperate.

"You're torturing me here, Annie."

"I'm torturing you? I thought you were doing the unwrapping." She stepped forward, her hands going to his zipper. "Or are you passing off that job?"

No use. He couldn't take it. Her nearness was intoxicating, and he caught her mouth with his, his hands pressing against the small of her back as he pulled her close against him. The heat between them blossomed,

and she moaned, grinding against him in a rhythmic motion designed to drive him completely insane.

Somehow he managed to maneuver them to the bed, stripping off his shoes and jeans as they went. At the moment, he wanted nothing more than to sink deep inside her, and the fact that his clothes hadn't dissolved from sheer will frustrated him.

"Please," she whispered, her fingers fumbling at the waistband of his boxers. *"Now."*

The passion in her voice went straight to his heart, even as the blood rushed to other parts of his body. "Whatever the lady wants," he whispered, as his fingers caressed her soft, secret parts.

"The lady wants you," she said, her fingernails digging into his back as she urged him closer. "She wants you now."

He'd wanted to take it slow, but no human male could resist, and Brent was only human. With one quick thrust, he drove into her, losing himself to the exquisite pleasure. She bucked up, meeting him thrust for thrust, their bodies becoming slick with effort, until her climax matched his and he collapsed on top of her, his body limp and spent.

"Mmm." She turned her head, nuzzling his shoulder.

With his thumb and forefinger, he traced a lazy pattern around her nipple. "I'd planned to take it slow. But you're a hard woman to resist."

"Yeah?" She rolled back, her eyes dancing with playfulness. "We still have a little time left. You wanna try again? They say practice makes perfect."

"Sweetheart," he said, rolling her on top of him, "I think you just made me an offer I can't refuse."

An hour later, she dozed beside him, her skin glowing in the afternoon sun that crept through the shades. And as he watched the gentle rise and fall of her chest, Brent knew one thing for certain—no matter what he'd told Annie, he wanted more than a Christmas fling. He always had.

Now he just had to figure out how to convince Annie that he really wanted her by his side. For good.

\* \* \*

They held hands during the drive to Carrington's Department Store, the warmth from his fingers spreading through her body all the way down to her toes. Somehow, the moment was even more intimate than the glorious three hours they'd just spent together in Brent's apartment.

"I think this may be the first time I wish I could miss working in Santa's Village."

He turned away from the road long enough to look at her, his cheek dimpling with his smile. "I'm flattered. You've worked there every Christmas since high school." He paused, then looked back at the road. "Why have you?"

Though the question surprised her, his voice held a note of genuine curiosity, and she tried to come up with an answer—something more articulate than *it feels right*. That wasn't a reason for anything. Heck, Brent felt right, but that didn't mean they were going to have a happily-ever-after. Did it?

She shook off the thought, focusing instead on his question. "A lot of reasons, I suppose. But mostly, I love Christmas. The spirit of giving and sharing. The looks on those kids' faces when they sit on Santa's lap. Maybe it sounds corny, but it's heartwarming."

Brent pulled into the employee parking garage, his face passive. "I suppose."

She shifted in her seat to look at him better. "What, Ebenezer? You don't agree?"

She'd expected a smile and a quick denial. Instead, he simply looked sad.

"Let's just say that in my experience, Christmas has been equated with profit margins. And Christmas Eve was spent waiting for Dad to get home from closing the store and checking the books. I don't think I saw him on the night before Christmas once until I was 16 and started working at Carrington's. To me, it always seemed as if the customers were racing to see who could buy bigger and better, and my dad was right there, cheering them on. I don't think that's what the spirit of Christmas is all about."

"No, it's not," she agreed.

"And on Christmas Day my dad never even made an appearance. Just slept until well after lunch, too exhausted to do any sort of family stuff. Not a very Norman Rockwell-esque situation." He shrugged. "Let's just say Christmas isn't my favorite time of the year. Somehow, it all seems like a big con to me."

His words were harsh, but he squeezed her hand, as if trying to assure her that he was fine with the situation. But fine or not, it seemed so sad, and as she followed him

into the store, Annie tried to imagine what the holiday season would be like without her family traditions. Pretty miserable, she decided, and she felt sorry for the little boy Brent had been who'd missed out on Santa and cookies and all the stuff she'd grown up with.

Right then, she made up her mind. Before she went to New York, she'd just have to make sure that Brent got the chance to experience some good, old-fashioned Christmas cheer. And she was just the girl to show him.

## Chapter Six

Brent frowned as he watched Annie working at Santa's Village, looking good enough to eat in her little green elf costume. He shook his head. It was all so commercial, and yet she seemed to be having the time of her life. Her face glowed as she chatted with the children in line to see Santa. And she handled every package she wrapped as though it contained a Faberge egg, picking out the perfect paper and making sure the package sparkled even though the service was free.

Baffling.

"Excuse me." A gray-haired woman tapped his elbow. "I'm trying to find a gift for my grandson. It's this little electronic gizmo that plays games."

Brent stifled a smile. He might not normally work in toys, but he knew Game Boy when he heard it described. He wanted to tell her that she should get her grandson something cheaper and spend more time with him, but he didn't know this woman and he couldn't presume to lecture her. So in the end, he showed her the display.

Immediately, her face fell. "Oh, dear."

"Problem?"

"I didn't realize they were so expensive."

At least she wasn't reaching into her purse for a credit card with the attitude that debt at Christmas wasn't really debt.

"Thank you anyway, young man."

She was walking away when he noticed her threadbare clothes and her scuffed-up shoes. He had no idea what possessed him, but before he could stop himself, he'd called out to her to wait.

She paused, looking back at him with a curious expression.

"This is completely my fault," he said. "I don't usually manage this department, and I forgot to have the staff put up the sale sign." He held out the box to her. "This one's on sale today only for \$15."

A huge discount, but the store could afford it. And if his dad disagreed, well, Brent would cover it from his own pocket.

The second he spoke the words, he knew he'd made the right decision. The woman's face lit up like...well, like a Christmas tree.

"I can just about afford that." She took the box that he'd initialed with the new price and clutched it to her chest. "My grandson has to spend Christmas in the hospital. I don't normally approve of these kinds of toys, but he wants one, and I think it will be a nice distraction for him when the family can't be there."

Brent was probably imagining it, but he thought that when she walked away there was a new spring in her step.

"That was an awfully nice thing you just did."

*Annie's voice.* He turned around to see his favorite elf grinning at him from behind a stack of Harry Potter merchandise.

"Could be habit-forming," he said.

She eased over, taking his hand and then urging him toward the employee break room. "Sure could. You just might end up enjoying Christmas after all."

He shrugged. She was teasing, but there was truth to her words. "I've been watching a woman I know. And thinking. She's not too bad a teacher."

"Yeah?" She slipped closer, and his arms automatically closed around her waist. "I can think of a few things you could teach me." She brushed her lips over his. "I've got five minutes left on my break. Maybe a quick lesson is in order?"

Not one to miss an opportunity, Brent leaned over and locked the door. The other employees could wait five minutes for a break.

And once those five minutes were up and he lost Annie to Santa, Brent intended to go have a little talk with his father about what Brent did and didn't want.

For one thing, he didn't want to work in sales. He never had. For another, he wanted Annie, and he intended to get her. His father's approval be damned.

He was 28 years old. It was about time he set the record straight.

\* \* \*

Brent's fingers stroked her back, leaving a trail of fire that eliminated any lingering chill from the December air. He'd said they were only taking a five-minute break, but

Annie wanted so much more than that. Ten minutes, an hour...

*A lifetime.*

She banished the thought. They'd agreed to a fling, and she was content to keep her end of the bargain. Well, maybe not content, but she knew she had no choice. Already, she'd shared more with Brent than she ever thought possible. She should count her blessings. She should rejoice.

Maybe. But the truth was, she only felt sad.

"Penny for your thoughts," he whispered, his breath tickling her ear.

"Nope. I'm not that cheap." She grinned up at him, trying to shake the mood, wanting just to enjoy the moment. "Just hold me, okay?"

He seemed to understand what she needed, and he pulled her tight, surrounding her with his strong arms as she buried her face against his chest. An innocent touch, but it burned through her just the same.

She clung to him, swaying slightly in his arms, knowing that, for the moment at least, she was secure.

His lips grazed her forehead, moving down to skim over the top of her ear, sending a swarm of shivers racing through her body. Sweet torture, but he kept it up, exploring her ear and her neck with his tongue, his breath hot against her throat.

Her pulse picked up tempo, and she felt her heart beat against his chest, barely cognizant of where he ended and she began. "Brent," she murmured.

"I know," he said. And she was certain that he did understand. They'd come together so fast, and yet he already meant so much to her.

"Will I see you after work tonight?"

"Sweetheart, you'd be hard-pressed to keep me away." He stroked her cheek. "What is it about you? So quiet and sweet, and yet you've got my insides all whipped up like a tornado."

"Just my innate charisma, I guess," she said with a grin. She hoped she sounded lighthearted, but the fact was, he was describing the very way she felt about him. And the knowledge that they were so in sync was almost as erotic as his soft touches and caresses.

"That's gotta be it," he said, pulling her close. They held each other, exploring, tasting, and touching, until he pulled away, gently framing her face with his hands. "Five minutes," he said, as she silently cursed whoever invented the very first clock. "Back we go."

She nodded, and he kissed the very tip of her nose.

The moment was so sweet, so tender, and yet she couldn't help the tears that welled in her eyes. In just a few days, she was leaving for New York for a new life. A better life.

But could it really be better if it meant that she'd be alone?

## Chapter Seven

*Bang, bang, bang!*

Brent frowned, confused until he realized the steady beat was coming from someone knocking at the door. His five minutes of bliss in the break room was over, and now it was time to go back to work.

Looking slightly embarrassed, Annie straightened her costume and her hair and stepped back, then took a seat at the table and started perusing a two-year-old copy of *People* magazine.

Hiding a grin, Brent flipped the lock, and Paul barged in, still in his Santa suit, the green of his face almost matching the tint of Annie's elf costume. Immediately, Annie was up and helping him into a chair.

"What's wrong?"

"Dinner," Paul managed, his voice barely a squeak. "At least, I hope that's all it is. But we've got signs all over the place that say Santa'll be back at eight, but I'm not sure I'm even going to be alive at eight."

He lurched forward then, and rested his head between his knees. "Someone just shoot me now."

Brent caught Annie's eyes, easily reading her expression. She was concerned about Paul, but she was just as concerned about the disappointment of those kids.

Well, what the heck? His moment of Christmas spirit with the old woman and the Game Boy had worked out well. Surely this wouldn't be too bad.

Before he could change his mind, he started peeling off his jacket. "I hope you're not contagious. And I hope that's stuffing in that suit, because otherwise it's just going to fall off me."

Annie's mouth opened, but no sound came out.

Paul's head rose just slightly. "You're going to..."

"Yup. Start stripping. Looks like I'm playing Santa."

Surprisingly, the next three hours passed remarkably fast. So fast, and so enjoyably, in fact, that he barely even noticed when Annie came over and whispered that her shift was over and that she'd see him the next day. Right at the moment, he'd been preoccupied with a precocious seven-year-old determined to explain to him why Blitzen was the best reindeer of the bunch.

Now that the kids were gone and the store was closing, Brent was surprised by how invigorated he felt. All in all, it was a week full of surprises. First Annie, now Christmas.

And there were a few more surprises coming, too. Or there would be if he had his way. For one thing, Brent still needed to talk to his dad.

Then he intended to pop over to the jewelry department to buy the perfect Christmas present for his favorite elf.

\* \* \*

"I'm hopeless, Faith," Annie said. "Absolutely hopeless." Which was an understatement. She hadn't stopped thinking about Brent in hours. He'd permeated

her brain and was oozing out her pores. The man was in her essence, and she didn't know what to do about it.

Faith leaned back against her sofa cushions and popped the top of her beer. "I'll agree with that. What are you hopeless about today?"

Annie stopped pacing in front of the doorway that led down the stairs to Faith's café just long enough to shoot her friend a dirty look. "What do you think?"

Faith put a finger against her cheek and cocked her head. "Hmm. Let me think. Brent?"

"Very astute."

"So what's the problem? From my perspective, you two are hitting it off just fine. Mission accomplished and all that jazz."

"Except I think I got a little bit more than I bargained for."

Faith took another drink, then spread her arm across the back of the couch. "Oh? Tell."

Annie licked her lips, sure that she was blushing. "I think I'm falling in love with him."

Faith laughed. Not exactly the response Annie had been expecting.

She propped her hands on her hips. "Do I laugh at your love life?"

"I'm sorry," Faith said, clearly trying to hold back another round of chuckles. "It's just that that's so yesterday's news."

Annie frowned. "Excuse me?"

"You know. Old news." Faith waved her hand in the air. "I could tell just from watching you two the other day. This is the real deal."

She wanted to deny it, to say she couldn't possibly be falling in love with Brent Carrington. But as fast as it had happened, as whirlwind as it had been, she knew it was true. Brent matched her and filled her in a way no other person ever had. They may have only spent a short time together, but she knew without a doubt that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

"I guess the bigger question is, what are you going to do about it?"

Sucking in a deep breath, Annie stood up straighter, hoping good posture would give her the courage she needed. "I only see one option, really. I mean it's a risk. He might not want me." She licked her lips, not liking that prospect at all.

"So what are you saying?"

"Just that as much as I want to move to New York, I want to make this work. I need to at least try." She ran her fingers through her hair, sure in her heart that Brent was worth the sacrifice, and hoping beyond hope that he loved her, too. "I'm thinking I'll keep my job and stay here in Bishop."

Faith's eyes went wide as she focused on something over Annie's shoulder.

"Are you sure that's what you want to do?" The familiar deep voice drifted over her from behind, and her pulse increased as her body reacted automatically to his nearness.

She spun around, wondering just how much of their conversation he'd heard. "Brent! Um, hi."

"Am I interrupting?"

"No, of course not."

"The door was open. I just walked up."

Annie exhaled in relief. If he'd just arrived, he must not have heard *everything*. It might be the truth, but she wasn't yet willing to share her realization that she was falling in love with this man. Not until she was sure that the feeling was reciprocal.

Brent's earlier words settled in, and Annie faced him square on, her brow furrowed. "What do you mean 'am I sure that's what I want to do?'"

"Staying here," he said, and her stomach tightened. Had she read him wrong? Was this really just a fling for him, and he wouldn't welcome having her near? "Considering your dream job's in New York, staying here seems silly."

"Silly?" She clenched her fists, hoping against hope that he wasn't about to tell her there was nothing between them.

"Well, sure," he said, taking her hands in his. His dimple flashed, and the band around her heart loosened. "What's the point of you being here if I'm living in Manhattan?"

## Chapter Eight

Annie held her breath, wondering if she'd heard him right. "You're moving to New York?"

"That's my plan." Brent shrugged. "I was kind of looking forward to you being there, too. But..." He trailed off, amusement dancing in his eyes.

Annie opened her mouth, but couldn't seem to form words.

From behind her, Annie heard the shuffle of pillows. "I think that's my cue to exit," Faith said, then headed down the stairs.

He held out a hand for her, and she came willingly, knowing that in his arms was exactly where she wanted to be—and exactly where she belonged.

Slowly, as if savoring every tiny touch, he traced his finger down her neck, following the V line of her sweater. The room was toasty warm, but she shivered anyway.

His fingers dipped under the cashmere, then traced the lace of her bra. She moaned, low and in the back of her throat. *More*. She wanted to beg for more, but her voice didn't work, and so she could only hope in silence that he understood her desire.

Of course he did, and she stifled a groan of pure pleasure, as his rough fingertips met the soft skin of her breast. He grazed her nipple, teasing with the lightest of touches designed to drive her over the edge. "Oh, Brent," she whispered.

"Mmm?"

She wanted answers—wanted to know why he was moving to New York. But she knew he'd tell her soon enough. And right then, she couldn't think anyway. Couldn't even focus. Heck, she could barely form words, managing only to force out her simple request—"More."

With a low, guttural groan, he dipped his lips to her neck, tasting and teasing as he worked his way lower. "Are you very attached to this sweater?" he whispered.

In answer, she grabbed the hem and pulled it over her head. "You can burn it for all I care."

He laughed. "I don't think that's necessary," he said, then kissed a trail from her neck to her breast, teasing the sensitive skin.

His tongue laved her nipple, her skin puckering in a sweet parody of pain. He was torturing her with his hands, stroking and exploring. And with every little touch, she seemed to melt a little bit more.

He still wore a jacket and T-shirt, and she reached out, urging the jacket over his arms until it dropped to the floor. She concentrated next on her bra, needing to feel nothing but Brent and air against her skin. Releasing the clasp, she wriggled out of the thing, even while managing to wriggle closer to Brent.

"Take your shirt off," she demanded, wanting to melt under his heat.

He complied, then urged her to the couch. She tugged at his waistband. "You need to lose these."

"A woman who knows what she wants," he said. "I like that."

"Yeah?" She cocked her head. "And what is it you want?"

"I figured that was pretty clear by now. I want you, Annie," he said, his voice low and raw. "I want you now, and I want you in New York."

\* \* \*

It took every ounce of strength in Brent's body not to make love to her right there. Etiquette, however, suggested that he wait until they reached his apartment, and so they simply cuddled together, curled up in each other's warmth and enjoying the last few minutes before they braved the cold and let Faith have the apartment to herself.

As he stroked her skin, he knew he'd never be happier than when he was with Annie. She made him feel whole. As if he'd been looking for the other half of himself and had finally found it in her.

With a little sigh, she shifted off his lap, nestling against him on the couch as he tightened his arms around her. After a few minutes, she looked up, her eyes wide and questioning.

"Why?"

"Because I want to be near you. I don't want to lose you, Annie. Not ever. Not if I can help it." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the long, velvet box. "Merry Christmas."

Her eyes lit up. "But I haven't gotten you anything."

"You've still got time. According to my dad, there are plenty of shopping days left." He nodded to the box. "Open it."

She did, revealing the delicate chain and the silver heart pendant. "Brent, it's beautiful. Thank you."

"You'll always be in my heart." He grinned, lazily stroking her thigh. "And I hope you'll be in my bed, too."

She laughed. "You won't get any argument from me." She paused then, licking her lips.

His heart tightened. Surely she wasn't having doubts. He'd bet his soul that she felt as he did, but what if he'd been wrong? "But?" he urged, taking the plunge.

"But New York." She sat up, pulling away, but not letting go of his hands as she faced him. "How can you just pack up and leave?"

"Do you want me there?" He had to hear her say it.

"Of course. But you've got your job here. The family business. Everything."

"You mean more." He sighed, then kissed her palm. "I never wanted to work at Carrington's. But Dad pushed, and I gave in, and I ended up with an M.B.A. I didn't want and didn't need. I had a long talk with him this afternoon. He doesn't completely agree, but he's supporting my decision."

"What *did* you want?"

"Law school. I've been thinking about it for a long time, and I recently applied to four schools. I got into all of them. I'm planning on going to Columbia starting next semester."

"Columbia's in New York."

He pulled a face of mock surprise. "You don't say?"

She laughed, then turned serious. "Is that the school you want to go to?"

He saw the insecurity on her face. "It's exactly where I want to be." Brushing away a loose strand of hair, he met her eyes. "I don't want to rush you. If you're not ready, or if you don't want—"

"No!" Her cheeks flushed a delightful shade of pink. "I mean, of course I want you, too. Can't you tell?"

"I'd hoped." Oh, how he'd hoped.

She nibbled at her lower lip. "What about your dad? I'm not exactly from the same breeding stock as a Carrington."

He laughed, knowing that despite the sarcastic tone she was truly concerned about his relationship with his dad. "Don't worry. We had a long talk. He knows how I feel, and he understands. And he's pretty impressed with you, what with all your academic achievements and now this new job." He shrugged. "My dad's a tough nut, but eventually he cracks."

She snuggled against him. "Good."

He stroked her hair. "I love you, Annie. It hit me fast and hard, but I can't deny the truth. And the truth is, I love you."

"I love you, too," she said, as the weight of the world lifted from her heart. "I think I always have, and I know I always will."

Snuggling back into his embrace, she let out a contented sigh. "Who would've believed it?" she asked.

"What's that?"

"That all my Christmas wishes would come true. And it's not even Christmas yet."

Closing his eyes, Brent hugged her tighter, this woman who, for the first time he could remember, had brought pure joy to him for the holidays...and beyond.

*The End*

Don't miss STARSTRUCK, Julie Kenner's newest  
Holiday Fantasy for Harlequin Blaze!



Available at [www.Omnilit.com](http://www.Omnilit.com) Dec. 1, 2009!

During the month of December, get 25% off all  
Harlequin titles at Omnilit!

And for more Harlequin romance online, visit  
[www.charlequin.com](http://www.charlequin.com).

Happy Holidays to you, from Omnilit.com and Harlequin  
Blaze!

ISBN: 978-1-4268-5300-5

Wrapped and Ready

Copyright © 2001 Harlequin Books S.A.

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

® and ™ are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

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