



## **Model Christmas**

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## Prologue

Renee climbed the stairs on the train and worked her way to the last car. She dropped into the seat in time for the train to begin pulling out of the station. Excitement rose inside as she watched the passing scenery. Trees bare of leaves and housetops coated with a few inches of snow reminded her that Christmas was not far off. In a few weeks, it would be on her. And where she had always hated the holiday because of being alone in the world, now she had hope. Well, she could concentrate on work until the dreaded season slipped away. Things were about to turn around for her.

No more stretching her grocery allowance with ramen or filling up on extra slices of bread. How pathetic her life had been up until now, with no hope of change. She grinned out the window and reached up to her hair to be sure it hadn't begun to frizz in the damp air on the way to the station. She'd coated it with half a bottle of holding spray. If a strand budged, it would shock her.

Not that she had anything to worry about. She had signed the contract. They couldn't change their mind now. She was a full fledged model, having hooked up with a modeling agency, and on top of that, she already had an assignment with a company that needed plus size models.

If anyone had told Renee last year, when things were their roughest, she would be a model, she would have laughed in their face and called them a liar. After all, she'd been battling the bulge for the last seventeen years of her twenty-six on this earth. Hell, even her boyfriends in the past had said in so many words, "You're pretty, Renee, but you could be beautiful if you dropped a few pounds. Baby, I'm just not feeling it with us."

Jerks, every one of them. And the experiences had left her self-esteem in the toilet. That's why it had been shocking when the agent approached her outside Frederick's at the mall. She had thought at the time he was some pervert, but management at the store had verified he was legit. The rest was history.

*A model at my age*, she thought with a laugh. Although her agent had said plus size models enjoyed a bit more leeway in age, especially doing spreads in catalogs for stores that sold for her size. Whatever, it was a paycheck, a nice one. She was not turning down this opportunity, and today would be her first shoot.

Nervousness at the thought hit her for the thousandth time. A room full of strangers would see her parading her size fourteen body around like she was something special. Her stomach knotted remembering. Well, if she had to go in there shaking like a leaf and stuttering like an idiot, she'd do it. This was a fantastic opportunity, and even feeling down on herself wasn't going to stop her.

After half an hour on the train, she arrived at her destination and shuffled with everyone else toward the exit. When the doors opened, a cold blast of air cut her breath off. Renee groaned, ducked her head and plodded down the stairs to ground level. One thing was for

sure. When she made enough money, she would get out of the city as fast as she could, and move to somewhere tropical. Barbados or Jamaica would be heavenly right about now.

Tucking her scarf tighter about her neck, she headed in the direction of the agency. The location sat about three blocks from the train station. Renee hoped she could soon afford to buy a car and wouldn't have to trek all this way in the cold. Or at least that she'd gain clout and the agency could provide her with transportation. That was probably pushing it, but she could dream.

As she approached an alley, she looked down to carefully pick her way along the walk. Whoever owned this particular storefront was too lazy to shovel it. She couldn't make out where to step off the curb. All she needed was to arrive at the agency with a swollen lip because she had smacked it on the ground.

Just because she was being more careful, fate had to trip her anyway. Renee found the curb by stumbling over it and falling forward. She put her hands up to catch herself, and the ache in her ankle from turning it made her gasp. The ground hurtled toward her. She yelped thinking of her first impression in her new career going horribly wrong just as she hit a good six inches of snow face-first.

Holding spray could not trump water. When she lifted her head, shaking snow from her face, two coils of hair began to dangle over her eyes. She groaned. "Oh, no. This can't be happening."

She tested her lips and found they were fine. At least the stupid snow had taken the force out of hitting the ground. She struggled to climb to her knees and found her limbs heavy and her ankle aching. Her six year old coat was getting soaked by the second.

"Are you okay? Need some help?"

Renee glanced up into the sexiest green eyes she'd ever seen. The man's gentle smile warmed her just a little despite how cold she was getting. He held out a hand, and without hesitation, she took it. With seeming little trouble, he hoisted her to her feet. She felt rather than saw his strength, hidden beneath a coat that looked almost as old as hers, if the worn edges on the collar were any indication.

"Thank you," she said when she was on her feet, and glanced away. "I wasn't looking where I was going."

Again he flashed the easy grin, teeth straight and white. Renee ran a tongue along hers. One of her bottom teeth was somewhat askew, which had made her more surprised that the agency had signed her on, and got her a modeling job so quickly. Deborah, the woman she spoke with most often, had said the company was looking for "real" women, whatever that meant. She guessed it meant flawed.

“Funny,” her rescuer said, “you looked like you were watching every step you made.”

Renee’s mouth fell open. “You were watching me?” And then she blushed, glad she was a good cocoa brown in skin color so he wouldn’t see the blood rushing to her face. “Of course you weren’t. Sorry.”

He shrugged, rocking back on his heels with his hands shoved into his pockets. She admired the breadth of his chest, the wildness to his chestnut hair, his head uncovered in the frigid weather. He stood a good head and a half taller than she was. Renee had never been known for her height. Or maybe the lack thereof. Tall-and-Gorgeous had her breath restricted. Men did not come up to her on the street, black or white ones. All of her previous boyfriends seemed to happen almost by accident. Then again, this was sort of an accident. *Get a grip, Renee. He’s not asking for your phone number, and you have never dated a white guy.*

“I’m very observant,” he admitted. “And besides, why wouldn’t I notice a beautiful woman? A man needs something nice to look at in this bleak winter landscape.” He gestured to the line of storefronts along the street, none displaying holiday decorations despite it being weeks until Christmas.

Renee shook her head, laughing. “Oh, wow, does that line work on anyone?”

He grabbed his chest, his green eyes twinkling. “You wound me.”

“I’ll bet.” Never had she been so relaxed with a man. All the previous times she had first talked to a guy, she stumbled over her words until she was more comfortable, and her head was filled with doubts as to why he spoke to her. Somehow talking to this man, she didn’t expect anything from him. It was as if they were just teasing each other, their way of dealing with the dreary, cold weather.

The man stuck his hand out again. “Keith Greenwich. Nice to meet you.”

She lowered her lashes and took his hand. The huge palm engulfed hers, making her feel small for the first time in forever. “Renee Lerner. Good to meet you as well. Thanks again for helping me.”

“It’s the least I could do.” He gestured with a thumb over his shoulder. “I’m the lazy slob you were probably cursing out when you hit the ground, who hasn’t gotten around to shoveling his sidewalk.”

Renee looked up at the small office. The place had to be no wider than ten feet, smaller than all the other spaces on the block, and the sign above the door had seen better days. It read “Keith Greenwich, Private Investigator.” From the looks of things, he had to be worse off than she was before her big break.

She refocused on him. “Well, no harm done, Keith. I have to be running along. I have an appointment I cannot be late to.”

He smirked. “Ah, my less than successful business venture sobered you from any interest in me, huh? I understand completely.” He spun toward the door with a good-natured wave over his shoulder. “Be careful, beautiful. Don’t want you hurting yourself when I’m not around to help.”

“No, wait—” Before she could stop him, he disappeared inside his office, and Renee was left standing there feeling like a heel. She hadn’t said she wasn’t interested, and hell, he hadn’t made any offers either. Although she did have an expressive face, so maybe she’d said more than enough without words.

Feeling the loss of..if not a rich man at least a fun one...she turned to limp the rest of the way to the modeling agency. Because she had left the apartment extra early, she wouldn’t be late, but she prayed for a miracle that they wouldn’t see her as the amateur she was with her hair a wet mess.

## Chapter One

*One year later...*

Renee wiped a hand across her brow and blew out a breath. She had been working steadily for the last four hours, and it was time to take a break. How she hated packing to move, but being that she was moving to a better neighborhood with a nicer apartment, she couldn't complain. And it wasn't like she had that much stuff. She had never been a pack rat, and lack of money meant she had just the necessities in life.

Her neighbor's dog barked suddenly like he had lost his mind. Renee had come to realize that was her signal that the mailman had arrived. With trepidation, she worked her way through the piles of boxes, hoping nothing had come for her because she had already had her mail forwarded, but also knowing there might be that one letter she dreaded receiving. She pulled the front door open just as the postman was tossing a leg up over the railing to walk around to the next block of apartments to the side of her building. He waved a cheery hello, and Renee responded with little enthusiasm.

Heart pounding, she plodded over to the bank of mailboxes and slipped her key in the lock. The metal door opened with a creak, a portend of warning if ever she heard one. A single letter lay in the narrow space. Renee swallowed and reached in to tug it out. She flipped the envelope over to read the front. As before, no return address was written, just her name and address with a small shield drawn after her last name.

Tremors weakened her limbs, and she had to reach out to the mailbox to hold herself up. She didn't want to open it. All the letters were basically the same anyway, messages of love and devotion and declarations that she belonged to him, that she had no right to expose herself to everyone, modeling as she was doing.

Renee blinked away tears and turned to scan the area around her apartment building. The parking lot was almost empty, most of the residents having gone to work already on this Tuesday morning. No one stood in their doorways or peeked through the front windows. She had scrutinized every resident over the last few weeks, suspecting every person that had said two words to her. The police had done the little they could do. Yet, this loser was still sending her mail.

She couldn't take it anymore. Enough was enough. After so long struggling, trying to make ends meet, she actually had a small savings account and an interview next week for a new assignment that could bring her even more money than she was making now. She was moving into a nicer, more expensive place, and one of the assistant photographers at work had even asked her out. She wanted to enjoy her success, not live in fear of this stalker.

Headed into the house, she tried to remember where she had packed the telephone book. She knew just who she wanted to call and figured she could find his name and number listed. As if by fate, she found the book in the first box she checked and flipped it open to

the white pages. Funny how even though a year had passed, she remembered his name and face like it was just yesterday when she met him. There were not many Greenwicks listed and only one private investigator with that name. She dug her cell phone from her pocket and punched in his number.

The phone rang a good seven times before he answered. She had just been about to give up, figuring if he didn't even have voicemail when he was away from the office, he might not be the right investigator.

"Hello, Keith here," he said in the informal, friendly tone she remembered. Weren't guys like him supposed to be secretive, closed off types? Keith didn't appear to fit the bill by any stretch.

Renee cleared her throat. "Hello, Keith. I don't expect you to remember me, but this is Renee Lerner. I met you—"

"Oh, yes," he interrupted. "The beautiful Renee, the woman I rescued."

She laughed. "I don't remember all that. Besides, for all I know you rescue women all the time, and I could just be one in a million that line could work on." Tongue-in-cheek, she waited for him to respond, hoping he did remember her.

"Okay, you got me," he admitted. Her heart sank. "I do try to be of service to any and all sexy women, and your particular chocolate sweetness caught my attention that day."

Renee flared her nostrils and rolled her eyes. "Oh goodness, you are so not for real." She burst out laughing. "Your game is too outrageous. One minute you make me think you believe that nonsense you're spouting, and the next, I think you're just teasing."

He uttered a small whimper over the line like she had pierced his heart with an arrow. It was the same silliness he had pulled on her last year. "Renee, Renee, why do you torment me? Do you know that my Tuesdays have never been the same since I fished you out of the snow?"

She gasped. He did remember, every detail it seemed. She was impressed, and her respect for him rose a notch with the knowledge that he had such a great memory. Even a year in a very vain line of work, where she was often pampered with people doing her nails and hair, her self-esteem hadn't risen enough to believe Keith remembered her because of who she was and not because of his own skills.

"I was wondering if you're still in the private investigations business," she said.

He grew serious. "Yes, need my help?"

She nodded and then realized he couldn't see her. "Yes, please. Can we meet for coffee or something so I can explain what's happening?"



“By all means.” He asked about her schedule, and Renee quickly flipped through her appointment book to find an open slot when she would have at least two free hours. As she did so, she marveled at how her life had changed. Last year, she didn’t own an appointment book, and now—she paused on the penciled in date with John on Friday night and grinned—everything was added to her book because juggling her schedule had become a challenge. Deborah had presented her with the small gift a month ago when Renee had missed an appointment. Keeping important people standing around could not become a habit. When she shared with him what dates and times over the next week were available, he chose one and assured her he looked forward to seeing her again. “And don’t worry. I may look like a loser, but I’m good at what I do. I’ve always loved nosing into other people’s affairs.”

She snickered. “You do not look like a loser.”

His voice dropped to a deeper tone, the rumble of it doing things to her body in places that had not seen action in too long. “So you remember how I look? Interesting.”

Getting into it, she replied. “Of course, a fine man like you? A sista would have to be blind.” Renee pressed a hand over her mouth. She did not speak that way, but Keith made it fun. She suspected he didn’t speak the way he was doing with her on a normal basis either. It was like they had been friends for a long time and shared a sense of humor for the absurd. She could be reading into their connection more than there was. When she met him in person and got to know him through his helping her find that idiot who had been harassing her, he could be altogether different than first—and second—impressions led her to believe. Still, she looked forward to learning more about Keith.

\* \* \* \*

Renee had sprung for a taxi to reach the restaurant where she was to meet John for dinner. The fact that he wanted her to meet him here rather than him picking her up annoyed her, but since this was her first date in almost two years, she didn’t want to be too uptight about anything.

She paid her fare and stepped out of the vehicle. Right away, as she had been doing since she stepped into it, she tugged on the bottom of her dress. Wearing such a short, form-fitting outfit had seemed like a good idea at home. Now, all she could think about was how thick her thighs were and how she hated that she didn’t wear something longer to cover them. With a sigh, she turned toward the restaurant and hurried through the front entrance. She was running twenty minutes late and hoped John wouldn’t be angry or had left. The second problem with the evening so far was that when she pulled out her cell to call John to let him know she would be late, she found it dead. She didn’t have a house line and her cell phone still acted stupid when she plugged it in, so she couldn’t get it to work until it juiced up a little. That meant she couldn’t let John know she would be there soon.

As she entered the restaurant and paused to look around, she muttered, “Well, here’s hoping he’s still here.”

“Renee,” a pinched voice called out to her.

She spun around, and her stomach balled into a knot at the sight of John. As if on cue, sweat broke out under her arms, and she felt it beading on her top lip. She resisted swiping at either place. After her shower, she had laved on a ton of deodorant and spritzed her body with her favorite scent. “H-Hi, John,” she stuttered, wanting to kick herself. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He took her elbow, kissed her cheek, and shuffled her along with a waiter. “Another minute, and we would have lost our table.”

His irritation came through clear as a bell, and while Renee was sorry she had kept him waiting, she didn’t appreciate being herded along. She carefully withdrew her arm from his grasp and picked up the pace a little to move ahead of him. She thought she heard a low whistle, but when she turned around, he cast her an innocent glance.

They settled in at their table, and Renee fiddled with her napkin on her lap, staring down at her hands to avoid looking up at John. She was blowing this big time, but she couldn’t shake off her nerves long enough to hold a conversation with him. John had no such limitations.

“So, how are you liking it so far? You’ve been in the business what, a year?”

She nodded, scouring her mind for a response. “Sometimes it’s good, and sometimes not. I mean the schedule can be a bear, but the money is sweet.”

He grinned. “I hear that.” He reached across the table to grasp her hand and thread his fingers between hers. It seemed an intimate move for a first date, but Renee didn’t draw back. “When I saw you pose for the Max Exclusives shoot, I knew I wanted to ask you out. I’d been watching you awhile, seeing how things went.”

Renee frowned. The Max Exclusives was lingerie. He had decided asking her out was worth it only after he had seen her almost naked in those designs. Honestly, Renee had never thought she could look that sexy with so little on, but Max knew his stuff, and she had run out and grabbed a few of his intimate things as soon as she was free. But John couldn’t be admitting he was that shallow, could he? After all she’d had several short conversations with him over the past year—all work related, but surely, he couldn’t have determined she was the type of woman he could hit it off with from that. Not her naked figure. She must be mistaken.

“So, John, do you have any siblings?” she asked, hoping to break the ice. “I am an only child myself, small family.”

He squeezed her hand, making her fingers ache a bit. "Let's not beat around the bush, Renee. After we eat, we can go to your place or mine. We're both adults here. If we hit it off, we can meet up regularly. If you're the type that has to do dinner first, like a lot of women, to feel like what we do later is all right, I'm fine with that."

Renee blinked. Okay, so she hadn't been mistaken. "A-Are you under the impression that I'm going to sleep with you on the first date?"

"We're adults," he reiterated.

"And adults means sex on the first date?" Her voice began to rise. He frowned and squeezed her fingers again. Renee yanked her hand away from him.

"Keep your voice down," he grumbled. "I knew you weren't as refined as some of the girls. Frankly, I usually like a lighter girl, sometimes even the white ones, and most of them I work with have had training for years in the business, are graceful and know how to carry themselves. They're poetry on two sexy legs."

*And I'm a clumsy elephant, I guess.* Boy, could she pick them. The waiter walked over at that moment to take their order. Renee held up her hand. "Don't bother. I'm leaving. You know what, John? You can kiss my unrefined ass. I wouldn't have dinner with you, let alone *sleep* with you, if I was bucktooth, blind in one eye, and you begged me!"

His eyes, which she had thought on first seeming him could woo a woman with one look, widened in shock at her words. She figured she had sealed his opinion of her with her outburst, but she didn't care. He had hidden his colors well, but she would not be torn down by another man who acted like he was doing *her* a favor by touching her.

She stood up, grabbed her purse, and marched out. On the street, fuming and pacing, she wondered how her sex life could be so screwed up. On the one hand, she had men like John coming after her, like she should be grateful to them for looking her way. And then on the other hand, she had a pervert writing her, thinking she belonged to him. Where were the normal men? Were they all taken or what? Shoot, even plump women found good men. Where was hers, damn it?

At last, a cab pulled up to the curb, and Renee jumped into it. She barked out her address and settled back in the seat. With tears in her eyes, she recalled what treat she had in the refrigerator at home. She knew it would be emotional eating, but whatever. The one good thing about her job was, she was paid to stay plump. They didn't want her to gain or lose, just like the smaller girls, and she already knew from years of practice, a good half pint of ice cream every now and then was a must to stay just where she was. She'd do that and watch an old movie.

Maybe Keith would have good news for her at their meeting. At least she didn't have to take his crazy come-on seriously. She could relax and enjoy him with no threat. Besides,

even if it was insincere flattery, Keith's compliments made her all warm inside, and she needed a balm to her bruised ego. She couldn't wait.

## Chapter Two

Feeling much more casual in a pair of blue stretch jeans and a red turtleneck sweater, Renee stepped off the train and headed in the direction of the coffeehouse where she planned to meet Keith. Unlike John, Keith had offered to pick her up from her apartment, but she had turned him down because she didn't know if she would be coming from home or from her last appointment. As it turned out, she'd found plenty of time to get back home, shower, change her clothes, and hurry out to catch the train. She might have moved to a better neighborhood, but living near the station had been a must as she hadn't yet decided to splurge on a car.

To get to the coffeehouse, Renee had to pass by Keith's office. She peeked in through the darkened window to see whether he had already left, but the artificial snow, the wreath, and the white blinking lights obstructed her view. She stepped back and blinked. So he was into the whole Christmas thing. She didn't remember seeing any last year, but then she hadn't been focusing on the window, but on the man.

Thinking of Keith and how they met, she looked down at the ground, perfectly shoveled and salted although the snow shower that morning hadn't amounted to much more than an inch or two. She was in no danger of falling, especially since here knight wasn't present to help her up.

After lingering with a silly grin on her face for far too long, she glanced at her watch and then picked up the pace. She needed Keith's help, and irritating him with being late, or worse keeping him from another job, would not be good.

Outside the coffeehouse, Renee paused with her hand on the doorknob. Her mouth had gone dry, and her stomach knotted. Not only would she have to face discussing those heinous letters again, she would have to face Keith himself, a sexy man who lit her desires just looking at him. She hadn't been nervous with him the first time they met, but what about now?

She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. The key was to remember this was business, nothing else. Keith wouldn't seriously be interested in someone like her, nor her him. Dating outside her race had never occurred to her, and it didn't now. Sure, it was becoming no big deal for many couples, but whatever. Not her cup of tea.

With that settled, she felt better and strolled into the small café. When she paused just past the door to scan the interior, she spotted Keith right away. He grinned her way and pushed back his chair to stand. Her heart kicked up thousand beats. *Didn't you just hear me, stupid? We're not interested. Now calm down, girl. This is business.*

Presenting a calm exterior while she walked over to his table, Renee had to be thankful for her training. The endless posing, practicing various expressions before hundreds of shots had allowed her to learn enough control that she didn't show her feelings so easily.

She drew up to the table and opened her mouth to speak, but Keith beat her to it. “There’s that face.”

A grin sprang to her lips. So much for control. “What face?”

He pointed toward her and winked. Then he came around the table, placed a palm at her lower back and slid a chair out for her. For a second, Renee couldn’t have moved if she wanted to. Better would be to bask in the warmth of his hand and the scent of his cologne. Whatever he wore wasn’t the expensive stuff like the male models she had met. They splashed it on after shoots until sometimes she thought she had an allergy the way her body reacted. Keith’s cologne was more subtle, earthy and virile, but gentle too. She could never have explained it if asked. Suffice it to say, he smelled good enough to jump.

Instead, she sank into her seat. “There’s nothing remarkable about my face. I’m your average girl next door, so they tell me.”

Keith shook his head as he went around the table to retake his seat. “Not true. Your face has spiced my dreams for the last year.”

Renee’s eyes widened. “Liar.” She wasn’t on billboards just yet, and probably would never be.

He chuckled, lifting two fingers and laying a hand over his chest. “Scouts honor.” After they sat laughing, and Renee admitted to herself that she couldn’t be nervous around Keith if she tried, he offered to get her a coffee. “What will it be? I’ll go up and order it. It’s on me.”

“Oh no, this isn’t a date. I can pay for my own. In fact, if I hire you to help me, then this would come out of your expenses.” She tugged her wallet from her purse and popped the catch open.

Keith stood, heading toward the counter. “If you don’t tell me what you want, I’ll get you my favorite, and trust me, it’s a bold concoction.”

“Keith!” she grumbled.

He stepped farther away. “Going...”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I don’t like coffee. Get me a spiced chai tea, please.”

He gave a half bow. “Your wish is my command.” While he walked away, Renee wondered if he really was the right man for the job. She twisted around in her chair and watched him flirt with the woman behind the counter. In seconds, her cheeks flamed red, and she looked at him with lowered lids and pouting lips. Renee tried not to vomit in her purse as she turned back around. Keith was a flirt, and didn’t take things seriously enough for her. She’d misjudged his character. What else was new?

She rose when he came back to the table. "You know what, I think I should go. I can deal with this issue on my own, and really I'm sure it's not a big deal. I'm sorry to have wasted your time. If you'd like, you can bill me for you coming here." She sucked in a breath, for some reason near tears. "Is half hour or forty minutes times your hourly fee fair?"

He sobered, the smile leaving his face as he set down the cups. Reaching across the table, he took her hand before she could turn away. She ignored the shiver that passed over her skin at his touch.

"Hold on. I'm sorry." He squeezed her hand. "You remind me of why I'm still single."

Renee's eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me?"

He ran a hand down over his face. "Damn, I'm an idiot, huh? Let's start over." He crossed to her and rested his hands on her shoulders. Against her will, he pressed her gently into the chair and squatted down beside her, his arms atop his muscled thighs and hands clasped in front of him. Renee couldn't help herself. She just had to hear what he'd say. Just how insulting would he be? It couldn't be worse than what John had said to her.

"I'm attracted to you." He shrugged. "There I've said it. It's out in the open. Unfortunately, I never grew up. I take life as it comes. I don't try to keep up with the Jones, and I'm nosy. I've already told you that. Along with those hang-ups come the fact that my face gets me the girl. My mouth makes me lose her."

Renee blinked. He was unlike any man she had ever met. She didn't know what to make of him. "Well, what did you mean by saying I remind you of why you're still single?"

He reached up as if to run a hand down her cheek. Renee pulled back, not too sure she wanted to go down that road. He withdrew. "I meant, like a green boy, I start shooting my mouth off to the girl...sorry, woman...I'm attracted to. I get all giddy and start trying to impress her. She gets irritated, and well you can guess the rest."

Renee laughed despite herself. "Just be yourself. Isn't that the advice everyone gives?"

He scratched at a five o'clock shadow, sexy as hell. "And they'd be right. However, this *is* being myself. Know what I mean?"

Renee patted his shoulder. "Yeah, I know what you mean." She sighed and waited while he went back to his seat. "Since we're being honest, let me tell you the truth as well. I feel like as fun and sweet as you are, I don't have much confidence that you can help me. Being nosy doesn't mean you can solve my problem."

“Hm, that’s fair.” He looked down at the table and then pinned her with those unsettling green eyes. “What if I told you that I did some checking on you and your situation while I waited for our meeting date to roll around?”

She gasped.

“You’ve been getting letters from some perv who thinks you belong to him. You’ve reported it to the police, but they haven’t been able to do a damn thing. You work through Parker Toole Modeling Agency, and have been for a year. Before that, you—”

“Enough.” She held up a hand. “I get it. But that stuff is almost public knowledge, isn’t it? I mean...”

He leaned forward over the table. “You have another letter from him you got a few days ago, and you haven’t opened it. You have it in your purse right now.”

Renee squeaked in fear. “How did you know that?”

He leaned back, giving her some much needed space. “Don’t worry. I’m not the guy. I have my ways of finding out things. Just so you know, that last part I guessed. Your reaction tells me you do have the letter with you.” All teasing had gone out of his voice the moment he began to show her he had a serious side, that he knew what he was doing. “Can I see it?”

As Renee retrieved the letter, all the fears she had kept at bay being in Keith’s presence came back. This guy, Evan Doon, he called himself, made her face the fact that she was essentially alone in the world each time he contacted her, each time he left small gifts in unusual places for her to find. Her only consolation was that he had never entered her home that she knew of or tried to approach her. That was why the police weren’t taking it seriously. Evan hadn’t threatened to hurt her, but his words crept her out anyway and made her feel unsafe.

Keith held the envelope in his hands examining it. He lifted it to his nose and sniffed. Finally, when Renee thought she would scream at his methods, he pulled a key ring from his pocket and used one of the keys to slide along the sealed flap. Using the tips of his fingers, he removed the letter and read it aloud in a monotone.

“Renee, you belong to me, no one else. When I see your face every morning, it gets me excited. I want to touch you. No other man can have that right but me. Remember, you’re mine and mine alone.”

Renee shook all over, and she clenched her jaw to keep from crying. When he finished, Keith looked up and was immediately apologetic. “Damn, what an idiot I am.” He scooted his chair to her side of the table, and before she could protest, he scooped her into his arms. Renee should have pushed him away, but instead she tugged him closer, burying her face his chest, aware on too many levels of the hard, unyielding muscles in



his arms as they cocooned her in a safe haven. For the first time in months, she let the tears fall, and Keith stroked her back for as long as she needed him to.

After some time, she sniffled and wiped her nose with her hand. Keith found a napkin and handed it to her. She drew away from him, but only a few inches. "That letter was one of the tamer ones. Some of them were lewd and gross, explaining what seeing me makes him do. The police said they tried to trace the paper, the type on the page, the name, everything they could think of. No fingerprints are ever on the envelope or paper except those of the post office employees. At one time, I thought it was my mailman, but he was cleared." A trembling sigh shook her. She looked up at Keith. "I'm sorry..."

She hadn't realized he was so close. His face hovered just above hers, and she still sat within his embrace. She marveled at how dark his eyes had gone and couldn't believe that he wasn't focused on hers in return, but on her lips. His mouth descended.

Renee jerked away so far that she nearly tumbled over the back of her chair. Keith caught her and made sure she had resettled herself before he moved his hands from her hips. Too late for setting her on fire with his touch. He gave her space. "I have the perfect solution for you while I'm shaking the bushes for more clues on who this guy is," he told her.

Hope sprung to life inside of her. "What solution?"

"I'll be your boyfriend."

She grunted. "Keith."

"No, no, hear me out. What I mean by that is I'll play your boyfriend, hang around, take you places. If this guy really thinks you belong to him, and me being so close pisses him off, it might flush him out. On the other hand, if he's a wimp, just trying to get his rocks off at your expense, then seeing me will help him to change his mind and go get his jollies elsewhere."

Renee chewed her lip thinking it over. "I don't know, Keith. I don't want to make him mad and have him trying something."

He reached across the table and covered her hand. "I promise I will protect you. Like I said, I'll be right there like a devoted boyfriend would be to his lady, and the fact that it's the Christmas season works in our favor."

She wrinkled her nose. "Why is that?"

His eyebrows went up "Are you kidding?" He ticked off on his fingers. "Festivities of all types, family gatherings, outings like sleigh rides, ice skating, picnics, ferry rides."

"Are you out of your mind? Picnics?"

He grinned. "You've not lived until you've picnicked in the snow."

"I'll take your word for it." She waved her hand in dismissal of that crazy idea. "Well, I don't know about all that. I have a few summer shoots coming up, and I won't have that much time to do all the Christmas activities you named."

"You mean you don't want to," he corrected.

She didn't deny it. "I don't celebrate Christmas much, not even to decorate my house and put up a tree. It's pointless, and I don't have family to protest, so whatever." She shrugged it off, but Keith didn't appear to buy her nonchalant attitude.

He stroked her cheek without warning. She couldn't make herself pull away from his touch. "Who ruined such a wonderful holiday for you, beautiful? What's his name? I'll make him pay for his callousness."

Renee blushed. "No one ruined it for me. Not really. Like I said, I have no family. I was an only child and never knew my dad. My mother died of terminal cancer three years ago." She paused, holding back the emotions that always surfaced at this time of year. Last year, and each since her mother first became too ill to leave her bed, Renee had holed up in her apartment with something high calorie and simply ate and ate while watching movies that were the farthest thing from the holidays. After December thirty-first, she seemed to snap out of it and go on about her life. The whole process worked for her. It was no big deal, nothing to discuss with Keith.

"I'm so sorry, Renee. I can see why you're a scrooge around these times."

"Hey!" She glowered at him. He winked. *Here we go*, she thought. His silly side had come back. Now she would have to deal with his phony compliments while not at the same time not falling head over heels with him, for the simple reason that he lightened her heart every time he opened his mouth.

Keith downed the rest of his coffee and stood up, his chair scraping the floor. He clapped his hands. "I've got it. I will show you what a wonder Christmas can be at the same time we're working on your case. It's all settled. Now, come on, I have another appointment, but we can talk about our date."

"What do you mean date?" She shuffled behind his long stride to the door and squeezed past him when he opened it for her. Renee did all she could not to allow her ass to rub Keith's thigh, but it did anyway, and she wondered if he made sure it happened. A glance over her shoulder at him once she was out on the sidewalk revealed him with a look of innocence on his handsome face. His ass was anything but innocent, and he knew it.

She turned to face him, her hands on her hips. "Okay, I agree to do this. But let's get something straight. We're pretending. We are not a couple. That means you don't get any privileges. Got it?"

He made a face, pushing his lips out and approaching her with arms outstretched. She burst out laughing, shoving at his chest. "Stop it, you idiot. What about your fees? I don't have much, but if we could do weekly payments or something that would be great."

His palm brushed her face like he seemed fond of doing. "Don't worry. I'm easy."

She smirked. "I'll bet you are."

Keith leaned in close to her, not touching her face, but warming her cheek with his breath. She shivered. "Remember, we'll have to make this look real, beautiful. So be nice, and let me see you home."

Wondering what she had gotten herself into, Renee nodded and didn't protest when Keith took her hand in his, just as a light snow began to fall.

### Chapter Three

Keith crossed his arms and leaned against a lamp post outside Renee's apartment building. He waited until he saw the light come on in her place and then waited some more. He couldn't leave. Not just yet. Earlier, when he admitted he was attracted to her, he wasn't lying. She was so beautiful, smelled incredible, and though she shied away from having a real relationship with him, he was determined to win her over. Each time he had touched her, electricity zoomed through his body, making him hard as a rock. If he read her right—and he knew he did—she wanted him as well. Her personal hang-ups kept her from accepting what was obviously between them, but not for long if he had anything to say about it.

He narrowed his eyes and scanned the area. Another truth he had shared was that he was good at nosing around, finding out things about people they didn't want him to know. That 'gift' was why he went into the business he did—that and a hero complex. He loved helping people, and Ms. Sexy Renee needed his help. It had taken all of his strength to hide from her just how angry reading that letter had made him. When she cried in his arms, he could have hunted the bastard down and ripped his guts out.

However, that wasn't him. Keith loved peace. He loved an easygoing lifestyle, which was why he also rented the tiny office he did, lived in the unassuming apartment above it, and wore the same old duds he'd picked up on a trip a few years ago. None of that stuff mattered. Not until he met the lovely plus size model who had just hired him to be her boyfriend slash bodyguard. Just thinking of her curvy body, her luscious lips, made him hard all over again.

"Idiot," he grumbled. Renee denied being hurt before, but Keith had a knack for picking up details, no matter how briefly they were flashed in front of him. He'd seen the pain in her eyes when he asked who hurt her as to why she disliked Christmas. He would work on that too. A woman like her wasn't for a quick roll in the hay. She deserved to be cared for, cherished. Keith was not averse to being the one to do it.

He grinned and turned from watching her place. A chill shook him head to toe. He dug into his pocket and retrieved his cell phone, then dialed a number. When the man on the other end answered, he gave his request. "Yeah, I'm going to need a car. Something serviceable, nothing fancy." He chuckled at the response. "Yes, I know I said I hated them, but that doesn't mean I don't have the need. Truth is, I have a friend, and I want her warm. I don't want her to have to trudge through the snow and cold. I need it tonight because I want to pick her up early. Okay, great."

He ended the call and shoved the phone back in his pocket before beginning the long walk back to his apartment over his office. Renee wouldn't be impressed. He reminded himself never to bring her there.

\* \* \* \*

Behind the wheel of a 1995 Volvo, Keith pulled into Renee's parking lot and shut off the engine. He reached over to the passenger seat and grabbed the warm pastries and the extra large cups of tea and coffee he had picked up from the coffeehouse on the way over here. Hopefully, Renee wasn't more of an early bird than he was and hadn't yet had her breakfast. Then again, he wondered if she ate breakfast. Some of the women in her profession skipped it. He hoped Renee wasn't trying to lose. Her body was edible just as it was.

He took the stairs two at a time to the second floor and flipped the knocker on her door. When she didn't answer after a few minutes, he knocked again. "Renee."

After a while, the sound reached him of someone shuffling to the door, cursing all the way. He laughed. Definitely not a morning person. She opened the door, and for a moment Keith stood there in surprise. Her hair, normally in perfect order, the dark waves tempting his fingers to run through it, was all over her head. Her eyes were swollen, half closed, and red. The only good thing he could say about his intended lover at that point was that her lips were slightly thicker in the morning, which he liked, and that the peek at her breast above the neckline of her floor length nightie begged for his attention.

After he had calmed his libido, he realized her eyes were the way they were from crying, not sleeping. He shouldered past door and kicked it closed, then set the bag and drinks on a small table. When he turned back to Renee, he took her into his arms to her muttered protests. "What's wrong, beautiful? What happened?"

"Keith, don't." She wriggled in his arms, but he tugged her closer, locking his fingers together behind her back. She sighed and gave into him. "It's nothing."

"Talk to me," he insisted. When she still hesitated, he said, "If you don't, I'll pick you up and carry you over to the couch. You'll sit on my lap until you give in. And I might be tempted to tickle you."

He bent to lift her, but she held up her hands. "Okay, okay. Just give me a minute, all right? I need to shower and put something on. I haven't even brushed my teeth, and you're acting like you don't care."

He gave her a wolfish grin. "I don't. Not with the view."

She blinked then looked down at herself. When she noticed how much breast she exposed to him, she squeaked and took off for the back of the apartment, clutching her nightie at the neckline. "Nice ass, too." Keith chuckled and retrieved the food and drinks to carry them to the dining room table.

As he set out their breakfast, he glanced around the place. One picture stretched over the living room wall, above an old couch. What he guessed was about a twenty-five inch TV sat across the room on a scratched but sturdy stand. The dining room was more barren of furnishings, with the small table suited for a kitchen and three chairs around it.

Secondhand, he guessed. Apparently, all of Renee's funds had gone into getting this place.

Fifteen minutes later, she came out of the room more appropriately dressed, and Keith complained. "That nightie was doing it for me. You could have showered and put that back on."

She rolled her eyes, lifting her tea to her soft lips. Keith stared openly. "Yeah, you would prefer that. And quit staring at me. You'll make me think you're the stalker."

He held up his hands, casting her an innocent look. "It's not me. I promise. Besides, I'm much more open. If I want to stalk you, I'll tell you so, and knock on your door to get closer."

"Like you did just now?"

"Hey, I'm on the job. Part of the duty of a good boyfriend is to run his girlfriend to work every day." He stood up and bowed, sweeping his arm out to the side. "Your chariot awaits."

She grinned. "You do know how to get me out of the dumps, don't you? Well, as grateful as I am that you came, I can't take advantage of the ride. I'm off today. I'll have to go in for three days straight after today and then off, but no appointments today at all. I don't know what to do with the free time."

Keith studied her, looked deep into her sad eyes. She might smile a lot when he came around, which did warm his heart, but Keith read people for a living. His little sweetheart was unhappy, and he'd do all he could to change that. "Then I'm in luck. Today, I will wipe away that sadness I see in your lovely eyes and put a genuine smile on those luscious lips. Now, let's talk about why you were crying."

She spun away to the bag on the table, rummaged through it, and came up with a cheese Danish. "Let's not and say we did." She almost took a bite of the treat and then drew back. "Ugh, I shouldn't eat this. Why does it look so good? I thought I should drop a few pounds."

Without hesitation, Keith strolled over to her, removed the Danish from her fingers, broke off a piece, and stuffed it into her mouth. It took all of his willpower not to then run his thumb over that plump bottom lip. He wiped his hands on a napkin and placed them behind his back to make himself behave. "There, decision made."

"Who are you?" she demanded, a curious rather than angry look on her face. "Most guys who want to go out with me, act like they accept me as I am, but later they say I'd be so much prettier if I'd just drop a few pounds." After she had said the words, she slapped a hand over her mouth. "I didn't mean to tell *you* that."

“Too late.” He reached for her pastry, but she pulled it out of his reach.

“I can feed myself, thank you very much. And, the jury’s still out on whether you’re like all the rest.” She grunted. “Wait, this is all fake. We’re not dating!”

Keith burst out laughing. “Let’s leave all the labeling of what this is for another time. How about we go ice skating? They have an outdoor rink downtown, and they pipe through Christmas music from every era the entire time. It’s loads of fun.”

She appeared horrified. “Ice skating? Christmas music? I don’t think—”

“Don’t think. Do.” He took her hand and brought it up to his lips, but he didn’t kiss her fingers. He did feel the tremor in them and knew she was not impervious to him. “You’ll enjoy it. I promise.”

“You do a lot of promising. I never make promises. People break them too often. No one puts any weight on their words anymore. I still don’t think I want to go. I told you, me and Christmas don’t get along.”

“It’s for the job. Remember? Look like you’re seeing someone to flush this guy out? Humor me. I do know what I’m doing despite the fact that you think I’m a goof.”

“I do not think you’re a goof.” She blew out an impatient breath. “I just...oh, never mind. Okay, I give in. You win. We can do some things together to make it look like we’re dating, but I warn you, Mr. Sunshine and Roses, I’m a grump at Christmas time. It’s not likely that I will enjoy myself at all, and I hope your enjoyment won’t be ruined by me.”

Keith wiggled his eyebrows. “Trust me, my love, I will make sure you have fun. I’m the King of Fun.”

Renee frowned. “Let’s drop the ‘my love’ and other endearments like ‘beautiful’ and whatever else you called me. I’m sure we’ll look like a couple just fine without all that.”

He swooped in, grabbed her by the waist and kissed her cheek. “Nonsense, beautiful, I don’t do anything halfway. Now, since you’re not going to work, I will run a few errands and come back around ten. The rink opens at eleven, so that gives us time to drive down there, find parking, and be ready to cut the ice. Be back soon.”

Keith didn’t give her a chance to tell him no. He twirled her toward the rest of her breakfast, grabbed his cup and a pastry, and headed out the door with a grin so huge, his cheeks ached. Up until now, he had lived a rather sedentary life, in some ways as sad and lonely as Renee obviously was. Sometimes he’d get hold of a decent case that the big guys had thumbed their noses at. Then he would have a blast making the superior folks in his field and in the corporate world look like fools. Yet, always, he was careful to keep his face out of the papers. Keith lived life on his terms, and he had never held much hope of finding the right woman who just might fit into the craziness that was his way of doing

things. But Renee was it. His heart hammered with his excitement at the prospect. There was not a doubt in his mind that he would win her love. Over the next few days, maybe weeks, he would do all in his power to show himself to be her hero, worthy of her respect. He would make her his in every sense of the word, make the idiot pay who had frightened her, and then get her to let go, to care for him.

Only then would he admit the truth of who he really was. He couldn't wait.



## Chapter Four

Renee clutched Keith's arm in a death hold and clomped across the outdoor carpet toward the ice. What had she been thinking letting this nutty man talk her into going ice skating? She had only been two or three times in her entire life, and while she did know how to roller skate tolerably well, ice skating was a whole different ball game. For one, if she fell, she'd not only freeze her ass off, she'd be wet. She hated wearing wet jeans. Being caught in the rain without a coat had taught her that.

"I think I just found out my ankles are too weak for this sort of thing," she whined.

Keith wasn't buying it. "No way you're chickening out. They just put on Frosty the Snowman, for Pete's sake. You can't beat that."

Renee laughed. "I think you might need to seek help, sir." She stuck out her tongue. When he tried to grab for it with his leather gloves, fitted snug to his large hands and making her want him to run them all over her body, she ducked out of reach. Okay, where had that thought come from? She told herself before he came back to her apartment to pick her up that she would keep this on friendly terms, no thinking about jumping his bones.

That resolve had taken a flying leap over her balcony the moment he strolled in the door wearing his long black coat, open to show off how he filled his black jeans. She had practically salivated over him. The man should not look that good in public. Private either.

"Uh-uh, Renee, you agreed to try this, so you're coming out here on the ice. Give me your hand. I won't let you fall."

Like a move of God or something, it seemed as if light danced around his head when he held his hand out, and Renee felt like he was her lifeline. All of the enjoyment of becoming a model had faded over the last few weeks with the mess going on with Evan and the Christmas season rolling around yet again. And here was Keith, smiling and happy like he had no worries. She had always wondered how certain people were able to be that way. Did they hide the pain better than others? The loneliness? Or did nothing get in to make them feel like they were on a never-ending merry-go-round?

She would have liked to ask Keith point blank but didn't dare. After she dressed, she was relieved he didn't push discussing why she had been crying. It was her thing around this time. She couldn't explain it to him. She and her mother were more like sisters rather than mother and daughter. They had leaned on each other, had only each other for years, and then she was gone.

Choking up at her thoughts, Renee pushed them down and followed Keith out to the ice. The second she set foot on the slippery surface, she clutched him tighter and poked her rear out while holding herself stiff. Keith chuckled.

“Oh, is that how it’s done? Poke out my butt?”

She hit at him. “Shut up.”

He disengaged from her hand and glided backward, curving first to the left and then to the right. Renee folded her arms beneath her breasts.

“Show off.”

He held out his arms. “Come here to me, baby.”

Renee’s heart picked up a few beats. “I told you not to call me that.” She did shuffle her way over to him and fell against his chest. If she had tried such a move on purpose, it wouldn’t have worked. Keith locked her in place, and she had trouble breathing calmly so close to him, intoxicated by his delicious scent.

“You may have told me, but I didn’t agree to it.” He smirked, skated back and whirled her around while she squeaked with her eyes closed and moved awkwardly, before he pulled her back into his embrace. “Come and skate with me.”

She groaned. “I thought we were.”

“We will.”

Renee didn’t murmur when he repositioned her so her back was to him and his hands held firmly to her waist. He shuffled them off at a slow pace around the edges of the rink. After two times around, Renee began to relax and stop tensing up. By no means did she feel comfortable, but with the gentle breeze blowing—not too cold with their physical activity—she didn’t feel like she was about to fall on her face either. No man had ever made her feel so alive just being held in his arms like Keith was doing. If she wasn’t careful, she’d lose her heart.

For the first time since they arrived, she noticed the other people in the rink, mostly couples, finding the cold weather an excuse to snuggle on and off the ice. A vendor sold cups of hot chocolate on the side, and the few children there split their time between twirling recklessly in the middle of the rink and racing each other to the side for the one-day-a-week, all the way up to Christmas day, 1940s prices on the hot drink. To flow with the oldie theme, the music playing at that moment was White Christmas, sung by Bing Crosby.

Keith lowered his mouth to her ear and whispered, “You’re not alone, Renee. Not anymore.”

She gasped and looked up at him. The warmth in his eyes brought tears to hers. She fought to blink them away before he saw, but something told her he did. He didn’t say a

word, only stared down at her, and she couldn't look away. Slowly, he lowered his head closer, his lips descending to hers. She should turn her head, make him stop, but she wanted it. Oh, how she wanted it.

They glided toward the center of the rink, Keith turning her to face him. His lips touched hers, and the kids, the ice, the chill in the air, all fell away. His mouth was sweet, like he had sipped the hot chocolate before kissing her. Renee tugged at the two sides of his coat, pressing herself closer as he pushed his tongue between her lips. *Mm*. Had she moaned? How could she not? She was on fire, wanted to be consumed by him, to be lost in his touch, in his kiss.

Keith's voice rumbled up from his chest. He moaned, opened his mouth wider, lifted it a millimeter, before descending again. He deepened the kiss, pulled gently at her lower lip and sucked it in between his. Renee pressed her legs together, resisting an ache to have his hands stroke her there. But his hands moved from her waist, to her hips, around to her ass to squeeze.

She yelped and pulled back. She'd worn a short coat. Everyone would see. "Keith, stop." She wiggled out of his grasp and skated away, only to lose her balance and fall flat on her face. The whole mood, the heat suffusing her body, the desire, fizzled as wetness crept into her sweater. *Great, the second time he sees me fall. He'll think I'm a real klutz and wonder what idiots hired me to model.*

Embarrassed beyond belief, she struggled to get up. Strong hands moved beneath her arms and hauled her to her feet like she wasn't the plump thing she was. Expecting to see laughter in Keith's eyes when she glanced at him, she found concern instead. "Are you okay?"

"Fine, thanks. Embarrassed."

He tutted in the sweetest way, touching her heart. "Don't be. Everyone falls."

"Not you."

He shrugged. "I've done my share. I'll show you the scars sometime." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Let me guess. They're in places you have to be naked to show me, right?"

"You read my mind." He took her by the hand. "Come on. We'll get something to warm you up, my little ballerina."

Renee grumbled at the endearment but gave him her hand, and they worked their way over to the hot chocolate stand. Keith flicked a dollar bill from his wallet with a flourish and held it up between two fingers. "I got this."

She laughed. “Big spender.” She stuck her tongue out, and this time he swooped in too fast for her to withdraw. He caught her tongue between his lips and sucked at it, sending sensual delight racing over her skin. This was going too far. Renee put her hands up to his chest and shoved. When Keith didn’t budge, she broke off the kiss, turning her head. He was not put off in the least, but painted her neck with nibbles and licks.

Renee yelped and stumbled a few feet away, holding onto the pole that supported the cart’s overhanging. She gulped in several deep breaths, determined to get a grip before she had an orgasm right there on the frickin’ ice.

“That’s not fair, Keith,” she told him when she pulled herself together. “We were not supposed to go that far.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” He seemed about to touch her but pulled back, curling his fingers into his palm. “I lose my mind when I’m around you, and my body has its own mind when it comes to touching you, kissing you.” His eyes darkened to emerald. “You have to admit our first kiss was cataclysmic.”

She spun to face the vendor, snatching up Keith’s money in the process. He didn’t need to see in her eyes just how much she agreed. “Cataclysmic is a strong word. Don’t you think that’s laying it on a little thick?”

He moved behind her, not touching but close enough to drive her out of her mind. “No. It was that and more.” He held up two fingers to the old man behind the counter. “Two, please.”

When they had their drinks, Renee sipped hers to get some warmth in her body. Keith laid an arm across her shoulders and guided her to a bench at the side of the skating rink. The heat rising inside her at once had nothing to do with the chocolate and everything to do with how sweet Keith was. Seeing her shivering, he took the scarf he had around his neck and wound it around hers.

She blushed and dropped her gaze to her cup. “That’s not necessary.”

“I don’t want you to catch a cold.” He tapped her nose. “I want to take care of you.”

She spun to face the rink. “Stop saying things like that.” To change the subject, she asked, “So tell me about you, Keith. Any brothers or sisters? Have you always wanted to be a private investigator?”

It was his turn to clam up, pressing his lips tight and finding interest in the skaters all of a sudden.

Renee wasn’t having it. She leaned out and blocked his vision of everyone else but her. “Oh no you don’t, mister. If you can be all up in my business, I can be in yours. Start

talking.” She took on a coy look. “You know I would never get into a guy who can’t open up to me.”

Keith couldn’t seem to speak fast enough. “I’m the oldest of three. One brother and one sister.”

The tone of his voice made her wonder if they didn’t have a good relationship, which was a shame. Renee’d do anything to have a sibling. A sister who she could share everything with, clothes, talk about men, call just to shoot the breeze. She sighed at the thought.

“Do they live in town?”

“No, and do we really need to talk about me? I’m boring.”

Renee narrowed her eyes on him. “Why do I feel like you’re not being straight with me? I bet you’re not as boring as you claim.” She tapped a finger to her lips, noting how his eyes flashed on the movement. The man’s sexual desires never took a break. “What about your job? Does your family worry about your safety, taking dangerous assignments and all? If you do have them.”

Her interest in his jobs increased, and she wondered if they were all dangerous.

Keith stretched out his long legs before him and crossed one ankle over the other. “Let’s get something straight, shall we? My family doesn’t give a damn what I do, where I am, or if my investigations kill me today or tomorrow.”

His words were casual, but Renee knew it hurt the way his family treated him. Rejection from the very ones who should be behind him in whatever he decided to do would hurt any normal person. She laid a hand on his arm, and Keith grinned before covering hers with his. She pulled away.

“There’s one person I trust and know that cares about me. That’s a family friend who has been there since I was about nine or ten. He at least has never turned away no matter what I did, and he recognizes my need to put space between them and myself.”

“Space?” she sputtered. “I would kill for a family. It’s just me now. And here you are with a sister and brother, and you don’t want anything to do with them just because they don’t like your career. I can’t believe that.”

For the first time she noted anger sparking in his eyes. “Don’t judge me, Renee. You don’t know anything about my situation or what kind of experiences I’ve had with my family.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” She jumped to her feet and stumbled toward the skate rental booth. Keith caught up and took her arm. He pulled her around into his arms. When she

would have broken free, he tightened his hold. After a while, she settled there, accepting his comfort despite her damp clothing.

When she began to sneeze, he turned her to the booth. “Come on. We have to get you out of those wet clothes.” His thumb messaging her arm told her he was back to his normal mood, probably thinking of how he could be there when she undressed. She wasn’t going for it.

By the time they reached her home, Renee’s sweater was dry because Keith had kept the heat blasting the entire way. He walked her to her door, holding her close to his side, making it obvious to her neighbors and anyone else who might be lurking out and about that they were together. At her door, he waited while she fished out her key to unlock the door.

Keith brushed his hand down her arm, sending chills of delight coursing through her. “Have dinner with me tonight.”

She had to admit she liked the prospect. “Wasn’t it enough that we spent the afternoon skating together?”

He shook his head. “No way. Friends do things like that, men and women in platonic relationships.” He minimized the space between them and made her have to resist swaying toward him. “Couples have dinner together in a romantic setting.”

She smirked. “You just want to take me out.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

She sighed. “No, but this is work, Keith. I feel like you’re stepping over the line a lot.”

“I do have ulterior motives,” he admitted.

She stiffened, a slice of fear cutting through her. He rushed to calm her. “Hey, I was joking. Or rather, I meant my motives are to win you over so you’ll make this real between us. You can’t deny you want me, Renee.”

“Confident much?”

He shrugged. “I know what I want, beautiful, and that’s you.”

“I should be turned off by your attitude.” She moved away, pressing closer to the door, her hand on the knob to escape him. “You make it sound like you only want to get in my panties. Most men want that. Not from me, but I mean most men just want sex and nothing more.”

His brows dropped low over his eyes, his lips thinning in a straight line before he spoke. "That's a stereotype I don't appreciate."

This was the second time she had made him angry. So some things got to him. She had to remember that. There was no love lost between Keith and his family, and he hated being lumped in with other men. Who liked that sort of thing? But then it was hard for her to believe he wanted more than the physical. After all, the man acted like he couldn't keep his hands off her. Was that even real? Hard as she tried to believe she was desirable with her clothes off, her mind wasn't going for it.

Sure she could pair the right pants or skirt with the right blouse, do her makeup just right so she looked her best. In that way, she'd captured her share of boyfriends in the past, but they never lasted. Not after they became intimate. Eventually, it led to the same thing. She found them cheating, or they lost interest, and it was about her weight. Common sense told her she was not that big, and that there were men out there who enjoyed women of her size. Hell, she had seen couples like that all lovey-dovey strolling down the street. Yet, something in her made her choose the losers, or made them choose her. She wished she'd break out of that habit and find the one, or at least give up hoping. Hope unfulfilled was worse than being in a bad relationship sometimes.

"I'm sorry," she told Keith. "I didn't mean to offend you. It's just hard to believe it could be anything other than physical, and because it doesn't seem to be anything more, giving in will lead to an end. We have to work together, and we'd never be convincing after a sexual relationship gone sour."

Keith shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. She watched the light and amusement return to his eyes. Just seeing it relaxed her. His sexy, slow smile spread over his face. "I maintain that one night in bed with me, and you'll beg me for more."

She flicked up an eyebrow at him. The man was impossible.

"In two nights, you'll be addicted and call me to come to you in the middle of the day to bring you to a screaming orgasm."

"Keith!" Embarrassment at his words heated her face.

"What?" he asked in puppy dog innocence. "I'm just voicing what I think here. What I *know*."

She slapped a hand on her hip. "You do not know that."

His gaze roved over her body from top to bottom, lingering in just the right places. To her horror, she felt her nipples tighten under his stare and hoped her sweater and bra were thick enough to hide the fact. The amusement vying with excitement on his face told her they were not.

“Oh, I know it, sweetness,” he told her. “I know it very well. There’s not a doubt in my mind that I can please you.”

She looked away, nervous about the direction of their conversation. “Sex is a two-way street. It’s not all about my pleasure.”

He moved in close to her, placed a hand on her cheek, and then slid it down to tilt her chin up. His lips descended on hers in a light kiss, and then he drew back but not far. “You’d please me. I don’t doubt that either. Every time I touch you, I lose control. I want desperately to be inside you.”

“Keith, don’t say that.” She trembled, trying not to close her eyes and press into his chest. “We-we shouldn’t let it go too far. Like I said...”

He sighed but backed off. “All right. I’ll give you more time, and myself more to resolve this issue with Evan, but then I will win you, Renee. You can count on that.”

“Do you think Evan noticed what we did today and will back off now? I just want to live my life in peace and not be afraid.”

Keith drew her in his arms and stroked her back. “I’ll get him. Don’t worry.”

She pulled away and opened her door. “But you are doing more than just going out with me, right?”

He looked guilty, she thought. “Of course.”

She hesitated and then came to a decision. “Okay, well I’ll go to dinner with you. Pick me up at seven.”



## Chapter Five

Keith spent the rest of his afternoon in his office, making phone calls and reading the message Evan had written to Renee over and over. He did not want to fail her. From his first case onward, he always enjoyed the thrill he got from having a puzzle to solve, whether it was locating someone or figuring out who had committed a crime. Most of those he dealt with were too small for the police to bother with, but he felt Renee had not gotten due diligence for her situation. He would see that was rectified.

Renee had lost her mother around this time, and he wanted to do all he could to help reshape the holiday for her, to make it about happy memories. This damn Evan Boon was not going to compound her problems if Keith could help it. Even though he had a lousy relationship with his family, he had not let that ruin his Christmases. And while he couldn't hold onto a woman too long up till now, he did manage to have someone to share his favorite time of year with. He would make sure from now on, that special someone would be Renee.

Taking up the envelope again, he studied it and noticed the shield that had been drawn beside Renee's name. Possibly the idiot fancied himself her protector. Keith ran his hand over his jaw. He had to remember to shave before tonight. Could the guy have been in that field, maybe a security guard? It was worth checking out, but first he needed to talk to his contact in the police department, see where they were in this investigation.

Half an hour later, Keith hung up the phone having spoken with his friend at the PD. From what he could find out, they hadn't chased down the lead on the shield. He wouldn't enlighten them. He would look into it but not mention it to Renee just yet. He wanted her focused on fun while he worried about Evan. He had made progress. Now it was time he went up to his tiny apartment and got ready to meet the woman of his dreams.

\* \* \* \*

Promptly at seven, Keith flipped Renee's knocker, anxious to set his eyes on her once more. He had been angry when she accused him of wanting her just for sex, but when she explained how doubtful she was that any man could want her for more, for something permanent, it renewed his resolve to show her he meant business. He'd do all in his power to not pressure her, to keep his cool and let things develop. But he would finish this Evan business so he could move on to wooing her. And wooing is just what he would do. Before long, she would be his. After all, she laughed at his silliness and hadn't yet run for the hills. That was promising.

She opened the door dressed in a teal mini-dress with long sleeves, a banded waistline, and for his personal visual delight, a plunging v-neckline. Her over the knee black suede boots paired with the short hem of her dress showed off just enough of her thighs to make Keith's heart do a wild tattoo in his chest. He couldn't help picturing her in the boots

alone. The suspicious look that came over her face made him rein in his wayward thoughts.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

She nodded, turned back into the apartment, and grabbed her purse from the table. “Ready,” she announced.

“That’s my girl. It’s a welcome relief not having to wait forever for you to finish dressing. You like to be on time.”

She shrugged. “I’ve had to keep to a strict schedule for a while. Besides, I think it’s just me. I don’t like anyone keeping me waiting, so I do my best not to keep them waiting.”

Keith made a dramatic gesture, crossing his hands over his heart and giving her a soulful look. “I feel tears coming on. I really do.”

She slapped his arm. “Come on, crazy. I’m hungry.”

He did his best to keep her entertained all the way to the restaurant, a slightly upper scale one. He had chosen it not to impress her but because they actually went the extra mile in making sure the customer was satisfied, and the meal portions were huge. Keith liked his grub. He was a big man, after all.

Renee’s eyes widened at the size of her plate—small platter was a better description—and the heaps of food when they had received their order. “Good grief, do they expect a person to eat all this? I’ll seriously need a doggie bag.”

Keith pointed his fork at her after downing a good portion of his food. Delicious, as usual. “You must eat at least half of it. No bird stuff.”

“What?” she shrieked. “Keith, I can’t. I have to think about my weight.”

“Think about it, but eat.” He leaned over and speared a bite of her baked chicken to hold it up in front of her mouth. She hesitated and then pulled it from his fork in the most sexy way. He felt himself hardening beneath the table. Good thing they were sitting and he had his cloth napkin for added protection. “You’ve ordered all healthy food, grilled marinated chicken breast with whole wheat fettuccine and broccoli rabe. Can’t get much better than that. You eat, and I’ll watch your body. How’s that?”

She rolled her eyes. “I thought you were going to behave.”

He winked. “I made no such promise.”

“You’re impossible.” Renee began to eat her food, and Keith was gratified to see her eyes widen at the flavor. “Mm, this is amazing. I need to come here more often. Although, I’m

thinking the prices are a bit much.” She gave him a pointed look. “You didn’t let me see them, telling me what was on the menu rather than showing me.”

“Hey, I run my dates the way I like. When *you* take *me* out, we’ll do it your way.”

She laughed. “That will be the day. I can see you now making excuses as to why you have to take me, or whatever goofy story you come up with.”

“I’ll have you know, beautiful, that my stories are not goofy.”

“Uh-huh.”

He tried not to cast puppy in love looks her way. No woman had been so diverted by his entertaining her. Renee was perfection in a delicious body and a sweet personality. He hated every idiot who had hurt her and made her feel less than the goddess she was, and if any of the fools came across his path, he would make them sorry.

They enjoyed each other’s company for an hour, Keith working ways to feed Renee food so he could watch her soft lips wrap around his fork. When she was distracted, thinking about something he had said to her, he could get away with it. Only when she paid too much attention to what he was doing did she frown and smack his hand, stating she could feed herself. Her expression was stern, but he was pretty sure she liked it, flattered by the attention he gave her. If he had his way, he’d have her back at her place, feeding her strawberries and cream. Or rather blueberries and cream. Not the same effect, but Keith made note of the fact that his love did not like the feel of strawberries on her tongue. He had retained every fact he learned about Renee.

“Keith! Oh wow, I thought that was you.”

He turned with his practiced grin on his face, recognizing the voice, but annoyed that one of his exes interrupted his up till now perfect meal with Renee. Out of politeness, he stood, and was taken aback when she threw her curvy body tight to his, her arms going up around his neck.

“It’s so good to see you,” she gushed, clinging. Keith reviewed mentally the sour note on which their relationship had ended. She told him she never wanted to see him again, said she’d found a man more to her liking. Keith had glanced behind her to find a man who surprisingly enough looked a lot like him with similar coloring and build. From the serious expression, he had guessed the man had no sense of humor, no sense of the absurd, which Becky had complained were his glaring flaws almost from the first day they met.

“Becky, how are you?” He tried putting distance between them without knocking her on the floor. Funny enough, the hand on the opposite side, out of Renee’s sight was the one Becky had snaked around his arm and wouldn’t be disentangled without a scene. He tried to extricate himself with words. “Let me introduce you to my—”

“You’ll never guess who I saw on television a few nights ago,” Becky gushed, interrupting. “Go on. Guess.”

“I wouldn’t—”

“Your dad,” she squealed. “Can you believe the coincidence? Of course, at first, I didn’t know it was him, but then the two of you do look a lot alike. I bet he looked like you when he was your age.”

Keith stiffened. He did not want to talk about his family, especially in front of Renee. He made another attempt to shut Becky up and get her moving on to ruin someone else’s evening, but she would not be put off without him hauling her ass out of the room.

She rested long, manicured nails on his chest. “I still wouldn’t have made the connection, since you are quiet about who you are, and who your family is, but then the interviewer asked about your dad’s family. He talked about them proudly. Now the funny part was when the interviewer got really into his personal life asking your dad how he felt that his oldest son works as a lowly private investigator while the family is worth millions! And then they flashed your face on the television, the black sheep son of corporate giant Dale Greenwich.”

The muffled gasp that came from Renee’s direction made Keith’s heart sink. His patience at an end dealing with Becky and trying not to make a scene, he shook her hand off of his arm and brushed away the one resting on his chest. Now he knew just why her interest in him had turned. She learned who he was and hoped to get back with him. What she didn’t know in her blind attraction to his money was that the report had been one hundred percent correct. He and his father hadn’t spoken in nearly a year, and before that the relationship had been strained for a long time. The one and only reason Keith hadn’t signed over his portion of his *grandfather’s* fortune was out of respect for the single person in his family whose opinion he gave a damn about.

On his deathbed, his grandfather had pleaded with him not to turn his back on the rest of them. He had felt Keith was their link to humanity, believing they were on the brink of having no genuine emotions like love and kindness. All of them, even his younger sister, the baby, and her two kids were just like Becky. Grasping for more, like it was there God-given right.

“Have a nice evening, Becky,” Keith uttered in the coldest tone he could take on. She caught the dismissal right away, and after a few sputters, at last turned to go back to wherever she had slunk from. Keith spun to face Renee. Her lovely eyes were cast down so he couldn’t see what she was feeling, whether it was anger or hurt. “Renee…”

“Don’t.” She held up her hand and then forced a smile. “I had fun, but I think it’s time I go home to pack. I have a shoot in New York tomorrow.”

His eyebrows went up. "You didn't say. Are the arrangements already made? What flight are you on? I'll see about getting a seat on the same one." He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket.

"Don't bother." She shoved back her chair and stood before he could get around the table to help her. "I don't need protection there, I'm sure. Some bigger names will be on set, and there will be more than enough security. A fake boyfriend doesn't have to follow everywhere."

He was certain he heard her voice crack on the words 'fake boyfriend', and while he felt horrible that she was hurt, he was also encouraged. Renee would not be hurt if she didn't care at least a little for him. "Renee, let me explain."

"I hired you, Keith," she snapped. "I don't expect you to tell me every little detail of your life. Don't worry about it. Can you please take me home now? *Please!*"

He nodded and signaled for the waiter to come over before handing him his credit card. After Keith had settled and left a generous tip, he guided Renee out to his car which a valet had driven to the door. The pinched expression on Renee's face told him she was piecing together now how he could afford all this extravagance. She would not believe him if he told her he rarely dipped into his money left to him by his grandfather. What he spent on a daily basis was what he made at his job, and if the funds were low, he lived simply until they increased. The only concession he had made recently was getting a car. Nothing would have prevented him from protecting Renee from the elements.

When they were in the car, Keith leaned forward to turn up the heat at the same time Renee reached for the radio. His hand brushed hers, and a streak of desire rushed through his body. She drew away like he was a snake, and he put both hands back on the steering wheel, gripping it until his fingers ached.

"I want to explain," he said a low tone.

"Don't bother."

"I will!"

She jumped, nodded, and looked away out the window. Keith put out a hand to stroke her curls but then drew back. She wouldn't welcome his touch now, and might not even after he explained. "I did tell you that my family and I do not get along. Becky confirmed that tonight. I am considered the black sheep. I couldn't care less. I don't bother them, and they don't bother me."

She crossed her arms over her chest and wiggled to make herself more comfortable in her seat. Her movements caused her dress to rise higher, showing the shape of her legs, her smooth, brown skin above the top of the boot. Keith got a nice glimpse each time they passed a streetlight. He did his own shuffling around the tighter his pants got.

“That’s not any of my business,” she said primly. “Like I told you, you weren’t obligated to share any of that with me. I admit I can’t understand not being close to your family. I’d almost kill to have one right now, but that’s me.”

“So,” he began, and paused trying to find words that wouldn’t anger her. “You’re not upset so much about me being who I am. You’re mad about Becky, right?”

“That’s—”

“Don’t say it, Renee. It is your business. I’ve been trying to get you to see me as a real boyfriend. I admitted I want it to go further between us. You do have a right to know about Becky.” She clamped her lips closed, but he believed she was all ears. “She’s an ex who blew me off like yesterday’s news because I wasn’t what she wanted in a man.”

“I don’t see why not,” Renee blurted, and then covered her mouth.

He grinned. “Thanks for that, beautiful.” He winked, and she rolled her eyes. “I was not refined enough for her, I suppose. I don’t take myself or my life seriously enough.”

Renee grimaced. “Don’t even say that word. I hate it. *Refined*. Someone I dated recently made me feel that way.”

“Then he’s a fool!” This time, Keith did reach out to stroke her cheek and touch her hair. To his satisfaction, she didn’t pull away. “As you can figure out, Becky found me infinitely more appealing when she learned I have money. I’m not so pathetic as to be fooled by her new attitude.”

“She is very beautiful.”

Renee’s downcast eyes told him Becky with her stupid moves on him, with her skimpy clothing, and the way she molded herself to him, had made Renee feel insecure. He could not have that. He should have tossed her on the floor if he had to, to make sure Renee didn’t think he liked her all over him.

Keith pulled to the side of the road and cut the engine. Her eyes grew round. “What are you doing?”

“This.” He leaned over and unbuckled her seatbelt to pull her onto his lap.

“Keith, don’t.”

“Why?” He rested a hand on her thigh, and felt a tremor go through her. Nuzzling her ear, he slid his hand higher. “Renee, you must believe that you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I can’t get you out of my head. I’m attracted to you in the worse way. *You*. Not that bimbo at the restaurant.”

“I just...uh...” Her voice shook as she tried to find words to explain. “It’s hard to believe. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He skimmed higher until his fingertips touched her panties. In a minute, he’d burst in his pants. Fighting to stay in control, he told her, “Sweetness, you work as a model. Your employers would not have chosen you if they didn’t see the same thing I see.” He chuckled. “Well, not the same thing, I hope. I see you naked in nothing but those boots.”

“Keith!”

He pushed past the elastic edge on her panties and found her heat. She was soaking wet, her softness allowing him easy entry. She squirmed on his lap, and he grew harder. Her ass wiggling on his staff was driving him insane, but this was about her, about showing her just how sexy she was.

Her long, curved lashes brushed her cheeks. Her lips formed an *O*, and she moaned his name. “You shouldn’t do that. Not here. Someone could come along and see us.”

“Let them.” He eased two of his fingers deeper inside her, the inviting warmth making his shaft ache. His fingers as far as they could go, he found her nub with his thumb and began to work it in slow circles. Her moans grew louder. She gripped his wrist as if to push it away, but she didn’t. Instead, she arched her hips and humped his hand. He pumped in and out, slow and then faster. He kept up a steady rhythm on her nubbin while he kissed along her neck, finding the wild pulse at the base of her throat.

“You’re going to make me...” She twisted away, gripped the steering wheel and made as if she would rise off of his lap. He wrapped a hand around her waist and pulled her back, never losing contact with her tight wetness. He watched in pure pleasure as her ass came falling down on his lap, and he met her with a thrust, although he was still clothed, and her skirt was an added barrier to him getting his needs met. Clamping her in place with his arm, he worked her. She bucked on his hand, almost screaming, but clenching her jaw to keep it somewhat muffled. “Keith, oh goodness, I’m coming. I didn’t mean to.”

He grinned behind her and didn’t stop his steady strokes until her cries began to ease. When they did, he slid his hand free and reached to pull her panties off while unbuckling his pants. She cowered, and with him having let her loose, she climbed back into her seat. He looked over at her, desperate to continue what they had started.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Keith,” she whispered. He knew what was coming. “I just can’t. I... You don’t understand. I... What happened to me is...”

“It’s okay.” Now was his turn to clench his teeth, but for a whole other reason. “I understand.” She seemed about to touch his arm, but he shook his head. At this point, he

didn't think he could handle contact without more. "No need to apologize. I'll take you home."



## Chapter Six

Renee spent the session in New York with her mind on Keith. How could she have let him get her off but then push him away when it was his turn. He had been nothing but kind to her. Not that she owed him or anything, but at least if she didn't feel comfortable sleeping with him, she could have pushed his hands away. No, the second he had rested his hand on her thigh, she'd come undone. Nothing short of a miracle could have made her stop him. And damn if he didn't have her hard on an orgasm within moments of starting. She guessed it went to show how horny she was.

She had wanted things to stay on a professional level between them, but how could that happen when from the start, Keith turned her on with just a flash of desire in those green eyes. Men had lusted after her before, when she was fully clothed. They had performed tolerably well when she was naked. And that was the biggest problem. Renee had to admit to herself that she enjoyed Keith going nuts over her, acting like he couldn't stop looking at her, coming on to her, even touching her in subtle ways. She felt like, as soon as he saw her naked, it was all over. He would find excuses not to call, not to help her, not to care. And then if he did, he'd soon be encouraging her to lose weight. Picking that kind of man was her M.O., so how could Keith be any different from the others?

As to that other fact, that he was rich, well, she couldn't fault him for not telling her, being that they weren't really dating. And while she didn't get how a person could hate their family members, she knew that some people didn't have the kind of close relationship she had shared with her mother. She felt bad that Keith didn't have that experience. Still, it would have been better if he had trusted her to tell her. She thought back to the day they first met, how he had turned back into his store, leaving her standing on the sidewalk alone when he thought her opinion of him had changed because he seemed poor. If he remembered that incident as well, it was no wonder he didn't want to tell her the truth. For all he knew, she could be a gold digger like that skank that had wrapped herself around him at dinner.

Renee winced, ignoring the pang in her chest at just the thought of how bold that woman had been, how she had felt free to rub up on Keith and to rest her hand on his chest. Skinny women like her who had nothing to be ashamed of in the body department pissed Renee off. She had to deal with the kind of attitude that woman had at work all the time. She was sick to death of it, and tired of feeling inferior to them.

Hell, if she was truly tired, she would have dragged Keith home last night and rode him until they were both sore. She groaned thinking about it. As it was, she might have blown her only chance. Keith had been nothing but polite and kind to her after she shot him down, but he hadn't pushed the issue of joining her in New York either. She'd be lucky if she ever saw him again when she flew home in a couple days.

Rather than focus on Keith to the point of losing her job since her manager had yelled at her to get her head out of the clouds, she pushed thoughts of Keith aside and vowed to revisit just what it was she was feeling for him on the flight home.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Renee's cab pulled up in front of her apartment building, it was after midnight. She'd finished up late that afternoon and had then missed her scheduled flight home. When she had arranged for a new seat and was at last on board the plane, she was too tired to worry over Keith. The second her butt hit the chair, she was out. At least the long flight had given her a chance to rest, although it probably meant she wouldn't sleep later. Either way, she was thankful to get back to her own apartment. Living out of a hotel room was not for her, even if it did come with room service.

After paying the cab driver, she yawned her way over to the mailbox and slipped her key inside her slot. A quick retrieval of what was most likely junk and bills, she hurried inside and locked the door behind her.

She tossed the mail on the dining room table and headed into the bedroom to strip and shower, before she returned and put on her electric teapot for boiling water. She loved this particular gadget because she had gone through too many tea kettles in the past that turned black from her forgetting about them and letting the water boil out. This one included an automatic shut off whether she remembered or not. Much safer that's for sure.

With another yawn, although she wasn't feeling too tired, she went back to the dining room table and began shuffling through her mail. When she flipped to a familiar envelope, her hands began to shake. Evan Doon. This time, the envelope was thicker than it was with the single sheet of printer paper he usually sent. She checked her address on the envelope. This piece had been addressed to her new apartment, not forwarded since she had informed the companies she didn't want to lose track of her and hadn't put in for a forward with the post office for all the rest.

She had prayed Evan wouldn't know where she had moved. Not that it was hard to find out in this day and time, but still she had hoped. Considering whether she should open it or not, or just toss it into the trash, she stood there a good ten minutes just holding the missive. At last, she sucked in a steadying breath and tore open the flap. First she pulled out the letter.

*Renee,*

*I can't believe you would think I'd let you start dating another man. You forgot who you belong to. Maybe it's time I got more serious with you.*

*Evan Doon*

By the time she finished reading the short message, Renee was shaking from head to toe. She sank down in a chair and pulled what turned out to be a picture from inside the envelope. The scene was the skating rink, and standing in the middle of it kissing were

her and Keith. Evan had been there, watching them. Renee sobbed, fumbling for her purse and the cell phone inside. After several false dials with her hands so unsteady, she managed to call Keith. While the phone rang, she prayed he would answer and not refuse her call, or worse hang up on her.

After about four rings, he came on muttering in a sleep-thickened voice. "Too late to read the display. Who is calling?"

"Keith," she wailed, trying to get herself together enough to speak.

"Renee?" He seemed to come awake all at once. "What's wrong, sweetness? Are you okay?"

"He-he knows where I live," she hiccupped into the phone. "He sent a picture of us kissing at the skating rink. He said, he said...I'm so scared. I'm alone here. Keith, please..."

"Shh, it's going to be okay, Renee." She heard thumps like he was moving around. "I'm getting dressed. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. To feel safer, check all your windows and the door. Make sure it's all locked. Then I want you to go into your bedroom and lock that door. You don't answer any knocks or the phone unless you see it's me calling. I'll call you to come open the door when I get there. Okay?"

She sniffled. "Okay. Just hurry, please. I just...I hate this. I hate it!"

"I know. I'm coming. I promise."

When he hung up, Renee rushed around the apartment checking all the windows and rechecking the front door. She had not put on the chain, so she did that and then gathered up her purse and her cell phone and ran into the bedroom. She turned the lock and stood in the middle of the room, looking around. Sudden thoughts of horror movies and someone hiding inside the house flashed through her mind, almost making her ill. She rushed to search under the bed and in the closet. Both were clear. Then to keep her hands occupied, she sat on the side of the bed and squeezed strawberry lotion into her palm to apply it to her dry skin. By the time she finished and had run a wide-toothed comb through her hair, her cell phone was ringing and she noted that it was Keith.

"Keith," she whispered when she answered.

"I'm at the front door, baby. Come let me in."

She couldn't get there fast enough. After tearing open the locks, she flung the door wide and threw herself into his arms. Never had she felt so safe in a man's strong embrace. Keith lifted her off her feet and carried her back inside. He set her down and turned to lock the door.

When he faced her, he cupped her cheeks and tilted her head back. The soft kiss he planted on her lips had her melting into his hold again. “What did the letter say? Let me have it.”

She pointed it out where she had dropped it on the table. He crossed to the table and began reading. His brows crashed low over his eyes when he looked at the picture. “I’ll string him up,” he grumbled. “I have several clues as to who this guy is. I can almost guarantee this will be wrapped up in a couple days, Renee. Meanwhile, I will stay here with you.”

“That’s not...I mean.” She blew out a breath and rushed over to stand beside him. The tears that had slowed when he arrived started up again. “Who am I kidding? I’m scared out of my mind, Keith. I don’t want to be selfish, but I can’t stay here alone. I just can’t do it.”

He pulled her close to his chest. “And I’m not asking you to. I’m staying. Come on, it’s late, and you should be in bed. I’m going to make a couple calls when it’s not one o’clock in the morning, and then you and I are going to be inseparable from now on.”

Keith turned out all the lights and walked Renee to her bedroom. He helped her lay down, and only when he stretched out beside her did she realize she had never put on her night gown. She lay there with him rocking her gently in her bathrobe with not a stitch beneath it. A tremor went through her, this time not because of her fear but because of Keith being so close in her bed.

Seeing her tense, he stroked her hair and whispered, “Don’t worry. I’m going to sleep on the couch. I’m just staying here until you fall asleep.”

She blinked away fresh tears for his gentleness, his considering her feelings. “Thank you so much. You didn’t have to come.”

“I did.” He stared down into her eyes. She wanted to look away, to deny what she was about to do, to let happen, but she couldn’t.

“Keith, stay.”

His eyes widened. “Renee...”

“Please.” She pulled his hand from her hair and rested it on her breast. “Stay here with me.”

In the moonlight shining through a small gap in the curtains, she saw his face clearly. He shut his eyes and laid his forehead against hers. “You don’t know what you’re asking, Renee. You’re vulnerable right now, and I refuse to take advantage of that fact. You’d only regret it in the morning.”

He rolled away to sit on the side of the bed with a slump to his shoulders. She clenched her fists and tried to calm her racing heart. This was it, now or never. She wanted Keith, and he'd made it more than obvious he wanted her. If he was going to be turned off by her body, then she was determined to find out now. She was already teary-eyed and not likely to get any sleep tonight. She could spend the hours crying for the loss of yet another man before they even made it official.

With courage dredged up from her toes, she moved her hands to the belt knotted at her waist and began unraveling it. She took hold of the two sides of her robe and spread them. Licking her dry lips, she focused on his back. "Keith," she called out. "Stay here with me."

He turned she knew to protest, and froze. His mouth dropped open. The moon had to be full with not one cloud dimming its borrowed light. The room was illuminated to the point that every detail of her naked body was on full display. "Damn it, woman, you make it hard."

She went for sass and forced a grin. "Don't you like what you see?"

"I'd be a blind fool not to." He put one knee on the bed, his heated gaze sweeping over her body from head to toe and back again. One hand on her leg, he pulled at it until her legs were spread, and he leaned lower as if to examine her center. Renee shivered. He focused on her face. "You're cold?"

"No, it's warm in here," she muttered, all at once embarrassed. What had she been thinking teasing him like this, not knowing if he would be turned on or off. And the fact that he hadn't jumped on top of her yet, made her think it shifted toward turned off.

His hand rose up her thigh. She caught her breath. "You don't shave."

She turned her head. "I haven't needed to."

He put his fingers there, stroking her until the trembling started again. She bit her lip to keep from moaning, but it took all she had. He worked his way lower, between her legs and paused at the first sign of her wetness. She swallowed.

"I like it just like this," he admitted. But his movements belied his words. He drew back and scratched at the back of his head with his other hand. "What you do to me, Renee. I feel like I'm about to lose it before I undress. You're so sexy. I'm almost afraid to touch you, that I'll make a fool of myself." He seemed to come to a decision. "Forget that, I'm hungry for this."

She yelped because he didn't give her a chance to digest his words, to realize he hesitated only because he was so charged at seeing her naked. In a blur of movement, he was on the bed, crouched between her legs with his hands beneath her ass cheeks. He lifted

Renee up off the mattress as he plunged his tongue into her warmth. His guttural moans as he ate her drove her toward an orgasm just as much as his flicking tongue.

“Oh, Keith, you’re going to make me come.” She bucked against his mouth and grabbed a handful of her pillow to shove into her mouth.

Keith ran his nose over her clit and drew back enough to draw in a deep breath. “Oh man, your scent is incredible, Renee. Do you know that?”

He didn’t wait for her to answer but thrust his tongue inside her again. She wanted to draw out his licking of her box for hours, but she couldn’t hold off her climax. Within moments of his beginning, she was shaking and screaming his name while electric pulses spasmed all over her core. She grabbed hold of the back of his head and pumped the best she could being several inches above the bed.

Keith rode the explosion out with her, never stopping his greedy attack for a second. When she settled down, he sat up and began yanking his clothes off. The sound of fabric tearing filled the room, but Keith kept stripping. When he was naked, it seemed the moonlight decided to hone in on his erection. Renee’s mouth went dry at his size, thicker than any of her previous lovers and so long, she was sure he’d bump her cervix if he wasn’t careful.

He held his shaft in his hand and stroked it while he watched her reaction. She licked her lips. “I want to suck it.”

He shook his head. “No way, sweetheart. I’d never last, and I’ve got to get this inside you before I lose my mind. Come here.” He released his shaft and reached up to pull her toward him, along the bed. Her ass went straight up his firm thighs, and the silky hairs on his legs tickled her skin a little.

“Anyone can see you’re a very big man in terms of height and build, but...” She swallowed a second time. “Oh, goodness, you’re so huge. Um...”

“Don’t worry. I might have my challenges with women in terms of words, but I guarantee you, I know how to use this bad boy. I promise, I won’t hurt you.”

With practiced hands, he guided his shaft’s round head to her opening, parting her folds as he went. From the first piercing inch, Renee felt herself stretching to accommodate him. She was no virgin, so it didn’t exactly hurt, but when he got as much as he could inside, the fit was so snug she panted. All at once, he began to move in slow measures. He glided all the way up until she thought he must be about to touch her cervix but didn’t, and then he’d pull back so only the tip penetrated.

He angled her hips and his in such a way that when he pushed forward, his shaft’s tip brushed over her inner walls. The sensation was intense and unexpected to the point that she cried out and jerked almost out of his hold.

“You like that, sweetness?” he asked.

Tears sprung to her eyes. “Yes. I can’t believe... Oh, yes!”

“Some believe it doesn’t exist, but that, my love, is your G-spot,” he explained.

“Do it again,” she shouted. “Please, Keith, do that again. I’m going to come again. I’ve never...not while a man was inside me. Do it again.”

He pulled all the way out of her, and she could have wept. But he turned her over to her stomach and hiked her ass in the air. He positioned his shaft at her sopping wet entrance and pushed in. Renee realized in this position, he could slide in at a less awkward angle to hit her spot. When he found it, and she was almost sobbing into her pillow with the sheer magnitude of the sensations, he squeezed her hips and picked up the pace.

Keith grunted after a few strokes. “Fuck, I’m not going to be able to hold this, Renee. I’ve got to let go. It’s too good, baby. It’s too damn good.”

“Do it,” she encouraged him. “I’m going to come again.”

The words had scarcely left her mouth when her orgasm, more powerful than any she had ever had before, slammed down over her. She grabbed the sheets under her and forced herself back on Keith’s shaft, screaming his name at the same time. His hold tightened to keep her from hurting herself on his length, but he didn’t slow down. Every time his big, amazing shaft slid across her sensitive walls, new explosions of pleasure radiated through her. This was unlike anything she had ever experienced. She couldn’t believe she had held off, delayed it for even one day. If this was the only time they were intimate before things soured, it was worth it.

Keith buckled over her, his hand coming down heavy on the bed. His hips drove into her, and he shouted her name kissing the side of her neck and her shoulder. “I knew it,” he muttered when his movements slowed. He pulled out of her and lay down on the bed, carrying her with him.

“Knew what?”

He tucked her beneath his arm, holding her snug to his side. “I knew it would be that good. No, I knew it would be good, but not that it would be incredible. Your body’s perfect, so curvy and soft. I’m growing hard again just thinking about it.”

She slapped at his chest. “You are not.”

He took her hand and guided it down to his shaft. Sure enough, he was growing out, hardening even while she touched him. Tingles of need moved through her core just knowing this sexy man was that turned on by her. And yet, she couldn’t trust it. Not yet.

She pushed aside those doubts for now and decided to enjoy herself to the fullest. It wasn't every day she got a man in her bed that looked like he could give those pretty boys at work a run for their money.

She wiggled out of his arms and sat up to swing herself over his hips, straddling him with her hands braced on his chest. "Well, if you're ready for more..." She grinned.

His eyes widened, and his gaze lowered to her heavy breasts. When he licked his lips, she knew she'd be shouting his name soon enough while he sucked her nipples until she lost her mind.



## Chapter Seven

Keith opened his eyes and experienced a wave of sheer joy. He had made love with Renee last night, or rather several times throughout the night. And after he had assured her he found her body scrumptious to the point of being obsessed to lick her from head to toe, she had let loose her wilder side. He grinned in the early morning sunlight piercing the gap in the curtains. Renee had ridden him like he'd never been ridden before. And all the while, those luscious breasts had bounced in his face until he couldn't resist sucking her taut nipples into his mouth. *Fools!* He thought. Every single idiot who told her she wasn't beautiful as she was, who thought she should lose weight. Her body set him on fire, and her sweetness kept the flames fanned until he was consumed. No, Renee was everything he longed for in a woman, and much much more.

And then he sobered, remembering the circumstances that had brought them together last night. Evan Doon. He'd gone too far taking that picture, almost ruining what Keith was working hard to rebuild, Renee's belief that Christmas was a magical time of year, one to enjoy to the fullest rather than allowing depression to drive her into hiding until it was over. Keith wouldn't let that pervert destroy what he began, Renee's healing. He would find him and put him out of her misery.

A gentle vibration on the floor alerted him that he had a call on his cell phone. He glanced over at Renee who was curled up in the cutest position, still sleeping, and inched his way to the edge of the bed. He stood and moved around on tiptoe to find where he'd tossed his pants last night. At the time, he didn't give a rip where they landed or that he didn't damage his phone.

After retrieving it from his pocket, he frowned at the display and jabbed the pickup button. "Mother?"

"Hello, son," she said in her usual formal tone. "I'm calling to invite you to dinner."

He shifted the phone to his other hand and looked down at his nails. "What's the occasion?"

She sighed. "You know the occasion, the same as every year. Christmas, of course. We're having it a little early for your father. He'll be going into the hospital for a procedure soon, and we wanted to make sure nothing stopped the dinner from being a success."

"Yes, can't have that. Traditions must be upheld," he quipped.

"Keith!"

He heard her gritting her teeth, something he had her doing since he was a child who refused to conform to his family's stiff ways. Many times during those years, he tried to

convince himself and others that he was adopted. Never mind that as Becky had said, he was a spitting image of his father.

“You didn’t even ask what kind of procedure your father is getting,” she all but whined. He pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. Already the euphoria he had awakened with was fading. His mother had a knack for sucking the joy out of most things.

“I figured you’d tell me specifically if it was anything urgent,” he told her. Probably something cosmetic, he thought. She confirmed his thoughts with her next words.

“Well, he’s going to get a breast reduction. They have it for males too, you know.”

Keith pulled the phone down from his ear and blinked at it. She was incomprehensible. “I’m sure he wouldn’t like you spreading that little tidbit around.”

“Oh he doesn’t care,” she said in an airy tone. “Anyway, dinner is at six tonight. You can even bring a date. James let slip that you have a girlfriend now. I hope she’s respectable.”

He didn’t rise to the bait. James would never let anything slip about him or his life. He knew Keith’s sanity depended on him having little contact with his family. “You can forget about me coming, Mother. I didn’t come for the last three years. I’m not coming this time. And whoever you’re getting your information from, you tell them to stay out of my business. Have a nice day.”

Before he could hang up, she shouted into the phone, something she rarely did, if ever. His mother held herself in strict control at all times, which made it hard for her to understand his liveliness as a child, ripping and running. Oddly, his brother and sister had always been well-behaved. He figured she must have thought she got a bad seed and tried again with his brother and then his sister. She should be happy with them and leave him to himself. But no, with interviews like the one Becky had seen on TV the other night, his mother kept trying to bring him in line.

“Please come, Keith. Your father and I aren’t getting any younger, and while I understand his desire to have this procedure done, his regular doctor did not think it was a good idea given the scare he had last year.”

Keith was amazed. This was the first time his mother sounded like she had feelings just like everyone else. “Fine, I will come, but I’m not staying long. Mother, I warn you—”

“I know, I know, don’t expect much more than the fact that you’ll show your face. Your father will be thrilled. Six o’clock, darling. Good-bye.” She hung up before he could get another word in, and he wondered if she had enacted that little show of feeling just to be the one to hang up first. He wouldn’t put it past her.

“Hey,” Renee called out behind him. “What are you sighing about?”

He spun around with a grin. Man, she was cute in the morning. “Morning, beautiful. I have just enough time to take you to breakfast and drop you at work before I have to take care of a few things. Are you free tonight?”

She blinked up at him in confusion after he planted a kiss on her soft lips. A stirring of desire started inside him, but he tamped it down. He needed to make some headway on her case fast, so they could move forward.

“I guess.” She sat up, and the cover slipped a little to reveal one nipple. Keith’s mouth watered. Damn, one quickie couldn’t hurt.

Her eyebrow shot up. “Why are you looking at me like that?” She squeaked. “Oh, goodness, don’t tell me you want more so soon, Keith. You’re insatiable.”

He pounced on her, dragging the cover lower to reveal both bouncy breasts that were the stuff of his fantasies. “Look who’s talking. You have a healthy appetite yourself, woman.”

With no preamble whatsoever, he parted her legs and cupped her heat, squeezing gently. She moaned and arched under him, offering up those delicious breasts. He took the offering and lost himself in pleasuring the woman he knew he was on the way to loving with all his heart.

\* \* \* \*

Keith left his car in the parking lot where he had tracked down a security agency that might know something about Evan Doon and took the elevator to the fourteenth floor. He had no trouble finding the Blue Cooper Security Agency as the name was emblazoned in large silver letters on the outside of the office door. He let himself in and stood glancing around. The place was done in the same rich cherry wood as the hallway was, and he figured the layout had been left over from the original building design because the cheesiness of the sign on the door did not suggest the owner of the company had much taste. Not that he could speak. His office employed the bare minimums of design. Maybe Renee could give him decorating tips, he mused. Better yet, he could just turn the entire project over to her to fix up. Most of his female clients that visited his office in the past had wrinkled their noses at the bare white walls, cheap carpet, and scratched desk in his office.

“Mr. Greenwich?” A man dwarfing him by a good four inches with shoulders like a linebacker came strolling purposely toward him with hand extended. “I’m Blue Cooper.”

Was that his real name? “Nice to meet you,” Keith responded. “You said you might know who I’m looking for?”

“Yes, come with me.”

Keith followed the man into his office, and right away Keith felt closed in. The place was a box. He was big himself, and the ten by ten office seemed cramped. He could only imagine how Blue stood it.

Blue sat behind his desk and flipped a file open. "We had a guy who worked here briefly two years ago. His name was Evan, not Boon though. Here's his picture."

Keith took the offered picture and studied it. The guy was clean cut, ordinary-looking, but then a nutjob didn't have to look like one. "What makes you think he could be my guy?"

"Well, I had to fire him because he couldn't keep his hands off some of the female clients' asses, if you know what I mean. Most of the women were lonely with too much money and nothing to do with themselves, so there weren't any serious complaints. They kind of got off on the attention. The last straw though was when he started getting a little obsessive with one of the women. He started leaving her letters, talking about she was his and no one else could touch her. Freaked her out something good."

Excitement and hope coursed through Keith's system. He scooted forward in his seat. This might actually be his guy. "Do you have any of the letters for a comparison?"

"Sure." Blue flipped through some pages in the folder in front of him. "I tell you I had a time convincing that woman not to sue my company. This is my baby, and I learned my lesson quick. Never make concessions for anybody. I don't care how much turnover we have in this business. It's not worth it."

"I hear you," Keith agreed.

"Here we are." Blue handed over a letter and an envelope. Both were dull grey, and unless he was going nuts himself, had a faint musty scent to them. He quirked an eyebrow at Blue, and the man shook his head. "Old stationery of the woman's he found in her attic. Weird how that funk has clung to it after all this time."

Keith shrugged and examined the envelope again. There was no shield drawn on the outside, and the wording of the letter seemed somehow not to fit what Evan Doon had produced. Sure, the same obsessive 'you're mine' was there, but not the angry tone. These words were almost of a lovesick man, and Evan Doon's missives didn't have that feel. "Any idea where he is now?"

Blue nodded. "I did some checking." He winked. "Investigation is in my blood even though we don't do much of that here. Found out that he worked for a construction company downtown. I have a call in to the guy who owns it, and I expect his callback soon."

As if he had produced it from just mentioning the call, the phone rang. Blue picked it up and punched a button. “Blue here. Yeah, uh huh. You don’t say. Damn! Okay, thanks.”

He hung up, and Keith felt his heart sinking. “Bad news?”

Blue ran a hand over his bushy, overgrown mustache. “Afraid so. Evan did work for the construction place about eight months, but then he was arrested for attempted rape. Guy happened to know for a fact that Evan is still behind bars because of that and some other charges he didn’t specify. Unfortunately, that means he can’t be your man. Sorry to have wasted your time.”

Keith stood up and shook Blue’s hand. “No, you’ve been a big help. I’ve got some new ideas for what to look into next. Thanks a lot.”

“Any time.” Blue saw him to the door. “Hey, if you’re ever looking for a change of scenery, give me a call, man. I can always use another body.”

Keith grinned. “Will do.”

## Chapter Eight

Renee thought she would throw up when Keith pulled up to the mansion that was his parent's home. She didn't even know why she had agreed to come. After all, she was still firmly in denial that they were in essence dating, since in doing so she could protect herself from a shattered heart should he dump her. Damn it, she was pathetic, but at least she had given it a shot with him, and the sex was out of this world.

As she sat waiting for Keith to come around to help her out of the car—his insistence—what she had said to John came back to her mind. She'd spouted off about not giving a crap about her unrefined ways. Looking up at the manicured lawn, the fancy landscaping that included a fountain and neatly sculpted bushes, she came to the conclusion that Keith's family was the epitome of refined. Even nature wasn't allowed to step out of line.

Keith opened the door, and a blast of frosty air hit her in the face, invading the warmth and safety of his car's interior. For a second, she wanted to draw back and ignore his outstretched hand. But that was the coward's way out. She might have hang-ups, but she liked to believe she could face a challenge every now and again. And hell, if Keith changed his mind about her from this dinner, well it probably wasn't going to go well with them anyway.

*Positive, damn it, Renee! Think positively.* When had she become so negative? She considered it. Yeah, after John. He had been the last straw. One would think her self-esteem would have been boosted with her line of work, but that was the worst place to build one's self-image. With this Evan situation on top of that, she began to think maybe it wasn't for her. She wanted a simpler life, sort of like how Keith had found his own niche, what worked for his personality. She admired that in him and wanted it for herself. It wasn't too late. Maybe she could go back to school.

When she tripped over the first step up to the front door, Keith's hold on her arm tightened. "Hey, space cadet, mind in the game. I need you with me."

She blinked up at him and caught the uncertainty in his eyes, the stiffness in his shoulders. How could she have not seen it earlier? Keith really didn't get along with his family, maybe even felt rejected by them, and coming back here after making a break from them must be challenging for him.

She smiled and squeezed his arm. "Don't worry. I'll be at your side."

His gaze stilled on her face. "Forever?"

Her heart skipped a few beats. "Are you serious?"

He grinned, his usual boyish façade slipping into place, and winked. "If you're a good girl and please Daddy." He leaned down to press his lips to her ear. "Do you know how hard I am looking at you in that dress?"

She gasped. “Stop being nasty right in front of your parent’s home, Keith.”

He burst out laughing and led her up the steps. As soon as their feet touched the top, the door swung open and a man stood in the doorway that could only be the butler. Renee gawked like an idiot, having never seen one in real life in what she could only term as his butler uniform.

“James,” Keith said, pride in his voice, “this is my Renee.”

Renee was about to protest at being called his but kept silent when James bowed at the waist and intoned, “Miss. Pleasure to meet you.”

Keith slapped the older man on the shoulder. “Good to see you, man. It’s been forever, huh? We’ve only spoken a couple times on the phone. You’ll have to come downtown and let me buy you lunch.”

James’ eyes widened. “Sir, that would be improper.”

“Nonsense.” Keith bound past the man, guiding Renee into the foyer. The space inside the front door had to be bigger than her entire apartment. The ceiling stretched two stories, and across from the foyer were two sets of stairs. In the middle of these on the wall was a gigantic wreath. At floor level between the stairs was a white Christmas tree with blinking lights and metallic paper-covered presents under it in multiple colors.

While Renee stood there with her mouth hanging open at the beauty of it all, the perfection, James closed the front door and stepped around them. “May I take your coats and show you to the sitting room.”

*Seriously? Sitting room?*

After they had shed their outerwear, Renee followed Keith and James to the sitting room. She schooled herself not to react like the pitiful poor girl she had grown up as when she entered the room where his family waited. Just like the elegance of the foyer, this room was professionally designed with an exposed brick fireplace, a fire roaring in its depths, quality furniture, and another tree. This green one was much bigger, extending almost to the high ceiling and had presents beneath it in subtler yet just as impressive wrapping paper.

When she had finished surveying the décor in the room, Renee settled her gaze on the family. An older couple sitting in individual chairs by the fire, a young woman with a man about her age at her side. Another man standing by the window alone, and two children under five perched on the couch. Renee marveled at how well-behaved the kids were. They should have been bouncing off the walls with the excitement of Christmas coming, begging for the cookies and cakes on a plate on the table, or something else to drive their parents out of their minds.

No one spoke. All eyes, Renee realized in embarrassment, were on her. Just great. Keith had not told them about bringing her or, she guessed, about the fact that she was black. Then again, these were modern times. Maybe his parents didn't care about that sort of thing.

"Keith," the older woman said in a choked tone of voice, "who is your friend?"

Okay, maybe they did care. Still something told her these people would never say anything. They would make her feel uncomfortable until she ran screaming from the house.

Keith drew her close to his side, his arm around her shoulders. "This is Renee." His expression dared them to disrespect her.

The woman seemed to force a smile. "Welcome to our home, Renee. We're glad to have you, aren't we, Dale?" The father grunted but nodded, and they left it at that.

Renee was glad Keith had elected to arrive like ten minutes before six. He told her he knew without a doubt that his mother would insist everyone sat down at the dinner table at six on the dot. Arriving ten minutes till meant little chitchat before they ate. She had already outlined to the entire family what few topics of conversation would not interfere with digestion. Keith felt berating him for not being what they wanted in a son would not be allowed.

Although Keith hadn't shared with his mother that he would be bringing Renee, the woman was on top of things. She had clapped her hands and called for James to have the housekeeper set out another place setting. She even indicated where Renee would sit, and that was as far away from Keith as possible.

When they entered the dining room, Keith strolled over to the name cards above each place and tossed away the name written on the one to his right. Renee hadn't seen who it was, but he guided her into the chair anyway without bothering to locate her actual name. It took everything in her not to burst out laughing. No wonder he drove his ordered mother crazy. Then again, who set out name cards for their immediate family? The woman was excessive.

"Keith!" his mother called out when she discovered what he had done.

His father grasped her elbow and directed her to the foot of the table. "Sit down, Margaret. I'm hungry."

Her face beet red, she sank with regal grace into her chair. Renee expected an angry glare in her direction, but Margaret was too well-mannered for that. "Shall we say grace, everyone? Keith, you lead us this time."



Keith didn't put up a fight, and Renee found tears wetting her eyes when he prayed. His gentle words requesting for peace and love at the holiday, happiness for those who had suffered loss during this time, made her remember her mother. Under the table, he laced his fingers with hers and squeezed. Her heart ached with the loss of her mother, but also with the hope she felt having found Keith. With him beside her, she just might be able to enjoy Christmas again.

The dinner stretched on with a number of courses and conversation about things she knew nothing of. When the main course was served at last, Margaret turned her attention on Renee. Keith whispered that it had taken that long for her mother to let go of her anger, which surprised Renee since the woman had been smiling and an attentive hostess the entire time.

"So, Renee, what do you do?" she asked.

Renee froze, glanced at Keith, and then back at his mother. "I'm a model."

On the other side of the table, his sister Shelby sputtered. "A what? You're kidding."

Keith's expression darkened. "What's that supposed to mean? Renee is incredibly beautiful and sexy." He ran the back of his hand over her cheek, warming her.

His sister looked doubtful. Her husband spoke up for the first time. "I'll give you that. What's it like?"

Renee didn't utter a word. Everyone at the table knew he wasn't asking about what modeling was like, but rather what it was like for Keith sleeping with Renee. Even his mother knew what the man was insinuating. She cleared her throat, and several pairs of eyes shifted her way. Shelby's husband's gaze never left Renee's cleavage.

"We will not have base talk at the dinner table," Margaret announced. "It's bad for digestion."

Keith's brother rolled his eyes. "Isn't everything, Mother?"

Her raised eyebrow indicated she was not amused, but Renee was. These people were outrageous. She could see why Keith had jetted. She was also used to the lustful looks she sometimes got for her big boobs, so that didn't bother her. Of course, she didn't appreciate the hints that Keith was with her because he had a black woman fantasy. She liked to think he had a better character than that, and surprisingly wasn't worried about it.

Keith, on the other hand, looked like he was about to explode. He tightened his hand in hers to the point that she winced, and he loosened his grip right away. "I'm sorry, sweetness." He stood and tugged her to her feet. "I think this is about it for us, Mother. I came as you asked. Now Renee and I have somewhere to be."

“But we’re not finished eating,” she complained. “Dale, talk to him.”

His father turned cold eyes on Keith first and then Renee. He didn’t say one word. Keith tightened his lips, firmed his shoulders, and moved away from the table. He pulled Renee so quickly, she could only call out a “Thanks for having us” before they were in the foyer.

“Why do I bother?” Keith grumbled, looking more like his father who had worn a perpetual frown through the entire fiasco. “They don’t give a damn, and I should never have exposed you to that.”

He caressed her cheek and leaned down to kiss her. Renee wrapped her arms around his waist while they waited for James to bring their coats. “Don’t worry. It wasn’t so bad. At least the food was on the money, huh?”

One side of his mouth turned up. “My mother. Food that doesn’t taste good is—”

Renee laughed. “Bad for digestion?”

He nodded, grinning now. “Yeah. You understand her so well.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

He tugged her closer to him, kissed her, and buried his face against her neck before drawing back. “See that? You are good for me. You bring me out of my funk with your sense of humor.”

“You’re kidding, right? You’re the one who keep me laughing and having fun. You always seem so lighthearted, and I guess tonight I see why. You’re busy enjoying life because you couldn’t when you were younger.”

“Hm, something like that.”

James came in with their coats, and Renee and Keith said their good-byes to him, Keith insisting that James come downtown on his next day off. James gave in, probably thinking Keith needed to feel someone in his household gave a crap about him. Renee wanted to cry that it was the hired help and not a blood relative.

“Are we headed home?” she asked when they were in the car and speeding down the highway. He remained silent for a few moments, his expression pensive. Renee laid a hand on his arm and rubbed it up and down. “Don’t let them get to you. If they don’t know what a great man you are, then it’s their loss. Families, more than any others, should be accepting of who we are whether they agree with the choices we’ve made or not.”

Keith brought her hand to his mouth and nuzzled her palm, sending tingles of pleasure along her spine. "I'm not worried about them. I'm used to their ways. Sometimes it gets to me, but not tonight!" He almost shouted the last few words. "I'm on a mission, and my family with sticks firmly planted up their asses will not ruin that."

Renee cocked an eyebrow at him. "A mission?"

He grinned, casting a warm look her way. Her heartbeat sped up. "Yes, a mission to heal my special lady's heart. Before I'm done, you will love this time of year. I promise you that."

"Oh, Keith, don't say that. You can't make that kind of promise. I admit I'm having different experiences with you, doing more than I have in a few years around this time. It's been fun, but loving Christmas is a bit much."

"Tree decorating party," he announced as if she hadn't spoken.

"Come again?"

He winked. "Beautiful, we are going to the tree decorating party. It happens to be tonight. Everyone gets together to decorate the tree on Central, downtown. They give free hot chocolate and warm cookies to everyone who lends a hand."

She crossed her arms over her chest and faced forward. "So in other words, you're only going so you can eat."

"My love, you know me so well." He burst out laughing, and his sudden merriment was contagious. For tonight, Renee pushed her worries aside to have as much fun as possible with Keith. There was never a dull moment with the man, even when she was struggling over the right fork to use at his parent's dinner. This tree decorating party would be exciting because Keith would make it that way, just with his vibrant personality. She wouldn't miss it for anything.

## Chapter Nine

Renee and Keith burst through her front door shivering with teeth chattering. Keith slammed the door, locked it, and rushed Renee into the kitchen. He flipped one of the stove's knobs to activate an electric burner and held her hands a safe distance from the heat.

"Ugh, I can't believe our hands froze all over again from the car to the door," she groaned.

Keith pressed in close behind her, rubbing his hands over hers and making her heart do its regular thump at his nearness. "Yeah, that temperature dropped out of nowhere, but at least we got the tree done, huh? It looked great, and you looked even better in the flickering lights. You're so beautiful, Renee."

She blushed, staring down at their clasped hands. "And you're determined." She didn't tell him what she thought he was determined to do and didn't want to admit it to herself, but Keith's goal went beyond just making Christmas a happy time for her. His aim was obvious in everything he did, the sweet words he spoke, the gentle touches that had at some point transformed from simple lust to something deeper. She dared not explore it.

But her lover was perceptive, sometimes seeming to read her mind. He rested his lips against her ear and spoke in a low, rumbling tone. "I *will* win your heart."

"Keith..."

"Come on. You need to get to bed. It's after midnight, and you've got work in the morning. I'm going in with you."

"You don't have to."

He kissed her. "I'm going. Besides, I have to check out a few things."

Renee shivered. She didn't want to think about Evan either. He was the only black mark on her time with Keith, the memory of which had her wondering sometimes if Keith was so dedicated as just a part of his job. She shook her head. No, she'd just been convinced a moment ago he wanted her to fall in love with him. Frustration had her gritting her teeth as she headed to her bedroom, Keith behind her with his hands on her shoulders. The game of love was too unsettling, had her second guessing every time she turned around. It could drive a person to drink.

When they had jumped in the shower for a quick hot wash, they both settled beneath the warm blankets on her bed. Now that they were lovers, there was no sense in Keith sleeping on the couch. Besides, all she wanted was to be in his arms, to ward off the painful loneliness of the season, she told herself, and not that it was Keith and no one else she wanted to be there with her.

When he tucked her tight to his huge, muscled body, she felt his hard-on. The man was rarely not ready for action. She smirked at him in the darkness, and he must have sensed more than saw the look in the dim lighting around them.

He chuckled. "Sorry, can't help it. You're naked. My guy takes that as meaning he'll get with his mate."

"His mate, huh?"

"Oh yeah." Keith demonstrated just who or what his shaft's mate was by slipping a hand between them and stroking between her legs. Renee's lips parted. She drew in a trembling breath and tried not to succumb to the delicious waves of pleasure he gave her with the slightest touch.

"You said I needed to sleep," she managed to rasp out.

"Yes, sleep," he agreed and then rolled her to her back and positioned himself over her. Because she had grown slick from their bare forms cradled together, Keith entered with no trouble. Renee spread her legs wider and wrapped them around his waist. Both exhausted, they moved in a slow rhythm, soft moans and the gentle slap of their bodies coming together the only sound in the room.

Keith raised his head to look down into her eyes. He stroked her hair from her face and studied her as if he was committing her to memory. "You are perfect."

She looked away. "I'm not."

He turned her head to face him again. "Do you think..." He kissed her and rested his forehead against hers, his eyes closed. Renee luxuriated in being in his embrace, in the feel of him moving in and out of her, caressing her hip, and the warmth of his breath on her lips. "I wish I could say the words, Renee."

She shook. "Keith."

"Don't worry. I won't."

"It's so hard to believe."

She felt him smile on her lips. "I know. But you will believe it after while, baby. No matter how long it takes, I'll stick with you. You might think this is a job for me and nothing else. I told myself that's what it was, to gain some level of self-control around you, but you already know how hard it is for me to keep my hands to myself."

She nodded. "Then it's physical, Keith. You shouldn't confuse the two. Lust fades."

“This won’t fade.”

She thought he would say more, but he fell silent and arched his back in order to reach her breast. His lips closed around a stiff nipple, and he laved at the tiny peak with his tongue. Renee moaned, curving up to his mouth, wanting to be his for all time. She clutched his arms, her nails digging into his flesh. He pumped a little faster and sucked harder.

Her orgasm descended, and his release tumbled after. They clung to one another, moaning, calling each other’s names until the pressure eased. Afterward, Renee fell asleep under Keith’s heavy weight with his softening shaft inside her.

\* \* \* \*

Keith leaned against the wall with his arms folded over his chest. Several times a cameraman’s assistant or some other person with important things to do in the spot where he stood had glared at him and asked him to stand somewhere else. All the time, Keith never took his eyes off Renee. She was a natural, he discovered. In her sexy lingerie for her biggest client, she moved in subtle ways while a man with a camera snapped off picture after picture of her. Even with so many people around, it didn’t seem to faze her in the least.

Remembering he had a job to do and was not there to gawk at Renee, he scanned the room. Every spot was filled with equipment, people either standing about looking busy or zipping in and out of the room. Clothes wracks bulging with outfits of all styles lined the walls, and cell phones buzzed among the chatter of voices. He wondered how anything was accomplished with the mayhem.

Spotting a woman Renee had pointed out earlier as the person in charge, Keith began to weave through the crowd toward her. She held a cell phone to one ear, another in her hand, and her bright red hair was filled with pens and pencils. Despite how she seemed pulled in every direction, the woman was attractive in a gray pin-striped skirt suit. She barked commands to at least three assistants that would send them scurrying for the exit to return several minutes later with whatever information she required.

“Ms. Deborah Toole?” Keith called to her. “I’d like a moment of your time, if you don’t mind.”

Someone from behind grabbed his arm and tugged. Keith turned to find another woman standing before him, nostrils flared, eyes blazing in annoyance. From her flawless skin and slender figure, he assumed she was another of the models, for which he didn’t have time. When he arrived earlier with Renee, one after another of them had flaunted themselves in front of him, just because they could. Apparently, there was no loyalty in this particular bunch. Keith hadn’t blinked twice at any of the women. None could hold a candle to Renee.

“I don’t have time for this,” he told her, his impatience clear in his voice.

She narrowed her eyes and if possible flared her nostrils even more. “Aren’t you Renee’s boyfriend?”

He sighed. “I am, and you are?”

“Deborah Toole, owner of Parker Toole Modeling Agency.”

Realizing that she and not the other woman was the one he was looking for, he reined in the attitude he had been displaying. Damn, he had taken her for one of the models. She looked almost as young as Renee. Had the woman aged well, or did her money do this for her?

She put her hands on slender hips glaring at him, and Keith wondered if she was guessing at the thoughts flowing through his mind. “I don’t allow boyfriends with the girls when they’re working. Sometimes, they have to pose in suggestive ways with the male models, which doesn’t sit well with the insecure, jealous type, if you know what I mean.” She raised sculpted eyebrows at him.

He grinned, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Well, considering Renee doesn’t have any accounts that call for the *suggestive* poses, I have nothing to worry about, huh?”

Her mouth compressed in a straight line. “I don’t have time to placate a—”

“This has nothing to do with my relationship with Renee and everything to do with her safety while working for you. I’m sure you’ve heard of the stalker she’s picked up in the last few months.”

Deborah rolled her eyes. “Almost every model goes through this type of thing. This fool has been doing nothing but sending silly letters.” She waved a hand over the room. “Ask every one of them if they’ve ever gotten mail from a pervert, and they’ll all say they have. It comes with the territory, but most take my advice when I tell them to ignore it. Some, like Renee, are more sensitive and blow it out of proportion.”

Keith opened his mouth to tell her what he thought of her dismissal of Renee’s fears, of her peace of mind being new to this kind of work, but Mrs. Deborah Toole was done with him. In a cloud of a soft flowery scent that teased rather than overwhelmed, she swept away to be swallowed up in the small crowd.

“Um?”

With all the noise, Keith almost didn’t hear the person speaking behind him. He began to turn around, but she laid a hand on his back as if to hold him in place. From the delicate touch, he was pretty sure it wouldn’t be a problem to shake off her hold to find out who was there, but he humored her for the moment. “What’s this about?”

“I know who you’re looking for,” she told him.

Keith stiffened. A break? This easy? He didn’t know if he should trust this woman. The models could be cutthroat, some of them being ambitious enough to do anything. That had him thinking. Could Evan be a woman, just another model trying to scare Renee to get her out of the way? From what he had learned in questioning her and from the report his PD contact had shared, Renee had been fortunate enough to land this particular account with Max Exclusives, especially for her age. Almost all of the models were under twenty-two who worked on this project.

“Why should I believe that?” he asked while scanning the room to locate Renee. She wasn’t present, and Keith felt a moment of unease until she strolled in the door wearing a different bra and panty set. He breathed deep to keep his mind on business. What he wanted to do was march over there and show every one of these people just who Renee belonged to. Of course she wouldn’t appreciate the barbarian attitude, so he kept his distance for now. He’d show her later how much he enjoyed the photo shoot. Well, the part when he got to watch her at least.

When he realized the woman behind him hadn’t answered, he spun around. No one was near him. The women within a few feet paid him no mind, except one who grinned and winked when he caught her eye. Something told him she wasn’t the one. He sighed, praying he hadn’t blown a good lead with the suspicious attitude.

He moved through the people standing in his path, looking for anyone who might be the girl who had spoken to him. Conversations about next assignments, clothes, makeup and boyfriends floated to him as he walked.

“Oh, Lord, here we go,” one woman groaned.

“What?” another responded.

“Big boss.” The first woman pointed with her chin. “Guy who thinks he can come strolling in every now and then to boss us all.”

“Yeah,” her companion agreed, “just because his name is also on the agency’s papers. If you ask me, I don’t know how she’s stayed in business so long. He’s nothing.”

The other woman laughed. “Yeah, a real nobody. I mean, damn, he’s not even good-looking.”

“That’s him.”

Keith spun around at the voice in time to see the back of a woman’s head as she walked away from him. He turned toward the doorway where the two women had been discussing Deborah Toole’s husband. They were right, he realized. The guy in the



doorway was squat and had a bulldog face. He couldn't imagine what Deborah had seen in him to marry him. Must be money, he figured. And what had money bags gotten for setting his wife up with her own business? A sexy model to hang from his arm. Eye candy. Keith shook his head. Their lives were a cliché. While he casually worked his way to the far wall where there were less people within hearing distance, he pulled his cell phone out and punched the speed dial for his friend at the PD.

His buddy Jeff barked a greeting into the phone on the third ring. "Butterfield."

Keith cut to the chase. "What do you know about Deborah Toole's husband. I don't have a first name, but he owns the modeling agency with her. Might have money."

Jeff grunted. "Yeah, he's got it. Not old like yours. Investments or some such. We ran a routine check on him a couple years ago. One of the models complained of inappropriate behavior. Case was dropped."

Keith frowned. "You're fucking kidding me, Jeff. And you didn't think to tell me this when I took Renee's case? Why were the charges dropped?"

The click of keys being stabbed came over the line, and Keith imagined his friend's thick short fingers abusing his keyboard in his usual heavy-handed way. "Didn't think it was relevant, especially since Toole's lawyer uncovered some scam the model was involved in the year before where she lied about another big wig touching her. Think she was out to get money. As soon as that came to light, she changed her story and dropped the charges. Thought Toole might bring up his own charges on account of her potentially ruining his character and bringing false accusations, but he wanted the whole mess buried." Keith could almost hear his friend shrug. "So, like I said, non-issue."

"What if I told you one of the models here points at him as the man writing the letters to Renee?" Keith suggested.

"I'd say get proof." Jeff hung up without another word.

Pissed off, Keith shoved his phone in his pocket. He ran a hand over his face and along his neck. He didn't want this to get out of hand. He wanted to put the fear of him and God into this guy, close it up quickly, and get back to concentrating on wooing Renee. As it was, Evan was ruining Renee's Christmas, and damn it, Keith could not let it continue another day.

After he searched the room for the woman with the waist-length black hair who he had seen walking away from him, he went out into the hall and searched the rest of the area. After twenty minutes, he was about to give up for the time being and return to the room where Renee was working. He considered questioning Toole, but decided to put it off until he had done more checking on the man himself. The police might not be willing to look at him as a potential suspect, but Keith wouldn't rule him out. Renee was not some

gold digger looking to get a big payoff by blackmailing her employer's husband. If he was the one, Keith would get him. *Period.*

He came to the end of a hall where there were fewer people and paused at the feeling of freedom from the crowd. The air seemed fresher and lighter in the absence of all the perfumes, lotions, crèmes, and whatever else these people coated themselves with. Keith turned to head back and stopped short. The woman stood before him.

"Can we talk?" she asked. Before he could answer, she glanced over her shoulder like she was afraid someone would see them.

Keith wasted no time taking her arm in case she changed her mind. He considered himself a good judge of character and believed he would know if she had an angle to accusing Toole of writing the letters.

He checked a couple of doors off the hall, found one room empty, and ushered her inside before closing the door behind them. Propping himself against the wall so as not to intimidate the already trembling woman, he asked, "What's this about?"

## Chapter Ten

Blowing out a breath and shoving her hair back from her hot forehead, Renee headed into the hall so she could return to the changing room. She was bone weary and couldn't wait to get home into a hot bath. Although she had worked to keep her concentration on what she was doing, her gaze had strayed Keith's way on several occasions. Seeing the naked lust in his eyes as he watched her had almost had her rushing across the room to be in his arms. Her heart had raced so much, she had to fight not to pant. Since this shoot included a small line of lingerie for lovers, Keith's affect on her had worked in her favor. The photographer had said she was a real professional. Renee held back her laughter.

Whatever. The long day was over, and she was eager to get out of there. She hadn't seen Keith for a while and wondered where he'd gone off to. Tugging her robe tighter and knotting it at the waist, she glanced up and down the hall but still didn't see him. He couldn't have left without her. He had promised to take her home, and they had agreed on Chinese for dinner.

"If you're looking for your boyfriend, I think he got lucky."

Renee spun around to find John sneering at her. "Excuse me?"

He pointed with his chin down the hall. "Went into one of the empty rooms down there, like"—he checked his watch although she bet he didn't know or care how long it had been—"half hour ago. Must be getting *really* lucky."

Renee put her hands on her hips. "Go to hell, John. Keith is not like that."

He held his hands out indicating the models coming and going, not to mention the assistants, half of whom wanted to be models and the other half almost as attractive. Sometimes this job got to her, and people like John were the reason. "Hey, he had his choice off all these beauties. You can't tell me you didn't see how they hung over him when you two came in this morning? Did you really think you could hold onto him, Renee? Come on, this business is no different than the Hollywood scene. People change beds like they change clothes. It's no wonder your man got caught up in it. He couldn't help himself. A smorgasbord like this is too tempting."

"You know you're pathetic, right?" she asked him. "You're trying to project how miserable you are onto me because none of these women will give you the time of day. But it's not going to happen. I feel sorry for you, John. Maybe one day you'll decide to become a better person. Doubful, but one can hope."

She spun on her heel to walk away but he caught her arm and jerked her close to him. "You little bitch. I can have you any time I feel like it. In fact, I could take you into one of these rooms and get myself off with you."

She punched him in the stomach, but from his reaction, it didn't do much damage. A moment of panic hit her thinking he was Evan. When she first met him, he hadn't given the impression that he was the nicest guy she ever wanted to meet, but neither had he seemed like he would act the way he was now. She searched her mind for a way to get out of his hold and wondered if screaming would be too much. John could say he was just kidding around, but then it wasn't like they were already somewhere hidden from everyone else. He had grabbed her right here in plain sight, which would make it more feasible if he claimed he was joking. Where was Keith when she needed him?

Like he had read her mind, John released her arm and took a step back. "I was only kidding." He narrowed his eyes, suspicion in their depths. "I did see him disappear with one of the models. He's only human. If I were you, I'd keep him on a short leash."

With those rude comments, he walked away and disappeared inside the main room. Doubts assailed Renee. She had been speaking the truth about Keith. He wasn't like that. He wouldn't play her for a fool. She didn't believe for a second that Keith would slip into one of these rooms with one of the models behind her back. From the short amount of time she'd known him, Renee knew Keith was the type to be straight forward and tell her if his interest had turned to someone else. The problem was, believing that it wouldn't turn. After all, she hadn't made any commitments to him. Her fears had kept her from acknowledging they were anything but client and investigator—with extra benefits.

Telling him now that she wanted them to make it official, that their dates were just that to keep him with her wouldn't be the right move. Either way, she needed to find him to know why he would just disappear when he had acted like keeping her within his eyesight was paramount to her safety. She had argued that the safest place was at work with so many people around at all times, but John had disabused her quick of that belief. Better to find Keith and get out of there. She'd had all she could take of the place.

She walked along the hall, stopping at each door to either knock or listen at the panels to see if she heard him. When she was almost at the end of the hall, she had just one door left. She stopped again and listened, but there was no sound. In fact, the hall had grown considerably quiet as most were packing up for the day. Renee put her hand on the doorknob to go in.

\* \* \* \*

Keith pushed off the door and walked over to the girl who stood with shoulders shaking and hands over her face as she sobbed. He sighed in impatience. It wasn't that he didn't believe her. He did, but something told him she wasn't telling him the whole truth, and the tears were a bit more than the determination he had seen in her eyes would allow. He guessed that she would do whatever it took to make her modeling career a success, even accepting Toole's advances.

He stood in front of her, and before he could say a word, she threw herself against his chest, whimpering and pressing her soft body to his. He brought down firm hands on her shoulders and wrenched her away to hold her at arm's length.

"Let's not play games, Chelsea," he told her. He narrowed his eyes at her. "I'm an easygoing guy ninety-five percent of the time, but when it comes to my work, I'm serious. And when it comes to Renee, that's a whole other stratosphere. I would destroy anyone for her. So, you tell me everything, and I mean *everything*, and save the tears for your acting class."

She gasped, her liquid blue eyes wide. "How did you know?"

"Never mind. Talk! What makes you think the man that's been harassing Renee is your boss."

She sneered and raised her chin. "He's not my boss. Deborah is my boss. Anyway, Peter Toole, Deborah's husband, tried to come on to me more than once in my first year. That's when he gets them, when they're new and eager, when they don't know how to take care of themselves, or don't have boyfriends who would kick his teeth in." For a second, she looked longingly up at him. He pursed his lips, hoping to get it through her head with just a glare that Renee was all he wanted.

Chelsea grumbled and looked down. "I told him I was going to press charges because he wouldn't stop touching me when no one was around. He has a knack for that, cornering girls. He said go ahead, before I could get anywhere with it, he would blacken my name in this industry so I could never get a job. He said if I..."

Keith didn't need her to finish. He knew what she was going to say, but Chelsea stiffened her shoulders and wiped her wet face. The hardness in her eyes was what he had seen earlier when she told him she was sure Peter Toole was his man. Chelsea may or may not have been victimized by Toole, but she was getting all she could out of it.

"So I had an affair with him. I convinced him to give me the best jobs. Deborah does whatever he says. He only shows up at the office once in a while, but when he does, we stay out of the way. Deborah goes from strong, independent businesswoman to obedient wife. We think he gave her money to start, but I think she's crazy enough to love him. If you can believe that!

"Anyway, it went on with him and me for a year and a half. And then I started acting class just like you said. I'm talking to a producer for a small independent film."

"So you feel like you're making it and don't need his help anymore?" Keith speculated. "Is that it?"

She glared at him. "No, that's not it. I still resented being forced to be with him just to avoid being fired and tossed out of the modeling world. I want to get him back."

Keith let loose a curse and walked away. "This is revenge."

"No, damn it," she shouted and then lowered her voice. "I mean yes. In a way. If you can get him on what he's doing to Renee, then my name can stay out of it, but he'll get his. That's what I want." She wagged a red-tipped finger at him. "Don't put my name in anything. I can't have scandal attached to me right now. I won't testify to a thing."

Keith's shoulders slumped. He ran a hand over his neck. He needed proof, and so far, Chelsea hadn't given him anything he could use. As far as he knew, Toole wasn't the guy that had been hiding behind letters to Renee. Toole hadn't hidden. He'd been confident in his money getting him out of any trouble.

"Thanks for your time, Chelsea. I hope you'll be successful in your acting career."

She reached inside a huge burgundy bag. "Hold on. I wanted to give you this." She held a letter out to him. Keith froze, excitement sizzling beneath the surface. Could this be what he thought? He dared not ask but reached for it.

Peter Toole was a fool in the worst way, an arrogant fool.

"That's a letter he gave me a few months ago. I had an assignment in Rome of all places. Can you believe it? Anyway, it was my Dear Jane letter. Said he'd found someone else. He wasn't given writing letters much, but he made an exception that time, I guess. Maybe you can use it for evidence, lift fingerprints or something. I kept it just in case."

Keith waited to look inside, but the outside had that same small shield beside Chelsea's name that Renee's letters had.

"You know what's pathetic?" she asked him.

"What's that?"

"When he comes into the office to annoy everyone, he tells us all we should be happy he's there, because he's our guardian, our knight. He says that bull every single time, like it wasn't stupid the first time he said it." She rolled her eyes. "Well, I have to get going. Remember, if you try to drag me into this, I will deny everything. I'm not risking my career on bringing that pervert down. If you get lucky, then maybe I'll get to see his ugly face on TV being led away by the cops. If not, well, nobody can say I didn't try."

And with that, she was gone. Keith tapped the envelope. So that's what the shield meant, and not that the guy was in security. Well, either way, Jeff down at the PD had to get something out of this.

With his fingers kept to the edges of the paper, he slipped it out and unfolded it to read. Toole's dismissal of Chelsea was short and to the point.

*Kitten,*

*Our time together was satisfying. I have found another.*

Keith grinned. Toole might not have signed it, but the letter could be matched with the others, and maybe—he could only hope—something of Toole could be pulled off paper to link the two. Even if they couldn't get a real conviction, his rep would be ruined, and he wouldn't be able to work in the industry or force young women into sleeping with him because of who he was. Keith closed his eyes thinking of it. To know that things hadn't progressed as far with Renee as they had gone with Chelsea was a huge relief. Something told him Toole had chosen to move more cautiously with Renee because she was not like the other women in the field.

Renee might not recognize it in herself, but she was strong, and Toole had to have seen that in her as well. She also didn't have the drive to be a model that the other girls had. Toole may have decided the best course was to break Renee down first. He no doubt planned to make her scared of what he might do, and then he would make his move. The worse part of all was the police doing nothing. They were playing into Toole's hands. If she hadn't met him last year, Keith wondered what she would have done, where she would be now. Would she have thought to call another private investigator? He liked to think so.

All of a sudden, he needed to be with her, to hold her and let her know he'd never leave her again. He, more than anyone else, was in a position to go up against Peter Toole, and he would damn sure win at all costs.

## Chapter Eleven

Renee turned the doorknob and pushed the door wide. No one was in sight. She took a few steps inside, hoping somehow she was just not seeing the entire room, but the space was small. The décor was like something one would find in a living room in a home. Covering a yawn, she glanced at the couch which looked way too inviting. This wasn't the time for a nap, but fifteen minutes off her feet might be just what she needed.

She didn't know why she hadn't thought to call Keith on his cell phone. As she shuffled across the floor toward the couch, she tugged her phone from the pocket of her robe and only then remembered she hadn't yet changed back into her street clothes. If her head wasn't attached... The door shut with a decisive click behind her, and she pivoted to face it. Her heart seemed to stop beating a moment at the sight of Mr. Toole, her boss's husband.

The man had always given her the creeps with his doggish facial features and his dark eyes full of who knows what. Like most of the other girls, she had an instant distaste of the man when she first met him last year. His visits to the agency were few and far between, and that's how she liked it.

"Mr. Toole," she mumbled. "What can I do for you?"

His eyes flashed. "Oh so much, Renee. We can start with you dumping your boyfriend and sending him home."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

He nodded to the phone she held clutched between trembling fingers. "Call him. Tell him you have to work late. Any way you have to, you get him to leave without seeing you again tonight."

She drew herself up in an effort to look like she wasn't nervous alone with him in this room, dressed in a robe with sexy undergarments beneath it. "You're mistaken, sir. I'm finished for the day. In fact, now starts my Christmas holiday. I don't have to work again until after the new year comes in."

Clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth with amusement in his eyes, he shook his head while stepping closer to her. To her disgust, she took a step back in fear. "No," he corrected. "You *are* working late. For me. You see I've been patient these last few months, and frankly after seeing you prance about in those skimpy panties and bras, I can't wait any longer."

Renee gasped and covered her mouth with a hand. Her eyes were so wide they hurt. "You can't mean... You...uh..."



“That’s right.” He came to a stop just inches away from her. She breathed in his cheap cologne. The man had serious money, and he couldn’t spring for at least something that didn’t smell like perfumed alcohol. “I sent you the picture. You remember, don’t you, Renee?”

He put a hand up to touch her hair, but she jerked away. She wanted to deny knowing what he was talking about, but the man was insane. She could set him off if she provoked him. Gauging whether she could move fast enough to sidestep him and get to the door kept her immobile, that and terror thinking about his threat to get rid of Keith.

He grinned. “I see it in your face. You remember what I said. You know now that I’m in a position to do just what I promised. If you don’t get rid of him, I will. I told you, you belong to me, and I don’t share.”

Renee put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “That’s funny because apparently your wife does! How many other women have you gone after? Do you think I’m going to just tumble into your bed? If so, you’ve got another thought coming!”

For a minute, he stared at her, like he couldn’t believe she wasn’t cowering at his greatness or pleading for him to spare Keith. Sure, inside she was crying like an infant, but she couldn’t show him that. This perverted creature had kept her in abject terror for over six months, and only after she had met Keith had she begun to feel protection. Mr. Toole might be hiding behind his position and his money, but Keith had money too, damn it. Besides that, something told her Keith wasn’t a pushover. He was the sweetest man she had ever met, and she cared about him.

“You don’t understand the situation you’re in, Renee,” Mr. Toole began.

“No, you don’t understand who Keith is,” she countered.

He frowned. “He’s a two bit investigator that you quickly took into your bed!” he spat. “He has no right to take what belongs to me.”

“Wake up,” she shouted back. “I’m with Keith, not you. I never even looked at you twice before today.”

She moved to go around him, but he grabbed her arm in a grip tight enough to make her nauseous from the pain. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“Get your hands off me. I’ll scream.”

“And what?” he ground out. “Who will believe a nobody like you, Renee? You’re not as young as the other girls. You can never get the real assignments that the younger, prettier girls get.”

She jerked on her arm. “I don’t give a damn either.”

“No one will believe that.” He reached out for her robe. Bile rose in Renee’s throat. “Give me what I want, and I’ll make sure you stay on with the agency as long as you like.”

“I wouldn’t stay another day!” She kned him, but he closed his legs in time to block it and then swung her toward the couch. A twist and a hard shove landed her on her back with him on top of her. Renee tried to scream, but he pressed a hand over her mouth. With the other, he pinned her arms above her head. Tears flooded her eyes, blurring her vision.

The door crashed against the wall with an explosive sound that sent Mr. Toole to the floor. Sobbing, Renee took the chance to jump over his body to run to Keith, who filled the narrow space in the doorway. When she hit his chest, his arm came around her and he dropped a swift kiss on her lips before zipping her around behind him.

“Go get dressed,” he barked. “I’ll handle this.”

“Keith.” She grabbed his arm as he stepped into the room. Renee was only half aware that a small crowd had gathered in the hall. Mr. Toole had really screwed up coming after her here, but when she glanced over Keith’s bulging bicep at her boss’s husband, the madman still seemed confident if a little glass-eyed.

He jumped to his feet. “Get out of here now, Greenwich, and I’ll let you off with a warning not to cross me.”

“Fool,” Keith roared. “Your money and the fact that you’ve been getting away with this for years has gone to your head. Not this time. If I have to wipe this floor with you, I will.” Keith shook her arm off and stomped over to Mr. Toole. “In fact, I *have* to. For daring to put your filthy hands on Renee.”

The first punch shocked them all—Renee, the people in the hall watching, and most of all Mr. Toole. Small shrieks from the women behind her at the blood gushing from Mr. Toole’s nose echoed Renee’s at seeing how skilled Keith was. The man had taken on a boxer’s stance, light on his toes with his fists up to protect his face. The jab had been nothing more than a blur. The second faster.

Mr. Toole sank to his knees, shaking his head. He blinked up at Keith, confusion in his expression. “How dare you? Do you know my lawyers will...”

“Idiot,” Deborah yelled from the doorway. Renee turned to see her boss shouldering her way past the crowd. “I warned you, Peter. I told you, your habits would catch up to you.” The collective gasp went up again at the knowledge that Deborah knew all along and had said nothing. “You’ve picked the wrong man, Peter.”

Mr. Toole stuffed a handkerchief up his nose that he retrieved from his pocket. "So he can fight, Deb," he grumbled. "He'll be sorry. Wait until I make some calls." He waved his arm around the room, unsteady on his feet. "All of you, you want your jobs, you saw nothing."

Tears rolled down Deborah's face. "I'm done. I want a divorce, Peter." She turned to walk to the exit. "I'm sure you've heard of Dale Greenwich?" she asked him.

Mr. Toole frowned. "Who hasn't?"

She held a hand out in Keith's direction. "Meet his son."

With that, Deborah made her exit, leaving Mr. Toole standing there wobbling on his legs and blood draining from his face. The look of terror and fear fighting for domination on his face while he stared at Keith would have been funny if this entire nightmare hadn't been centered around Renee. She too turned and ran from the room. She made it back to the changing room before Keith caught her and scooped her into his arms.

She cried on his chest, shaking from head to toe. He was her hero, but this had gone to prove to her once and for all that Christmas was the worst holiday of the entire year. She would never model again because the mere thought left her ill, and Deborah's company was in ruins, which also meant all the models would lose their work as well. She cried harder.

Keith pressed his face into her hair. "If you'll trust me, I'll make everything right. I promise."

Renee didn't say a word. She just nodded and didn't look up. Keith was more than she had first believed. She would let him do what he could and not think about tomorrow, or what she would do to pay her bills, or how long it would be before she was forced to move back into the cheaper apartment in the less desirable neighborhood.

\* \* \* \*

Renee opened her eyes days after the incident at the photo shoot, wondering as she did each day if Keith had decided not to see her anymore. Because nature called, she dragged the covers back and left her bed. That had been the single thing that got her up. Every muscle had ached the next day after fighting with Peter Toole. She couldn't bring of herself to think of him in such a respectful way as adding *mister* to his name. Dreading the time when she would have to testify about what happened in that room, she pushed thoughts of the man out of her head.

When she was finished in the bathroom, she came out into her room and stood staring at her bed. Her stomach growled, but she ignored it. After that, the phone rang. She didn't move. The buzz from her cell sounded, and she wondered where she had thrown it that third day.

The knob to her bedroom door turned, and fear took hold of her throat, closing off the airway. Images of Toole having escaped and come after her for revenge went through her mind, but when the door swung wide, there stood Keith.

Her eyes widened, and she couldn't move. He closed the space between them to take her into his arms and lift her to carry her across the room. After placing her on his lap, he held her tight like he would never let her go.

"I'm sorry I took so long. I missed you," he whispered, his voice sounding thick with emotion.

"I thought—"

"Shh, no, don't say it," he interrupted. "I'm here, and I won't be away from you again. I believe I have settled things in a way that will work for everyone. There's just one last piece to put into place."

"Piece?" She struggled to sit up and at last convinced him to loosen his hold. "What piece?"

He grinned down at her. "You."

Too weak with hunger and fear to speak, she just sat there looking up at him. He stared back, his eyes soft and seeming almost hungry, as if they had been starving for sight of her. If she dared believe what she saw in their depths, she would say he loved her. Could that be true? No man had ever said he loved her, not even to convince her to take the relationship to a level of intimacy when she held back.

"I bought Parker Toole Modeling Agency," he admitted.

She blinked. "You're kidding?"

"Nope. I did." He shrugged. "Deborah Toole and her husband are going to be going away for a long time. Nothing's going to be done before the holidays are over, but at least they were taken into custody, Toole without chance of bail."

"How did you manage that? And without my statement?"

"Once it became clear that he was going down this time, several women came forward. You will have to give your statement and maybe testify later, but I was able to convince them to give you some time."

She ran a hand through her wild hair, surprised at the turn of events. "But buying the agency. That's crazy, Keith. You don't even know anything about modeling."

“You’re right, I don’t. However, I have—”

“Don’t tell me. Connections, right?” She shook her head. “Men, their money, and their friends. Will you change the name? Come to think of it, why would it be Parker Toole when that bastard’s name was Peter?”

“Deborah Toole’s maiden name, and yes, I will change it. To whatever my manager decides.”

She frowned. “You’ll give the person that much say right off the bat? I don’t know about this venture, Keith.”

He grinned, and she began to suspect he wasn’t telling her something. He squeezed her hips and then lowered his hands to her ass, giving that a light pinch. “Well, I was hoping my new manager would be you.”

“What!” She hopped off his lap and paced the room. “I don’t know anything about the business side of things. And come to think of it, I bet all the clients pulled their contracts with this kind of scandal. In fact, I’m sure of it. This might have been a big mistake, Keith. Oh, I’m so sorry to have gotten you into this.”

Keith stood up and grabbed her by the shoulders, stopping her movement. “Calm down, baby. I told you to trust me, didn’t I? I did not want all those women to lose their contracts, so I called my father.” He swallowed as if he had downed a bitter pill. “His contacts are beyond either you or I could fathom. He has strong ties with almost every one of the current clients, and he has convinced them not to pull their contracts. On top of that, the models whose clients pulled their contracts have been reassigned to the clients who stayed. Everyone has a job.”

He kissed her while she stood there blinking in astonishment at all he had accomplished in just a few days. She couldn’t even begin to comprehend the kind of power that could rearrange so many people’s lives with a few quick business deals or phone calls or however he had accomplished the details.

“Finally,” Keith told her, “I’ve hired an experienced assistant manager, someone I happen to know who is in the business and was looking for a new position. You will like her. She’ll guide you, but I’ve made it plain that you are the woman in charge.”

Renee pressed her face into Keith’s chest, breathing in his familiar scent and letting it calm her. “You are my hero. You’re amazing, and I still haven’t figured you out.”

He winked. “You’ll have plenty of time for that. Now, get yourself cleaned up and looking like the beautiful woman I know and love.”

Renee’s heart did a thump in her chest. “Why?”

He directed her toward the bathroom while easing her nightgown up over her hips. Excitement at his touch ignited inside her, but she concentrated on his words.

“The other part of the deal I made,” he told her.

“What’s that?”

“We are spending Christmas with my family.”

Renee shrieked. “You’re kidding me!”

Keith laughed. “My father’s one stipulation for using his connections to help me was that I spend Christmas with them and many more occasions throughout the year. But before you go on a rampage, I countered his stipulation with one of my own. All of them had to accept you and respect you and...” He paused for obvious dramatic effect. “We will all do Christmas dinner the way that *I* choose, *where* I choose.”

“Oh goodness, Keith, you’re a nut. What are you going to make your family do?”

“That’s for me to know, and you, my love, to find out. Now, get your sexy tush in the shower. On second thought, I think I’ll join you.”

Renee glanced back at him as she dropped her nightgown on the floor. “Yeah, on second thought, huh?”

Keith was naked in seconds and soon washing away all the hurt and loneliness that had built inside her over the last few days. Renee didn’t know what she would do without him.

## Epilogue

Renee skated almost at ease in Keith's arms. Every now and then she had to hide her face in her lover's coat so his mother wouldn't see her laughing at the woman. On either side, the stiff, uppity woman had not one but two servants holding her up on the ice while she gave it her best attempt. Renee couldn't believe they were all out here at the skating rink. Maybe underneath all the order and rules, his mother loved him after all. Even Keith's sister, her husband, his brother, and their father were there. Although Mr. Greenwich was ensconced in blankets inside one of the tents to keep warm.

What money wouldn't buy. Renee shook her head. Keith had rented out the entire rink for his family and her. He had erected a couple of tents, one for sitting about playing games and just talking, and the other for dining on their catered Christmas dinner. Each tent was equipped with heaters so when they were finished skating they could thaw out in warmth. Keith had even hired the vendor who made the hot chocolate that day they came to the rink together. That was another reason for Renee to hide a chuckle, Keith's mother at first resisting, saying she didn't know where that hot chocolate had been made or if the man had washed his hands before he made it. One look from Keith had straightened her up.

Keith interrupted her thoughts. "Hey, you."

She glanced up at him, her heart swelling over the fact that he had done all of this for her, to make her Christmas a special one. "Yes?"

His gaze turned earnest. "Are you happy, Renee?"

She looked to where the tree stood, decorated in the most absurd way, too much tinsel in some places, not enough in others. The top portion sported colored blinking lights, while the bottom displayed solid white ones. The thing looked a mess, but Renee couldn't help grinning at it. All of Keith's life, servants had decorated their Christmas trees to perfection. But tonight, Keith had insisted every member join in to decorate this tree. His niece and nephew had unbent enough to shout and giggle like children should do, and hadn't stopped yet as they zoomed around the rink, not caring when they fell down.

"Yes," she told him. "I'm happy. I can't even begin to tell you how much you've done for me, how you've changed my life, my outlook. I was so alone before I met you. Yet, here tonight, it just seems right. It's nothing like I've experienced, and it doesn't have to be." She squeezed his hands in hers. "This Christmas is perfect. *You're* perfect."

"Renee, do you know how much I love you?" he asked. Tears filled her eyes, and she looked down. He put a hand under her chin to lift her head. "Don't look away. Do you know it? Do you believe me?"

She sniffled. "Yes, I believe it. I know. And I was scared to admit it to myself, but I love you too, Keith. So much. I don't know if I could stand to be away from you ever again."

“You don’t have to.” He nuzzled his cold cheek against hers. “Tell me you’ll marry me, baby. Make me the happiest man in existence.”

She gasped and drew back. “Are you serious? Your family…”

“Marry me,” he said again in a firm tone. “I am not willing to be without you for the rest of my life, Renee. My love, my heart, marry me.”

“Yes. With all of my heart, yes!”

The End