





# Holly's Big Bad Santa

by Starla Kaye

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# Chapter One

Fifteen years was a hell of a long time. Some people said you couldn't go home again, and Jared Danville had believed that. He'd left Danville, Kansas, and done his best not to look back. Until now.

Sitting in his Lexus at the end of his parents' long, winding driveway, he looked toward the massive Victorian house on the hill overlooking the town his great-great-something grandfather had founded. Every son and daughter of every generation since had stayed here, had brought wives and husbands here, and had helped grow the town. Except him. He hadn't been able to stay another minute in small town USA.

Right now, with all the crazy turns his life had taken lately, small town Danville held a lot more appeal than it once had. *Home*.

He owned an expensively decorated condo practically on the beach in Santa Monica. Prime property. As he carefully stretched his still-healing body, he finally understood what "home" really meant. It wasn't how valuable the house was or how big. His California condo—just because of where it was—easily had a higher monetary value than this huge three-story house with its fancy gingerbread trim, wraparound veranda, and turrets. But this was home.

As always, his parents had put up thousands of tiny white lights lining the numerous turrets, the high-pointed peaks, and the edges of the roof. When he'd been a teenager, he'd once tried to help with putting up those lights. All youthful macho man, he'd gotten careless and rolled off the roof. He'd broken an arm and sprained a leg. That had pretty much ended his holiday decorating.

And he'd stopped celebrating Christmas altogether after he'd left here two days before Christmas almost fifteen years ago.

He squeezed his eyes shut on that raw memory. *Pain*.

His upper left chest throbbed from too many hours sitting in one position and from trying to help steer with his left arm when his right arm got too tired. He needed to lie down, although he probably should take one of the pain pills first, but he really didn't want to. He hated feeling weak, mentally or physically.

Disgusted, he opened his eyes. He shifted his gaze toward the cottage-style house next door, Holly Jacob's home. How many times had they sat snuggled together on that porch swing? How many kisses had he stolen there with her mother inside the house? Sweet. Her kisses had been so sweet and yet filled with youthful passion. God, he missed them. Missed her.

Smoke curled lazily up from the chimney. Even in the afternoon, Christmas lights already twinkled in the big pine tree in the center of the yard. The three-foot tall plastic Santa and Mrs. Claus with two slightly smaller elves had been put out this time of year for as long as he could remember. They looked worn by age, but they were a Jacobs' family tradition. One that would stop after this season. The worn Santa and Mrs. Santa and the elves would probably be thrown out as Holly thinned her belongings.

His gaze hardened and moved to the For Sale sign only a few feet away from the Santa scene. His jaw tightened. He thought about the much-read and sadly wrinkled letter he'd received out of the blue from his dad just over three weeks ago. Talk about "creepy." Just when he'd been thinking about selling out of the private security business, just when he'd broken up with his second fiancée, just when he'd been balanced in that precarious state of "there's a 50/50 chance he'll make it," according to what his doctors had told his partners in the ICU... Somehow his parents had tracked him down. "*Come home for Christmas, son*."

Something pinched in the region of his heart. Here he was after all these years. Home. He'd never thought this would happen. He'd left during a snowstorm in the middle of the night. Now he'd returned just after a snowstorm. The remnants of it were all around him. Cold. He felt chilled to the bone even in the heated car. Frustrated, too. "*Holly is leaving us. You'd best come back and say your good-bye before it's too late*."

He'd read that part of his father's note while still groggy and in the hospital. The words had kick-started his heart again. He'd thought his father had meant she was dying. He'd dropped the note, started pulling out IV lines, and caused all kinds of warning alarms to go off. Nurses had streamed into the private room, even a doctor had raced inside. He'd been a crazed man determined to get the hell out of there to go to Holly. The only thing that had stopped him was one of the nurses finding the note and reading it to see what had set him off.

"*This Holly person moving bothers you?*" she asked

"*Moving?*" He slumped on his bed. "*Not dying?*"

"*I don't see anything about her dying. Just leaving. Moving to San Diego in January,*" she'd said as the other nurse and doctor worked at getting him to lie back

"*Not dying?*" His fuzzy brain had only read part of the note. He'd stopped too soon

The note had haunted him, made him strive to heal faster, and do more physical therapy than recommended. He'd ignored all warnings to be careful, not push himself so hard. Urgency had built within him. He needed to finally face his past and the wrongs he'd done to his family. He felt an even more powerful need to see Holly again. His gut told him if he didn't get back to Danville and confront Holly he would regret it for the rest of his life. His gut feelings had seldom been wrong, so he'd heeded them and decided to check out of the hospital far earlier than his doctor wanted. When he made his mind up about something, nothing and no one could sway him.

The only concession he'd made to anyone's loudly voiced concerns was he wouldn't fly home. Air pressure changes would have played havoc with his many healing stitches and his recovery from the fairly serious concussion. So he'd driven. Two and a half days of fighting fatigue, staying off his pain meds, and disregarding everything but the need to see Holly.

He leaned his head back. Now that he wasn't driving, his mind was getting muddled. Tired, so tired.

He'd left here a strong-willed, tough kid. He'd become even tougher, harder, more determined. He rubbed at his shoulder and smiled. His partners called him Alpha Stud on Steroids. There'd been plenty of times when he fit the title, mainly because he'd been searching for the right woman. The one who fit him, who understood him, who could keep up with him in bed. His gut told him that woman was Holly, had always been her, and would always be her.

He rotated his left shoulder. Damn but that hurt. His partners also called him Kick-ass Badass. At the moment he didn't feel like he could kick anyone's ass.

Something thudded against his windshield.

He immediately reached for the lock box beneath his seat and the gun inside. Then he noted the smashed snowball and the water dripping down from it. He sucked in a steadying breath and the tension eased from his body. *A snowball?* Someone would have had to work damn hard to scrape up enough snow to make a snowball from the spattering of snow on the lawns nearby.

Before he could open his door, five foot maybe two of clearly pissed off female stomped over to glare at him. He gaped in shock at brown eyes darkened so much they looked nearly black, at a perky nose scrunched in disgust, at pink lips pursed so tight her mouth had to hurt. *Holly*. Rigid with fury. Even buried within a thick, red ski jacket she looked so damn cute in a full-blown woman way he ached to pull her into his arms.

He'd missed this hell on wheels. Yes, *this* was the *only* woman he'd ever wanted, would ever want.

She stepped back so he could get out of the car. But before he could speak, she snapped, "You sonofabitch!" And then she stormed away.

Not exactly a loving endearment, but he could work with it.

"Come back here!" Jared yelled behind her as Holly marched back toward her cottage.

She couldn't believe she'd actually thrown a snowball at his car. How immature! She'd come outside to check on her lights and watched him pull into the Danville's driveway. She'd recognized him instantly. All the hurt she thought she'd gotten over had burst free again. Just the sight of him had peeled away almost fifteen years of maturing from the often reckless teenager to the calm, respected woman she'd worked hard to become. She'd always had strong reactions to Jared Danville. *Dam it! Dam it! Double dam it!* She was soooo over him. She was! Really!

"Holly! Dammit, Holly, stop!"

His voice had deepened into a husky, sensual growl. It did funny things to her insides, spiraled warmth through her, especially low in her body. It made her think of... No!

"Go. Away! Disappear back into the ether like you did before." She hated the way her voice had choked up. She refused to look back at him and moved faster.

She'd almost made it to her porch when a snowball hit her just above the collar. With her short hair there was nothing to prevent cold drops of melting snow from going down her back. She stiffened, curled her hands into fists, and rounded on the man who'd once been the boy she'd believed she would one day marry.

As Jared stopped a few feet away, she took in the changes the years had made in him. Where the boy she'd teased, tormented, and had a mad crush on had been the hottest eighteen-yearold in Danville, Jared, the man, was a breath-stealing hunk to warm any woman's dreams. Pitch black hair had thinned in front to a widow's peak, but was otherwise still thick and begged for her hands to slide through it. Crow's feet etched the tanned skin of his face at the corners of deep, rich chocolate eyes. And beard stubble caressed his carved face. A slightly pale face, pinched with white lines of...pain?

"Are you done yet?" he asked, ending her close examination and making her forget what she'd just noticed.

She blinked in annoyance. "More than done," she lied, spun around and continued marching to her house. Something she'd seen nagged at her. What had it been?

A big hand snagged her arm and Jared jerked her to a stop.

"Let me go or else..."

"Or else what?" He sounded amused. With another tug, he pulled her to him.

She hadn't been sure what threat she'd intended and all thoughts of threat faded from her mind the instant her coat-covered chest bumped against him. She got the immediate impression of well-defined pecs beneath the black cable knit sweater. He'd gotten out of the car without a coat and it was freezing cold out here. Yet heat blazed between them. Beads of sweat formed on her back, in her cleavage. Her heart raced. And all of that ticked her off. She tried to wriggle free.

"We need to talk."

His brown gaze held hers, so many emotions swimming within it. He didn't look like a man who accepted defiance. He looked hard, dangerous...not the bad boy *kid* he'd once been. Sadly, she found the dangerous man very appealing. But she'd spent years trying to get over him walking--no, running--out of her life.

"I don't think so." She pushed back with all her might and barely managed not to fall on her backside. "Why couldn't you have stayed away?"

He appeared to hold his breath, jaw tensed. Finally he said, "Because it's time I made peace." He started to reach for her again, but stopped. Instead, he swept his gaze over her once more. "You haven't changed a bit and yet you've changed so much."

Holly frowned. "What the heck is that supposed to mean?"

A hint of a grin appeared at the same time his gaze heated. "You're still the contrary female you always were. But you're also damn cute."

"*Cute!* Not pretty, not beautiful, but *cute!*"

He had the gall to chuckle, though she had the impression he wasn't a man who laughed often. In spite of her anger with him, she wondered what had happened to him over the missing years. There was a sense of hardness about him. In the stiff way he carried himself. In the hints of having seen too much that lingered in the depths of his eyes. Yet she felt a vulnerability about him as well.

"Honey, you're puffed out to probably twice your normal size in that down jacket. You're wearing thickly lined suede boots. You could have the shapeliest legs I've ever seen, but I sure can't tell now." His rusty grin widened a bit. "*Cute* is the best I can do at the moment."

Annoyed with her softening attitude toward him, she curled a lip in disgust.

He chuckled once more.

Fighting against an unwanted attraction, she leaped back even further into her old, immature ways and shoved at his rock-solid chest.

Caught off guard, he flinched, groaned, and landed on his butt in the mushy, wet brown grass. "What the hell!" He glared up at her and rubbed at his upper left chest.

A lesser woman would have been alarmed by the ferocity in his tone. She wasn't, but her childish behavior mortified her. She sped toward her house, but she didn't escape fast enough.

"First chance I get, Holly Jacobs, I'm warming your bottom!"

Face flaming, she gripped the handle of her front storm door and scanned the area, hoping no one else had heard what he'd said or had witnessed her behavior. When she didn't see anyone, she called back, "In your dreams, Stud Boy."

He climbed gingerly to his feet and brushed off his wet slacks. "Did you call me 'Stud Boy'?"

Unable to believe she'd actually said such a thing, she shoved open the inner door and fled into the safety of her house. She slammed the door and leaned back against it. She'd just started making plans to leave Danville to begin a new life. She'd met a man in San Diego online a year ago, visited him several times since then. Eric wanted her to move there and take their relationship farther. She'd dragged her feet until he'd almost given up on her. Now, when she'd finally made plans, Jared came home.

"No!" she snapped, shoving away from the door. Jared being back in Danville had *nothing* to do with her life. She was selling her business, selling her house, and moving half-way across the country. Done deal.

His body aching, Jared started to follow after Holly. He wasn't finished with her. He just needed to catch his breath, force down the demanding need for the pain killers he'd avoided taking. He'd gone through dependency and withdrawal once before. He wouldn't go through it again. He hesitated, rubbed at his shoulder wound, and steadied his breathing. Another minute...

Footsteps sloshed their way across the driveway behind him and then the lawn. He stiffened. Panic crept into his consciousness. The fight or flee feeling. He stood his ground. He'd been a Marine, a trained badass. "The few, the proud" had turned him into a man who could face anything, do anything, and bear anything. His breathing ability returned. His confidence as well.

Slowly he turned. His mother raced across the yard toward him. For a seventy-two-year-old woman she still had a lot of zip. And she sported the reddest hair he'd ever seen, a sort of orange-red. *Wow!* Not something he ever would have expected.

"Oh Jared! My sweet, sweet Jared!" She threw her arms around him, hugged him with amazing strength. "I saw the strange car. I had a feeling, a mother's intuitive moment." She sniffed back tears and hugged him harder. "I just knew. I knew it was my baby boy."

*Baby boy. He was hardly that anymore, but, damn, if it didn't sound good to be called that once more.* Her hug nearly brought him to his knees. He couldn't show weakness in front of her. "Mom," was all he could manage to say.

Then she released him, stepped to his side, and swatted his bottom. "That's for hurting me like you did."

He gaped at her. Few people would even consider taking him on. Yet this woman who barely reached his chin had smacked him on the butt.

"No doubt I deserved that. More, too." In spite of his tenuous hold on his pain, he pulled her to him, inhaled the once familiar scent of his mother, and savored the feel of her. He'd hoped, but he'd never really dreamed he'd have this moment again.

"About time you showed up," his father stated in a deep tone much like Jared's. "Guess you got my note."

Jared looked at his father, recognized the physical similarities, saw the same wariness he felt. And then the sense of distance faded.

His father stepped beside them in Holly's front yard and wrapped his arms around Jared and his mother. "I'd hoped. Prayed." He audibly swallowed hard, and he hugged them both tighter.

Jaw tight with strain, Jared swallowed down years of regret. "Sorry." A lot more needed to be said, later.

After a final squeeze, they separated. His mother took his big hand in her much smaller one to lead him back to their house. She refused to let go of him.

"How come your backside's all wet?" his father asked from behind them.

His mother stopped to look and questioned in maternal disapproval, "And where is your coat?"

Warmth curled inside him in a way it hadn't in far too long. He nodded toward the cottage. "It's all Holly's fault."

"Is she okay?" Concern filled his mother's eyes.

"She hits my car with a snowball, shoves me onto my ass in the wet grass...and *she's* who you're worried about?" He raised an eyebrow, more in amusement than irritation with Holly's behavior. "She's a bit pissed off to see me."

"That's probably putting her feelings mildly."

His father headed for Jared's car. "Let's grab your bag and get out of this cold. Your mom just took a pumpkin pie out of the oven. I've been drooling over the smell for almost an hour. Maybe we can--"

"James Danville, the pie is for tomorrow's dinner with the kids." She tugged Jared along, smiling up at him. "I've got gingerbread cookies, though. You used to like..."

When tears trickled down her gently lined face, Jared felt lower than slime. "Gingerbread cookies and a glass of milk sound awful good, Mom." *Damn good*

A few minutes later he sat in one of the chairs in the eating nook attached to the over-sized kitchen. The house felt warm after coming in from the below freezing temperature outside. Scents of pumpkin pie and gingerbread drifted around him, making his stomach rumble, making him remember similar smells from so long ago. The faint sounds of Christmas music played on the stereo from the great room. He closed his eyes, felt swamped with so much guilt, so much pain. The music he'd worked hard to avoid hearing tortured him with all he'd turned his back on.

"I..." he began, uncertain how to apologize, how to explain why he'd left. He'd been tired of arguing with his father all the time. Of the four Danville kids, he'd been the one with the biggest ego, the most daring, and the hardest head. He'd lacked the ability to see beyond what *he* wanted. His two older brothers had excelled at almost everything. He'd been the family rebel. His grades had been less than stellar. He'd gotten kicked off the football team. He couldn't remember the number of times the Sheriff had personally delivered him home after some prank or another. Yes, Black Sheep of the Danville Family had definitely been his well-earned title. His parents had struggled to deal with his title and reputation.

His mother jammed a cookie between his teeth. "Not now, Jared. I only want to enjoy having you home."

His father sat down opposite him and took a cookie from the plate between them. "We'll talk it out later, son."

Jared chewed on the cookie, absorbed the comfort of being with family again. He'd missed them. All the places he'd been, all the things he'd seen...none of them compared to being with people who loved you or with being back in your family's home. Why had it taken him so damn long to figure this out? Probably because he'd kept himself so busy all these years, desperate not to have time to think about what he'd left behind.

His shoulder ached, but he didn't think Holly's push or his landing on his butt had done any damage. His head pounded. He had trouble focusing, but he didn't want his folks to know about any of his problems. He didn't want to worry his mom.

"So how're Jason and Kandee? Jim and..." He hesitated. "Oh right, he's divorced now. And what about Jocie? Wasn't she engaged?"

His father studied him curiously. "You've been keeping up with your family?"

When Jared would have answered, his father waved it off. "Glad to hear that."

Guilt weighed even heavier on him. The first year he'd been away, he'd sent an occasional postcard to let them know he was at least alive and breathing somewhere. When he'd joined the Marines, he'd stopped sending the postcards. He'd gone places his mother would have been worried sick about. Stupidly, he'd thought she'd be better off not knowing where he went. After he'd got out of the Marines, he'd decided it had been too long since he'd communicated with them. Why stir them up by contacting them again? Yet he'd always kept up with what happened in his family and in his hometown. His parents had good, happy lives. They had two sons to be proud of, who'd taken over the family's law firm of Danville and Danville. They had a daughter who had a successful real estate company. His father still managed the Danville Bank, started by his great-great-grandfather a hundred years ago. They had grandchildren. They hadn't needed him. At least that's what he'd told himself.

He ground his teeth in annoyance. Pity party, like some girl. *Get over it! You screwed up. Now man-up and fix things*. They'd tried in a way. They'd managed to track him down in

L. A. and get a note to him.

He was about to speak when his mother said, "Jason and Kandee have three grown kids of their own and two grandchildren." She slid a glass of milk in front of him. "Jim's still bitter about the divorce. Long story for another time. And Jocie is on-again, off-again in the engagement thing with her partner in the real estate business, Parker Greene."

"You can catch up with them tomorrow," his father said. "Everyone is coming here for Sunday dinner, as usual." He sighed and his brow furrowed. "I'd better warn you, your brothers are still a bit hostile about the past."

Jared nodded and took a drink. He'd figured as much. "I'll mend fences, if I can."

With a nod of acceptance, his father asked, "What about you, son? Are you married? Any kids?"

He looked at his parents. They appeared hungry for any kind of knowledge about him and his life, which made him feel even worse. "I've never been married. Engaged a couple of times." After learning about Holly planning to leave, he'd panicked. He'd finally realized exactly why he'd broken off those engagements. They'd both been beautiful, caring women. But they hadn't been Holly. "No kids either."

"You weren't ready before, were you?" his mother prodded. "To settle down with someone." She studied him another second. "Something tells me you're ready now."

His gaze shifted away from her knowing look. "At the moment I don't have a job or even know where I want to live, or what I really want to do. Settling down doesn't seem to be in my immediate future." But he'd figure it out. And Holly



would be included in that future!

"I need--" his father started to say.

"Not now, James," his mother interrupted heatedly. "Don't you bring up the bank. I've just got my son back. I won't have you driving him away again."

"Mom," Jared started, and then stopped. The bank *had* been part of why he'd left. He hadn't wanted to be molded into taking over a job that held no interest for him. His brothers had already joined the law firm, being almost twenty years older than him. He'd been a "surprise" baby born late in his parents' lives. He'd been his father's last hope of having an heir to take over managing the bank.

"No! We're not getting into any of that now." She raised her stubborn chin. "You'll figure out what you want to do and we'll back you unconditionally."

Jared suddenly blinked at tears that threatened. He reached for another cookie. Where was the hardened Marine? The tough bodyguard he'd been for the last five years that could face down the most dangerous attackers?

"Your mother's right. We just want you to be happy, son." His father reached over and patted Jared's hand. "It would be awful nice if you could be happy here, doing whatever you want to do."

When he'd decided to make this trip, he'd never expected to be hit with homesickness. He hadn't known what he wanted here beyond making peace with his family and convincing Holly to make a life with him. Now he wondered about staying here in Danville. L. A. didn't appeal to him anymore. He'd told his partners he wanted to sell out of the private security firm, although they were balking at his sudden decision. He could sell his beach house pretty easily.

He shook off those thoughts. "I've got a lot of thinking to do, Dad. My life has been kind of complicated this last year. Getting shot a month ago--"

"*Shot?*" His mother stepped closer, used a mother's x-ray vision to look over every inch of him. "You *do* look sort of pale, kind of pinched around your mouth. Are you in pain? Should you be in bed? James, maybe we should call the doctor." She leaned down and hugged him, nearly strangling him.

Jared sucked in a breath and gritted his teeth, endured as best he could. "No doctor."

"Darlene, he can't breathe."

She reluctantly released him but looked at him in concern.

He waited until his pulse slowed down and the pain eased. His dad had been right; his mother had had the strength of a Python. "It wasn't that bad. Well, okay, it was. But I didn't know how to tell you, or if you'd even care." The flash of hurt in his mother's eyes told him what a fool he'd been, then and now.

For a second it looked like his mother intended to give him a royal lecture, which he deserved. But then she blew out a sigh of frustration. "I'm putting you to bed. You *will* tell me *all* about it. Later. Right now I don't think I could handle it."

His father wasn't quite ready to drop the subject. "What were you doing that got you shot?" Clearly, with his other sons being small-town lawyers and his daughter a realtor, the thought of his youngest son doing something dangerous had shocked him.

"Acting as a bodyguard." All the traveling he'd done the last couple of days was getting to him. He yawned and stretched his long legs out. "Unfortunately, getting shot can be a hazard of the job."

"But you're not one now, right?" His mother's eyes flashed with disapproval.

"Time will tell. I've been a partner in a private security business with some old Marine buddies for the last five years. But I'm trying to sell out of the company." He yawned again. "My partners are trying to change my mind."

"Tell them *No!*"

He had to smile at the fervor in his mother's tone. "I'm not a little boy, Mom. You can't tell me what to do anymore."

She huffed. "Never could." Then she calmed down and smiled. "You always were my toughest child."

His father nodded. "If you didn't find trouble, it found you." He looked thoughtful. "Holly was always the same way. And you spent a lot of time getting *her* out of mischief."

"What a pair you two were!" His mother shook her head sadly. "Are you going to make things right with Holly before she leaves town?"

Jared fisted his hands on the table, ground his jaw.

She went on without noticing the tension emanating from him. "Our Holly has decided she's finally had enough of Danville. She's trying to sell her quilt shop and putting her house on the market." Tears glimmered in her eyes.

"There's a man in San Diego she met online, that she's visited a few times. He wants her to move there and marry him," his father finished, looking every bit as unhappy as Jared felt.

"It's not happening!" Jared stood, grimaced, and headed out of the room.

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# Chapter Two

Holly rolled over and smiled in contentment. *Ah, Sunday*. Her favorite day of the week. After working over fifty hours a week at her quilt store Monday through Saturday and her volunteer work at the senior center two nights a week, she needed time alone on Sunday mornings to re-energize and prepare for another wild week of commitments, which she had even more of this year. She still wasn't quite sure how she'd agreed to be Santa's elf helper at the Danville Bank's community Christmas party next Saturday. Or when she'd agreed to be Mrs. Claus and ride in the sleigh at the town's Christmas parade a week later. She planned to leave Danville in January and needed to focus on that. She needed to end her community commitments, not take on more. But nobody cooperated with her. It felt as if the whole community conspired against her, refusing to let her go, leaning on her even more. And when someone asked for her help, she tended to cave.

Her smile faded, as well as her good mood. Leaving Danville was one of the hardest decisions she'd ever made. Giving up her shop, which she took great pride in, had caused her many tear-filled nights. It broke her heart to put her family's home on the market. Moving away from Danville and all the people she loved--especially James and Darlene Danville, her second parents--was so difficult. How many times had she almost changed her mind? Countless. She'd wavered in her decision so often that gentle, kind, vanilla boring Eric had about given up

on her. *No!* Eric wasn't "vanilla boring," just dully predictable.

So unlike Jared Danville.

She sighed in frustration. The big, bad boy who'd once broken her heart had come back to stir up feelings and needs she didn't want to experience again. She'd seen in his eyes, in his attitude that he'd become a serious badass. Unfortunately, she liked a man with a bit of an untamed side, liked the promise of heat and va-va-voom just in the way he looked at you. If she didn't watch herself, trouble lay ahead. Poor Eric barely managed "va." But she'd told him she intended to move to San Diego and she would. She hadn't agreed to more, wanting to take baby steps in this big change in her life.

She sighed again, heavier. Maybe Eric was capable of "vava" and she could encourage him toward "va-va-voom." She could settle for that. He did give great hugs. Right? Yes! Yes, he did!

Enough of these bothersome thoughts! *Get back to enjoying your peaceful Sunday*. She didn't have to be at her shop until around noon, if she went in at all. Bridget, the college student who worked for her part-time, could handle everything without her. She could stay in her nice, warm bed all morning. Or she could make breakfast and bring it back to bed and then read the newspaper while snuggled beneath the down comforter she'd recently splurged on. She could...

Her doorbell rang, interrupting her pleasant musings. Annoyed, she refused to answer it. Jeez Louise, it's only--she glanced at the bedside clock--7:35! Too early for visitors.

The doorbell rang again, followed by someone pounding on the door.

She flung the comforter back and climbed off the high, old-fashioned sleigh bed. Grumbling, she stormed barefoot through the small house with its hardwood floors. Anyone who knew her, knew Sunday mornings were *her* private time

Holly shivered. The thermostat needed adjusting, but whoever her visitor was had punched the doorbell yet again.

She frowned and moved faster. Someone would get a huge piece of her mind!

Too irritated to think rationally or to think about what she wore, she jerked the door open, ready to lambast the intruder to her quiet Sunday morning. Instead she stood there gaping, almost salivating, at the sight of pure male perfection. It took her a second to shift her gaze from Jared's roughly carved, stubbled face with eyes crinkled in amusement, down to a black leather bomber's jacket covering a black T-shirt, and then lower to faded jeans. Another half-second passed before her gaze moved on from the very nice package she shouldn't have even glanced at to his snow-dusted boots. *Snow*

She leaned to the side and looked out at her snow covered lawn. "Well, darn! It wasn't supposed to snow again until next week."

"You used to like snow."

"As a kid." She huffed and her thoughts turned in another direction. *Bed head!* Even with short hair like she now wore, her hair tended to be a disaster when she first got out of bed. *Why the heck do you care?*

He hadn't said another word, but she sensed he was wandering through long-ago memories of their times sledding down the hill in his family's backyard, building snow forts, bombarding one another with snowballs.

She trampled down unwanted memories. "Playing in snow is a whole lot different from having to shovel your sidewalk, shovel your driveway, and drive in it." She looked up at him unhappily. "The reason you're disturbing me is..."

His lips twitched. "I'd heard this cute little gal lived here, that she wore the sexiest PJs. I wanted to check it out." His grin spread, and he swept his gaze slowly over her once more. "Not exactly sexy, but, hey, I've got a great imagination."

Holly's face flamed, and she glanced down at her favorite flannel PJs, the ones splashed with images of Santa and Mrs. Claus kissing. "You're probably more into filmy nighties and silk teddies." She shivered and wished she'd not turned the temperature so low last night.

He reached out to touch her shoulder, fingered the fabric. "Soft." His gaze warmed. "I'm okay with these."

Her heart raced, and she scooted out of his reach. Wanting to get back at him for making her think of him peeling her out of the PJs, she gave him her naughtiest smile and batted her eyelashes. "I save those others for nights when... I'm sure you understand." She actually hadn't had many such nights, but he didn't need to know.

His grin disappeared, and his jaw tightened.

Hmmm. Interesting.

"Maybe we should change the subject." He closed the door, and the small space seemed even smaller. He was a big man, bigger than his older brothers who were both just over six feet tall.

She stepped back into her entryway and rubbed her arms against the chill. "Good plan."

He looked as if he wanted to reach for her and pull her into his arms. As if he were kissing her. *No! That was what her foolish body wanted. Brainless leftover thoughts from a night spent dreaming about him.* She shoved those ideas, those longings far, far away.

"Something wrong? You seem, I don't know, upset." He studied her, his head slightly tipped to one side.

"Hmmm, let me think. I was all nice and warm snuggled in bed, planning to stay there for a whole lot longer. Then someone started pounding on my front door." She wiggled her cold, bare toes and rubbed her arms again. "Now that someone is keeping me from going back to my warm bed."

"Babe, I'm not against you going back to bed. I'd even join you there." His eyes had darkened, his tone huskier now.

*Yes!* her foolish body screamed. Heat tore through her and pooled low in her body in a way it hadn't in far too long. Maybe ever. *No! No! No!* Even as her heart skipped a beat, her brain kicked into gear. "I'll just bet you would."

Looking unrepentant, he nodded. "Yes. I would."

Her mind spun with visions of Jared in her bed, deliciously naked. Visions of him reaching for her, of him planting those big hands of his on her breasts, of his mouth suckling there, of a hand slipping lower. *Stop it! This is sooo wrong!* "You're here why?" she questioned sharply.

His brow had furrowed, and he studied her again.

Oh jeez, had he guessed what she'd been thinking? Her face heated, and she narrowed her eyes. "Why. Are. You. Here?" She enunciated each word to prod him into answering.

"Mom sent me." He'd gone back to admiring her choice of nightwear. His chest rose and fell at a more noticeable rate.

"Because?" She prodded again, forcing her gaze up from the way the hard planes of his chest pushed against the black t-shirt visible through the open front of the bomber jacket.

"Huh?"

"Focus, Jared." She used two fingers to point from his eyes to hers. "Here. Not on my breasts, which you really can't see now anyway." The PJ top was pretty baggy.

His dark gaze lifted. "If you'd undo one or two buttons, I could see them. I wouldn't have to use so much imagination." His voice had turned husky, teasing.

She blinked, swallowed hard. He looked serious, like she'd do such a thing just because he wanted to get a real view of her breasts. Her nipples hardened. *Dam it!* So did her clit. *Double dam it*

She shot him a killing look. "Why did Darlene send you over here? Does she need something? Sugar? Flour? What?" *I need something, but it sure isn't sugar or flour*

He shook his head, finally gave up staring at her breasts. "No. She wanted to make sure you were coming to dinner today, as you usually do, I'm told. She thought my being here would make you change your mind." He held her gaze, in challenge.

Darn him! He'd always enjoyed daring her, and she'd rarely backed down from his challenges. But things were different now. Complicated. Especially her feelings for him. She'd planned to call Darlene and make an excuse of some kind, but had decided it was too early to call. "I'm not sure," Holly fudged. "I should skip dinner today and help at the shop this afternoon. It is Christmas season now. We're starting to get busy."

She watched his shoulders stiffen at the mention of Christmas season. He met her gaze. His expression seemed troubled. Was it guilt and regret? If not, it should be! She remembered the pain she'd suffered, the hurt his family had endured when they'd discovered he'd left during the night. He'd skipped town with just his backpack two days before Christmas. He'd left a note: *"I have to go. I love you, but I've got to go."* He hadn't even signed the note. He'd just left it for her on her front porch in a small box with a sprig of holly. *Damn him*

"Mom will be disappointed," he said unemotionally.

"She's got you home to fuss over." She should be happy for his parents, and she was. But she also felt somehow not as important to them at the moment. She usually shared Sunday dinners with the Danvilles. They'd been her "family" for years. Now she felt like an outsider. And, yes, she realized how petty that was, but she couldn't help it.

Holly should have insisted he leave, but instead she walked into the living room to adjust the temperature. With her back turned to him as she turned the dial on the old thermostat, she said, "I'm sorry about the snowball thing yesterday."

He stomped his feet on the throw rug in the entry. "No, you're not. Or for what you said."

*Sonofabitch.* She hardly ever used that kind of language. She'd worked hard to become more of a lady, to give up the mischief maker part of her. In one single moment of time, Jared had drawn all of it out of her again. She slowly faced him. "You bring out the worst in me."

His expression solemn, he said, "You used to bring out the best in me."

"Why?" The question flew out of her mouth before she could stop it. She still had the crumpled note he'd left behind for her. "*I have to go. I love you, but I have to go.*" The words continued to hurt her. "How could you say what you did in a damn note and then just leave? You didn't even have the guts to tell me you were leaving to my face."

She blew out a breath of frustration. "I thought we were closer than that. *You* were my best friend." Her voice broke.

"I—"

She shook her head and held up a hand. "No! Never mind. I don't want to know the reasons. It's too late. Way, way too late."

His wide shoulders slumped within his leather jacket. "I can't change the past, Holly. But I've done a lot of growing up." He sounded distressed.

"Haven't we all." She hadn't had to run away from her home to do it. No, she'd had to toughen up right here and face his family and her friends after he'd walked away from them all. She'd grown up fast, painfully fast when he'd left her.

His expression tightened. "I'm a different man now."

"How so?" she asked and wished she hadn't said anything.

"In more ways than you can imagine. Some good, some maybe not so good." He held her gaze. "I'll never be the perfect man, the perfect son. Like my folks wanted."

The vulnerability he tried to keep hidden was in his eyes. "They didn't want perfection, Jared. They just didn't understand you."

His gaze locked on hers. "You did. Only you."

She snorted. "What did it matter?" Her heart strained, tears threatened. She toughed up and stretched to her most intimidating height of just over five feet two inches. Okay not so intimidating.

"It matters. You matter." His voice had deepened, his expression strained.

Stupid tears threatened even more. She did *not* want to cry in front of him. She was so close to really losing it. "Go! Now! Before I kick your sorry ass out of my house."

To her surprise, amusement danced in his expression. "Really think you can?"

She growled in frustration, actually growled. "Don't make me call your father. He'll come straight over here and drag you out of my home."

Now he chuckled, but he did move back to the front door. "Yes, he probably would. Dad's always been a champion of the underdog, of the woman who needed protecting."

"Like you," she said the words quietly.

She thought about the many times Jared had come to her defense over the years. If there was trouble to be found, she found it. He'd saved her from herself too many times to count, and he'd taken the blame for her pranks a lot of times as well. Jared Danville had been the toughest guy in town, with the worst reputation—although not truly mean or evil, just rough. But he'd had a soft side, too. A vulnerable side only she'd seemed to know about. She studied him now and wondered how much he really had changed over time. How much he'd stayed the same.

"You didn't give up on me before, don't do it now." He pulled open the door and didn't look back. "If I have to, I'll come haul your sweet butt from the store. Mom wants you at dinner today. You're going to be there."

"You're such a stubborn man," she grouched. But, oddly, her heart skipped a beat at his threat. And at his wanting her to have some kind of faith in him, even after what he'd done to her.

Jared could have kicked himself for having laid down the gauntlet in challenge earlier. He knew better. Holly Jacobs had never liked being told what to do, and she clearly hadn't grown out of that.

Jason and Kandee had arrived a half hour ago. His brother had barely spoken two civil words to him. Kandee had said little more. Jim called saying he would be there in an hour, but not to wait dinner for him. Jocie was on her way. Holly, of course, had gone to her shop. He'd watched her drive away not long after he'd left her house, and she hadn't returned.

"Damn stubborn woman," he muttered and drew his father's attention across the kitchen.

His father continued to stir a pot of gravy on the stove.

The smells of roast and homemade rolls swirled around the room. "Holly, I take it?"

"Who else?" Jared put the lettuce salad he'd helped with in the refrigerator. "My fault. I made it sound like an order that she be here today."

His father nodded. "Women don't like being ordered about." He smiled at his wife. "Only took me fifty years of marriage to learn that."

"Fifty-three years," Darlene corrected. She looked at Jared. "So, are you going to get her?"

"Maybe it's better he didn't," Jason said. "After all she suffered because of him, he should leave her alone."

"Stay out of this!" Jared caught the concern in his mother's eyes and shook his head. "I'm not backing down, Mom. What happened is between me and Holly. What happens next is between me and Holly."

"I can drive you to her shop," his father offered, lines of worry in his expression.

They shared a look, a silent reminder that Jared didn't want his folks to tell his siblings about what he referred to as his recent job-related accident. His parents hadn't been happy about his decision but had agreed to respect it. His father went back to stirring the gravy. "Right. You can take care of yourself," he said, sounding sad.

It was hard after so many years of doing just that, but Jared said, "Thanks, Dad. But I'll go get Holly on my own." *And sometime damn soon I'm going to spank her sweet butt*

The door to Holly's Quilt Shop opened and a blustery wind swept through the building, blew straight to the register counter and wrapped around Holly. She shivered from her boot-covered feet, up her wool slacks and through her warm sweater. Bridget, standing next to her cutting fabric for a customer, shivered as well and then gasped. "Oh wow!"

Holly glanced up to find Jared standing big and tall in the doorway, looking extremely uncomfortable. Snow blew around behind him on the sidewalk. Flakes landed on his leather jacket and in his hair. She longed to rush over and hold him against her, run her hands up and down his arms to warm him.

Instead she said, "Close the door. With you on the other side."

The customer looked at her in surprise. Few people knew her to be rude, but then they didn't know her history with this scowling, gorgeous hunk of a behemoth.

She watched him close the door and move further into the space crowded with tables stacked with rolls of fabric, racks of patterns, cabinets with thread and other things necessary for quilting. He looked so out of place, but determined as he eased carefully around it all. He was focused on getting to her and clearly unconcerned with the middle-aged customer Holly could see was savoring every yummy inch of the newest eye candy in town. Bridget pretty much did the same thing. To her disgust, she, too, was eating up his good looks.

Forcing aside her female appreciation, she asked, "Did you take up quilting while you were away?" She knew why he was here, but she wasn't in the mood to cooperate.

"I'm more into knitting."

"You're so full of it, Jared." She rang up the customer's order, feeling him watching her. "I'm busy. Go away." He seriously disturbed her. His gaze directed at her chest made her breasts ache, made her nipples harden. *Dam him!* It almost felt like he was touching her now. Moisture pooled between her legs. *Ohhhh, this has to stop*

Annoyed at her thoughts and reactions, she snapped again, "Go. Away!"

"Jared Danville?" the woman asked, sounding both surprised and in awe. "I recognize you now."

He nodded and a hint of red spread beneath his beard stubble.

"Some of us thought you had died. Your parents have been so distraught." The woman shifted uneasily. "They must be so happy you're back."

Holly's breath hitched. She'd been one of the many who had believed he'd died somewhere over the years. His parents had never wanted to accept that. But she'd needed a way to let him go, so she could move on. Of course, she hadn't moved on. Until recently. Until her decision to leave Danville because she couldn't stand the pain any longer. Now the person who'd caused all of the pain had returned and now frowned down at her. She wanted to rage at him, make him fully aware of all the misery he'd caused her. Another part of her wanted to wrap her arms around him and never let go.

"Nearly did a few times," Jared stated quietly. "Even just a month ago." He grimaced, and Holly was almost certain he wished he hadn't admitted that. Especially now that Bridget and the woman looked at him in sympathy. This older, harder man before her didn't seem the type to want sympathy or pity.

Holly turned back to the register, her knees weak. She so hadn't wanted to hear him say something like that. Trying to think of him as dead was far different from hearing him admit to actually having nearly died. A few times. *Even just a month ago!* Oh, God. Did his parents know? Darlene would be going crazy with worry if she did. She'd want to coddle him in cotton the rest of his days. Holly's own instinct was to do the same thing, which, of course, was ridiculous. How could she feel anything at all for him after they'd been so close, planning a future together, and then he'd just walked away? He'd left that pitifully short note. He'd never called, not tried to contact her in any way for fifteen years. How could she care now? *But I do*

"I'm only here for a couple of weeks."

"Surely your folks want you here for Christmas. That would only be another week longer." The woman handed Holly a credit card.

Holly couldn't resist looking at him after the mention of Christmas. A vein pulsed in his neck. She could see in his gaze shift quickly to the door, sensed that he wanted to get the hell out of here, yet he didn't move. He didn't have to explain his wariness for anything Christmas-related. She knew him, even after all this time. Guilt had always weighed heavily on him when he'd done something foolish, something wrong. His having run away at Christmas time certainly qualified as "foolish" and "wrong," at least in her opinion. In his, too, she felt certain.

"We'll have a good visit before I have to leave." He studied the fabric on the counter. "I don't do Christmas."

"What do you mean?" the woman questioned in confusion.

Jared stood there looking rigid from the stiff set of his wide shoulders to his tight jaw. Not everyone in town knew the story of how he'd left Danville just before Christmas. Not everyone in town knew what a painful subject it was for the Danville family, her, and, apparently, for Jared.

Although still hugely mad at him, Holly came to his rescue—as she'd always done. She looked to Bridget. "Can you handle the shop for a while? Maybe for the rest of the day? Jared came to get me for dinner at his parents' home."

Relief swept over his face, some of the rigidity left his body. "Yes, we need to go. They're holding up dinner for us."

"No problem." Bridget shifted over to the register to complete the sale. She reached under the counter and then shoved Holly her purse.

Holly snagged her coat from a hall tree behind the counter. "I can drive. My car is out back."

Jared shook his head and took her arm as she walked around the counter. "We'll come back for your car later."

Her arm tingled where he held her, even through the layers of fabric. She inhaled his musky cologne, something similar to what he'd worn before, and his own personal scent. Both scents had always driven her hormones crazy. Between them and his touch—okay his amazing ability to kiss, too—she'd gotten so close to going all the way with him. She'd resisted because she wanted everything to be special when they got married, which would have been the next spring. It had been hard on them both, maybe harder on him. She'd wondered if that had been why he'd left her. He'd said he loved her, but not enough to write her or to call her. Had he needed more of a woman than she could be back then? Had he decided he couldn't wait any longer? She'd reached for him and regretted her decision for months after he'd gone. She let out a deep breath. None of it mattered any longer.

She pulled her arm free of his hold as soon as they left the shop. "You owe me for saving you back there."

He stopped, lifted her chin, and looked into her eyes. Her stomach fluttered in anticipation. Then, as she held her breath, he cupped her face, stroked her cheek with his thumb. "I owe you for so much more than that," his voice had gone husky, rich with warmth.

She savored his touch and the tender look in his eyes. *Yes, you do.*

He released her, unlocked his car and opened the door for her.

"Just leave me in peace and we'll be good." She settled in her seat, but he didn't respond. She'd been afraid of that.

Jared tried to concentrate on driving the slick streets and not on the quiet woman sitting beside him. There'd been a time when they could talk about anything. Okay, they'd also argued about anything and everything, but they'd also done a lot of kissing and making up. Especially in their senior year of high school. He'd wanted to go farther and he knew she'd been tempted, too. During the summer after graduation and the first semester of junior college, their hormones had gone nuts. They'd gone pretty far, heavy petting, French kissing, but she'd resisted taking the final step because she'd had this idea about saving herself as some kind of gift to her husband for their wedding night. It had nearly killed him to respect her wishes. He had, though. They'd talked about getting married the next spring and he'd been determined to last until then. *Dammit! He should have been able to last until then.* But, no, he'd gotten stir crazy here, impatient. *Stupid.* He'd been long gone by the next spring.

"I don't suppose you're still a virgin?" He could have bitten off his tongue for having asked such a personal question. But, dammit, he'd wanted to be Holly's first *and only* lover.

"I could ask the same question," she countered, looking squarely at him. He saw the pain in her eyes, saw his answer.

*Damn!* He clutched the steering wheel tighter. "Got it. I shouldn't have asked. Sorry."

*Damn, damn, damn!* What had he expected? She was thirty-two now. Still, he wished she'd waited for him—selfish man that he was. He'd left her, left behind a ridiculous note professing his love and nothing else for her to hang on to. He hadn't called her or written her. For all she'd known, he could have died. She didn't owe it to him to wait. He also wondered why she hadn't married any of the local men, because he was darn sure she'd had offers. A thought which upset him all over again.

She turned away to glance out the window where quarter-sized flakes were falling in a winter wonderland he might have enjoyed at another time. "I couldn't wait forever for a man I didn't think would ever be back. I had needs, too." She hesitated. "*Have* needs. Just so you know, I like sex."

"Holly." Her name came out as a groan. He seriously wished he'd never spun the conversation in this direction. *She likes sex.* Considering he'd dreamed of taking her virginity and then had wet dreams of doing so much more with her over the years, he didn't need to hear her confession. His pants grew tight. *She likes sex. Well, hell*

"New subject," she demanded.

"Okay, good idea." He shifted on the seat to get more comfortable. "How about this ridiculous idea of you selling the shop? Even my first time in there, I could see you care a lot about it."

He glanced at her and saw tension thinning her lips. "Or how about that idea of selling your house? Holly, you've always loved the cottage."

"There's nothing ridiculous about my decisions. You left Danville. It's my turn to leave Danville."

When he would have pressed her again, she shook her head. That familiar stubborn look sizzled in her eyes. "Drop it, Jared. Not your business anyway."

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's not."

He wasn't going to argue with her about this right now. They'd get into it later, and he planned to win the argument. He planned to win Holly. He had to win her back. He couldn't settle for defeat.

She remained stubbornly quiet. He turned down Main Street, barely noted the town square hadn't changed much over the years. A new business here and there. Then he saw the Danville Bank on the north side of the square. His brothers' law office was on the opposite corner. The next block held his sister's

real estate office.

"Is Jocie handling the sale of your house?" He hoped so, because he planned to stall any possible sale until he made up with Holly. Then they'd figure out what to do with the house.

She didn't answer right away, and then said quietly, "She will be. I'm signing the contract papers with her next week."

Good. "What about the sale of your shop?" He'd try to stop it as well, somehow. "Anyone interested?"

"Actually, Jason's wife, Kandee, is thinking about buying it. Jason isn't too wild about the idea. He likes her staying home to watch the grandkids whenever needed." Her shoulders slumped. "No one else. Yet."

Good. "Too bad," he lied. He'd have to talk to Jason, back him up in convincing Kandee not to buy the shop.

They arrived at his parents' house, and he swallowed hard. Anxiety settled in the pit of his stomach and radiated outward. Two other cars were there now, probably Jim's and Jocie's. He dreaded facing his family. "This is going to be a stressful meal for me. My brothers are pretty hostile, which I understand."

She surprised him by reaching over and gently squeezing his arm. "You hurt all of us. But your parents will forgive you, probably already have. Your brothers will come around. Jocie always had confidence you'd return one day, although I never knew why. I didn't."

Her admission cut him as sharp as any knife. But he deserved the pain. "I'm sorry, Holly."

She gave a curt nod of acknowledgment, not forgiveness, and climbed out of the Lexus the second he stopped next to the other cars. He sensed she was about to balk and change her mind about going to the family dinner with him. He practically threw himself out of the car and sped around to her before she could move away.

"I've got to do this." He stepped closer, nudging her back against the car.

"Jared." Her eyes widened. Her nostrils flared, but when he cupped his hands around her face, she didn't resist. She stiffened, but didn't stop him as he lowered his head and claimed their first kiss in years. God, it felt so right. All of it. His hands touching her, the scent of her settling over him, and the tenderness in the kiss.

Maybe her mind battled against doing this, but her lips accepted him. She kissed him with far more skill than she'd had before, a thought which disturbed him. And pleased him. Then all thoughts fled, and his attention was solely on tasting her and on memorizing how she felt in his arms.

Her hands slid into his hair, threaded through it. He returned the favor. "So soft," he muttered, pulling back just a bit. "Short. I miss your long hair, but this is okay, too."

She lightly touched his receding hairline. "You've changed, too."

He pulled her to him again. Her tongue slid along the crease of his mouth. Eagerly he opened and their tongues tangled in that special dance. Then he blew out a breath. "More. I need to feel bare skin, mine against yours."

She trembled in his embrace, yet he felt her trying to put distance between them.

"Forget dinner. Let's go to your place." His hands cupped her face again. His thumbs feathered her soft cheeks.

"We can't do this, Jared." Her tone was sad, strained. "I'm involved with someone else." She put her hands on his chest and pushed firmly away from him.

She'd shoved against his healing shoulder wounds and he couldn't stop pulling in an audible breath. He saw her frown in concern. He didn't want to get into his injuries. "Does he make you feel what I make you feel? You were every bit as much into the kiss as I was." He had a raging hard-on and could barely think straight.

Holly continued to study him, trying to determine what had made him gasp. "We're good together." She sounded more resigned than definite. "What's wrong with you? Why do you look so...so pained?"

He glanced down at the obvious bulge in his pants, which throbbed almost as much as his shoulder. "What do you think?"

She huffed. "You'll have to take care of your little problem. On your own."

He ignored that and went back to her comment. "We're better together. You and I. We're better."

"No! I can't do this again. I won't!" She moved by him. "Give your mother my apologies. But I can't go there. Not today. Not with you there."

Jared leaned against the car and rubbed his shoulder. "I'd say I'm sorry, but I'm not."

She faced him from a few feet away, breathing hard. "Well, I am."

"Liar."

Furious, she reached down, patted a snowball, and threw it at him. "Stay out of my life. Stay away from me."

She'd hit him in his wounded shoulder with a hard-packed snowball. If he hadn't been still healing, he wouldn't have felt it at all, wouldn't have flinched. But he did.

His Holly didn't miss a thing. She heard his quiet groan and saw his reaction. She marched right back, held a finger inches from pressing his shoulder, and said firmly, "Tell me what's wrong with you. Now!"



"Leave it alone. You don't want to know." He pushed her hand away. "What you need to know, Holly Jacobs, is I don't give up as easily as I once did. I've learned how to fight and how to win."

"I'm not battling you. We were over fifteen years ago. I'm finally moving on."

*Moving on, without him. No!* His gut told him to fight damn hard for her. For them.

In a surprising move, she avoided his protective arm and managed to poke his upper chest, but not hard. When he inhaled sharply, she demanded, "Now, tell me what the hell is the matter with you. Does this have something to do with your admission in the shop? That you almost died a month ago?"

"I got shot. Okay. Does that make you happy?" He hated being forced to tell her. He didn't want her sympathy. He wanted her love.

At first she looked horrified. Then she turned away. "You're exactly what I don't need in my life: a badass man who people shoot at. I need someone I can depend on. Someone--"

"You need me. You want me. I felt it in that kiss, heard it in your soft moan."

"Maybe so, but I'm going to work damn hard to resist you. You'll be gone soon. I can resist you for two weeks."

"Think so? Really?"

She turned back to level a glare at him. "Really."

"I'll be in your bed within the week."

She ground her jaw for a second, and then narrowed her eyes. If looks could kill, he'd be toes up. But he loved a challenge. "You belong to me, Holly. You always have."

He shoved away from the car, grinned at the fury in her expression, and whistled as he walked toward his parents' house.

"You sonofabitch!" she yelled after him.

"Remember what I said about warming your backside?" He kept on walking, smiling at the string of curses she grumbled before she stormed to her house.

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# Chapter Three

"Where are you going so early, son?" James asked from where he sat at the kitchen table reading the morning newspaper and eating cereal.

"I'm going to use your snow blower over at Holly's place." Jared stopped by the coffee pot and grabbed a cup from the cupboard before pouring some coffee. "What the heck are you eating? What happened to eggs and bacon in the morning? I didn't think you ate anything else."

James snorted. "Those were the old days. Your mom's watching my cholesterol and everything else. If it tastes good, I can't have it." He grinned. "The only exceptions are family dinners and holidays. She lets me splurge a bit then. I live for those times."

"She loves you, wants you around for a good, long while." He did, too. But his parents were in their seventies already. He'd missed a big chunk of their lives.

Jared concentrated on sipping his coffee. His thoughts wandered back to the family dinner yesterday, which had been strained at first. His brothers hadn't been thrilled to see him again, but they'd grown less hostile by the time they'd left. Jocie had welcomed him back unconditionally. What had gotten to him most was watching his parents together. Their love for one another was obvious in the casual touches they shared, in the tender glances, and in the way they helped one another without being asked. He wanted that. He hadn't realized how much he'd grown to hate being a bachelor and being alone most of the time. Sure, he'd had some live-in lovers over the years. But that wasn't the same as having someone there you really cared about. He'd sure screwed up his life. If he hadn't run away, he and Holly would have been married almost fourteen years by now.

"You weren't ready," his mother said, walking into the room and seeming to know what he'd been thinking.

"Young, stupid, and you're probably right. I wasn't ready for settling down. Not even with Holly." He blew out a deep breath of frustration and then reached up to rub at his shoulder. He was tired of babying it, tired of the other slowly healing sprained ribs and bruises. "Why couldn't I have been like Jason and Jim? They never got into trouble. They never thought about rebelling. They were damn near perfect in school clear on through law school. They—at least Jason—got married to a nice young woman and raised kids of their own. I—"

"Stop it!" His mother moved to stand directly in front of him. "Stop comparing yourself to your brothers. Each of you children was different. Each of you struggled with something growing up. Jason was far from perfect, still is. He's been overly rigid about things all of his life. Everything is so black-and-white with him. Kandee should be granted sainthood for putting up with him for so long."

Jared blinked at his mother's admission, agreed with it, and gave a small smile. "Glad to know I'm not the only one who sees him that way."

"Jim is pretty rigid, but not as much as Jason. He married the wrong woman and it cost him dearly. But he'll be okay," his father inserted. "Jocie. She's far more personable than her older brothers and not anxious to stop living the single life. She likes her freedom. She loves her partner, Parker Greene, too. She's just not sure about living with him *and* working with him. Truthfully, I understand that."

His mother stepped forward and gave Jared a gentle hug.

"I'm so glad you finally came home. You were my toughest child. Still are, I think."

"Probably right, Mom." He hugged her back with equal care. "I've got plenty of rough edges, maybe more than before. My life has been a lot different than my brothers'. My partners think I'm something of a hard ass. Pretty damn determined at times."

"That's probably what it'll take to win Holly back. Letting your inner 'hard ass' out and staying determined." His mother smiled and moved to get her own cup of coffee. "She's every bit as stubborn as you. She's made up her mind about leaving and about seriously considering Eric Adams' proposal. Our Holly doesn't back down easily."

The mention of Adams' proposal felt like a punch to his gut. Made him even more determined to do whatever he needed to make things right with Holly. He took a sip of the hot coffee and set the cup down. "I warned her yesterday I don't give up easily anymore, either. The battle is on, and I aim to win it. Whatever I have to do."

Now his mother looked thoughtful, worried her lower lip. She exchanged a glance with his father. "Anything? You're willing to do anything?"

Jared hesitated. Something in her eyes made him cautious. "What's going through your mind, Mom?"

"The bank's community Christmas party is this Saturday afternoon." She must have noted his immediate stiffening. She gently touched his arm. "You're going to have to get beyond that, Jared. Your father and I have."

He took in his father's nod. "I'm trying. Guilt is a pretty heavy burden to bear."

"Humbling, too. Maybe you needed a good dose of that." His mother looked up at him. "Anyway, Holly is going to be the elf helper to Santa. Jason was going to be Santa again, which he hates. I'm pretty sure we can talk him into letting you take over the role."

Jared's stomach knotted. Serious Christmas stuff. *Santa*

*Him*? Before he could refuse his mother said, "Is 'man-up' the term they're using these days?"

Say *No*! But the words that slipped out were, "Yep. Okay, it's time to man-up. You got yourself a new Santa. Biggest, baddest Santa Danville's ever seen."

Holly was running late, thanks to that rat-bastard Jared Danville. Their conversation yesterday had stayed with her the rest of the day, and night. *You need me. You want me.* Yes, she did! And she really, really hated that she did. Why couldn't he have stayed away? Even for just another month.

She jerked on her jeans and then searched for her favorite holiday sweatshirt. She needed to fit time in for doing some laundry. Maybe she should have

gotten up and done it last night instead of tossing and turning for hours on end. Every time she'd squeezed her eyes shut and tried to will herself to sleep, Jared had been there. Not in person. But, no matter how many times she'd washed her face, his scent had lingered on her from their kiss. It had been her imagination, sure, but it had seemed so vivid. Stupid imagination even had her recalling the demanding touch of his lips against hers, the warmth of being in his arms. God, she was so pitiful!

Socks! Didn't she have at least one pair of clean socks? She spotted a pair in the far corner of the dresser drawer. Then her fingers touched the necklace Jared had given her their senior year in high school. She hadn't been able to get rid of it. Okay, she hadn't gotten rid of anything he'd ever given her. She'd packed the stuff away in boxes up in the attic. Except this necklace. She'd needed it closer to her than the attic, but not out where she'd actually see it. *Leave it there. Forget about it.*

As if her traitorous fingers had a mind of their own, she carefully pulled out the delicate gold chain with the small green, holly-shaped charm. Holly. For her. He'd been so excited when he'd found the necklace in a catalogue and ordered it especially for her. She'd sobbed in happiness as he'd ever so carefully put it around her neck. And then he'd kissed her.

They'd almost gone all the way that night parked in his car on the side of a country road. She'd wanted him so badly. Still did. *Dam him*

Certain it was a mistake but unable to stop herself, she put the necklace on and then tucked it down inside her sweatshirt. She'd take it off tonight and put it away again. She didn't often give in to weakness, but today she did.

*Vroooooom! Vroooooom!* The repetitive sound came loudly from outside. What the heck? Then it occurred to her that she'd been hearing this sound for a while now. It just hadn't registered in her brain, which had been focused on Jared.

She tugged on the socks and then raced out of the bedroom to the great room. Opening the blinds, she looked out at the driveway. Her half-cleaned off driveway. She really needed to find a way to stop James from cleaning her driveway every time it snowed, even if he used a snow blower. He was getting too old and she worried about him. She'd go take over the chore herself right now.

A minute later she stepped out her side door and headed for the sounds of the snow blower working in front of her detached garage. "James!" she yelled out. "Let me do that!"

She skidded to a stop on the slushy driveway. The tall, well-muscled man in the black leather jacket, stocking cap, snow-dusted black jeans, and slush-covered boots was definitely not James. Jared looked so good, so positively take-her-breath-away yummy. Her heart skipped a beat, then another. Then it kicked into high speed.

Jared turned the motor off, making the silence almost blaringly loud. He straightened, grimaced before he could stop himself, and grinned at her. "Mornin', Babe."

He might think she'd missed seeing that grimace, but she hadn't. *Shot.* The man had been shot and nearly died. *Idiot man!* She marched right over to him. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Helping you out."

"Hurting yourself is more like it." She shoved his hands off the controls and wriggled her way in front of the snow blower. "I can finish this. Go home."

"I'm fine. I can't just sit around forever," he grunted and grabbed her around the waist, picked her up, and set her off to the side. "Can't you just accept my help?"

"No." Call her ten kinds of stubborn, but she didn't want to make whatever injuries were still healing worse. And it really annoyed her that she could still almost feel the touch of his big hands around her waist. *Think San Diego. Moving. Eric. Eric what?* Good grief, she'd forgotten his last name!

"Aren't you going to be late getting to your shop? Let me just finish this last part." He reached for the controls.

Before she could protest, she spotted a few drops of blood on the slush at her feet. Her gaze shot to him. "You're bleeding! Where? Darn it, Jared."

He looked confused for a second, then he lifted his right arm and they both stared at a gash on his wrist just below his coat sleeve. "Well, damn." He pulled off his leather glove and examined the heavily bleeding wound. "I bent down to clean something out of the blower a few minutes ago. Thought I felt a scratch. But being so cold, I didn't hardly feel anything."

"It's a pretty deep scratch." She took hold of his other hand and tugged him toward her house. "Let's clean it up and decide if you need stitches, maybe a trip to the ER."

"No stitches. No hospital. A bandage should take care of it." He tried to resist her.

Holly glanced at him and saw the stubborn set to his jaw. "How long were you in the hospital?" She tugged him harder.

She shoved open the side door and led him into her combination kitchen-dining room. The blast of heat felt good compared to the near freezing temperature outside. The blast of air also caused the scent of Jared's cologne to drift over her, his personal scent, too. She sucked it in and savored the smell. A surge of desire tore through her.

He stopped to stomp the snow off his boots on the small rug. "This last time, over two weeks."

*This last time? Over two weeks.* She fought the yearning to go to him, to pull him into her embrace, to feel the steady beat of his heart against her. She wouldn't do that. Couldn't do that. It had to be enough just seeing him standing here strong and healthy. He would be fine before much longer.

On shaky legs, she went to the pantry and grabbed her first aid kit. When she came back he stood at the sink, running water over the cut. The wound wasn't as bad as it had seemed. Still it bothered her to see him hurt. She pulled out some butterfly bandages to pull the edges of the cut together. "Shot, you said. right? Why?" She needed to lighten the moment. "Did you try to hold up a convenience store or something? Got shot trying to flee the scene?"

"It was a bank. Hold-up gone bad." He dabbed the cut dry with a paper towel.

She blew out a breath and considered kicking him in his oh-so-fine ass. "Now try telling me the truth."

As she started to apply a bandage, he met her gaze. "Bodyguard job gone bad. I got shot. Twice. Tumbled down a flight of stairs, too. Some sprained ribs. Concussion." He gave a crooked grin. "You know me, hard head. But it did manage to jumble my thoughts for a spell there."

Her legs threatened to give out, and she sagged against the counter. "Shot? Twice? Concussion?" The questions came out so quietly. He'd told her yesterday that he'd been shot. She'd tried to shove it from her mind. He was okay now, annoying even. Hearing about it made her almost sick. Lightheaded.

Before she realized what he intended, Jared scooped her into his arms and carried her through the house. He didn't stop until he lay her gently down on her bed. Pain etched into his face, white lines creased the corners of his tightened mouth.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "I thought you were going to pass out on me back there."

"You shouldn't have carried me." She searched his face harder. "Did you hurt yourself ? Oh, Jared."

He'd lost a considerable amount of color beneath his normal year-round tan. "The macho man in me gets me into trouble sometimes." He drew in a breath and held it, closing his eyes for a second. "I'll be fine. Just need a couple of minutes."

She scooted over and patted the bed. "Come lie down." What was she doing? Being this close to him could get her in serious trouble. Already her heart raced, tingles zipped through her. "Maybe I should call your parents. Your dad could help me get you back over there."

He almost leaped onto the bed before she finished speaking. He still seemed pale, but his eyes sparked with a fire that warmed her, that drew her. His voice husky, he said, "This is all I need."

"No, no we need to get you out of that jacket. Boots, too."

She scrambled off the bed and removed her down-filled jacket and the boots she'd jammed on before hurrying out of the house.

He sat up with effort, holding his left arm across his ribs. He grimaced at the movement and the pull against his healing wounds, but he managed to ease out of the jacket. "Damn, I hate being weak like this."

"It's a temporary thing, tough guy." She sped over to pull off his boots. His feet were big and she stared at them for longer than she should have. What was that saying?

He chuckled and drew her attention. "In this case, honey, yes, it's true." He eased carefully back on her pillows. Even though pain filled his eyes, he smiled in that pure cocky way men did sometimes.

"What's true?" Her face heated as she realized he'd figured out what she'd been thinking about. "Never mind, I don't want to know." *Dam it, she did want to know*

"Yes, you do. Hell, you've probably been wondering all these years." His hand moved to his belt buckle and her breath caught.

"What are you doing?" She should stop him. She should look away. She should run away. Instead she stood there watching, waiting, and dying of curiosity.

Confident man that he was, he popped the button on his jeans, then slowly eased the zipper down. "All those years ago, you touched me, still inside my shorts. Thought I'd finally let you see the big boy you used to make so hard. Still make so hard."

Blood strummed the nerve endings at the core of her body. Her clit pulsed, everything else did as well. "I've seen other men." But she wanted to see him. Now.

At the flash of irritation across his face, she wished she hadn't said that. She didn't want to know he'd been with other women, which, of course, he had. After all, they'd had that ridiculous virginity discussion. The one where she'd admitted she liked sex. She did, she just wasn't all that experienced.

He parted the jeans and reached inside his undershorts to pull out his cock. His hand surrounded the thick shaft with the bulging veins. He stroked it once while he watched her reaction, and then his crooked grin returned. "Impressed?"

"Yes." Again, she hadn't meant to say anything. But that precious rod *did* look impressive. The few other men she'd been with in no way compared to him. It had to be at least seven inches long, maybe longer. *Oh my! Oh wow!* She wanted to touch it, desperately. *No! You do not want to touch it, to see it, to anything. Look away. Now*

"We could continue this little game of show and tell." He stroked the shaft again and her gaze refused to shift away. "I always wanted to see your breasts completely bare, too."

Her nipples hardened instantly and shoved against the sweatshirt. "I don't think that's a good idea." She nodded toward him. "And you should probably put that away. You should probably leave, too."

He shook his head. "Not a good idea. I think I overdid myself out there. My headache is coming back big time. Bed rest is what I need right now." His eyes looked heavy, darker, and he motioned her closer. "Maybe you could lie here with me for a little bit. Help me relax. Maybe rub my...head... forehead."

"The shop," she gasped. Bridget would be opening the shop in an hour, so that was covered. "This isn't right."

Yes, it is." He still looked paler than normal. Pain marred his handsome face. He sucked in a breath, held it and somehow managed to shuck his jeans. The undershorts followed, even his socks. Amazing for an injured man. But then he was a *man*. Men, when focused on sex, were very determined.

Instead of protesting what he'd removed, she said, "Your sweater." What was she thinking? What had happened to 'this isn't right'?

"It's fine." That stubborn look had returned to his eyes.

She didn't mean to, really she didn't. But she began tugging off her jeans, pulling off her sweatshirt. She stood before him in a red thong and a red lace Victoria's Secret bra and thick, white calf-length socks.

He chuckled. "Now if that isn't the sexiest sight!"

Holly snorted in disgust and pulled off the socks. "I'm upset with you for making me do this." Which, of course, was ridiculous. He hadn't touched her. He hadn't even begged her to undress. She just had.

"Then you're going to be really pissed when I make you hop aboard and ride your heart out." He held his cock up in invitation.

Her mouth watered. Her vulva pulsed, all but screamed at her to do exactly as he'd said. But she wanted to see his chest, see just how much he'd filled out. She wanted to touch it. "Nothing more until that sweater comes off."

Concern pierced his brow. "Holly..."

She sashayed over to the bed, knowing he watched every step she took, every bounce of her breasts. "It's coming off."

Resigned, looking wary and in pain once more, he sat up enough that she could pull it over his head. She gasped at the sight of two red-rimmed, healing wounds in his upper left shoulder and at the yellowish fading signs of bruising over his rib cage. Tears slipped down her cheeks. "Oh, Jared."

Somehow she ended up on the bed, snuggled against him, one leg bent and lying over his. Ever so carefully she fingered his chest near the wounds. He thumbed the tears from her cheeks at the same time. They lay there quietly for several minutes. Until she felt his hard shaft poke her in the stomach.

"Was that a hint?" She moved her hand down to encircle his warm erection.

"I'd have to say 'yes,'" he said in what sounded like a rumble of happiness. He reached to unclasp her bra, and then tossed it to the carpet. His eyes darkened. "Even better than I imagined."

He tweaked a nipple and she sighed; then he did it again. "Oh, Jared." She wanted to feel his hot mouth covering them, have him suckle them. She wanted... It finally occurred to her that bending over would cause him pain. And she saw the frustration of that knowledge in his expression.

"I wish I could," he said as if he'd read her mind.

She wasn't the most experienced woman at lovemaking, but she'd read her share of romances. Especially the hotter erotic stuff. She'd experienced "va-va" sex, but she wanted the whole "va-va-voom" kind. The kind she was sure Jared--when fully healthy--would be capable of. *Yeah, bring it on*

They were going to do this, even if she knew they shouldn't. Putting aside the rights and wrongs of it, she sucked up her courage and decided to boldly take charge. Her heart raced in anticipation. She and Jared had had so many adventures in the past. *This will be just one more*. She'd have this one time with him, this one memory that she could hold onto when she left here. Not for one minute did she think him tame enough now to settle down. And she'd never settle for being part of an occasional affair. She wanted stability in a man.

"Guess it ends here." He looked at her in grave disappointment.

With her naughtiest smile, she stood up and shed the thong. He watched her every move. When she crawled back onto the bed, his breath hitched. When she shifted astride his thighs, his eyes went wide, and then he smiled.

"Guess I was wrong."

She sat there on her knees, momentarily distracted by the sensation of his moderately hairy legs against the soft, bare skin of her inner thighs. Her body looked pale compared to his overall tan, except for a brief area where he must wear a Speedo. He was big all over; she was slight--not necessarily perfect--but much smaller. He had six-pack hard abs with fading, yellow bruises. She preferred to think of her abs as pleasantly soft and casually toned.

"Enough staring and comparing, Babe." He nodded at his thickly, veined cock alert and ready for attention. "Action. I'd like to see some action here."

She snapped out of it, slightly disappointed. She could look at him forever. But she didn't have forever. She only had now. And she was more than ready for some action, too. "You never were very patient."

He didn't deny it. He simply reached around to cup her buttocks. "Climb aboard."

She obediently raised up until she took hold of his cock and guided the tip between her aching lower lips. He watched her, breathed shallowly, and smiled smugly as she began lowering her body. Inch by inch. Her thighs trembled. Her clit did a happy dance as his shaft went further and further inside her. It felt so good. Better than ever before. He was made for her. She was made for him.

She forced the troubling thought aside. *Now it's only about now*.

Impatient, he grasped her waist and slammed her down until he filled her to the hilt. Until her cheeks slapped against his balls. So full. So tight. "Ohhhhhh, God!"

"I knew it," he gasped, trying to make her move, "would be like this." He smacked her right buttock. "Move!"

"Hey," she protested, oddly turned on by the sharp spank.

"If you don't start riding, Babe, I'm going to turn you over my knee and really spank your butt. I promised you a spanking anyway." He grimaced and drove upward as much as he could.

To be obstinate, she stayed low, kept him deep, and used her inner muscles to squeeze his cock. "I've never been spanked."

"You should've been. Many times." He tried to force her into movement. His expression definitely frustrated.

Finally she rose upward, slowly, oh so slowly. She shivered all over at the tingling such slow movement caused. Just before she reached the head, she slid back down. "I could do this forever," she purred, leaning down, her breasts dancing in front of his face.

He went still. His gaze sharpened, and then he reached up and took hold of the thin chain he'd finally noticed. "The necklace." He swallowed hard and such depths of emotion swept through his eyes. "You kept it. All these years."

"Yes," she whispered.

"I'm glad." He fingered it a final time and released it. Then he called upon some inner strength against pain and leaned up enough that he could catch one nipple with his teeth. He drew it into his mouth and began to suckle.

She arched forward savoring the sensations. Slight pain when he nibbled on the tip and it pebbled. Fluttering tingles when he lathed his tongue around it. She dropped her head back and let him have his way with it, with the other breast, too. "So much better than fiction," she sighed, her eyes closed.

"What?"

Her face heated, and she flashed her eyes open. "Never mind. Just continue what you were doing."

He studied her for another second, and then took hold of her waist. His hips rose. He pushed harder and harder inside her. "I'm ready to move on."

A soft sob slipped out, and she closed her eyes, feeling. Simply feeling. Such exquisite sensations. She'd been right. She *loved* sex, including foreplay. Even this tiny bit of foreplay she'd just experienced.

His hands left her waist, and his fingers inched lightly down her body. They moved lower and lower until his thumbs met at the point where his body drove into hers. Talk about sensitized! She'd trembled with each microscopic movement of his fingers. Then, with his thumbs touching his shaft, he touched her as well.

"Oh. Ohhhh. Ohhhhhh." She looked dazedly down at him. "If you stop, I'll have to kill you. Kill you dead. Ohhh my!"

The threat made him play with her more, grin, too. "So responsive. I knew you would be like this. His talented thumbs worked magic for another few seconds until he began to shudder. "Time to move to the next step," he groaned.

She was good at this step, but didn't resist when his hands moved back to her waist. He encouraged her to lift up, guided her as he taught her to ride a man. Up, down. Over and over. She decided she really liked acting the cowgirl. *Yea, haw*

Faster and faster. Deeper and deeper. Nothing slow and steady. It was all about bucking with delight in the saddle. Desperation reigned supreme. For her. For him. His fingers dug into her hips. His face contorted with need. They ground against one another. She drove down; he pumped upward.

"Jared!" she screamed out his name and flew apart.

He drove up again and again, straining for breath, grunting with effort. Finally he gave a savage growl, held her to him, and erupted deep inside her.

When he released his tense hold on her hips and heaved a breath of relief, she lowered her head onto his sweat-covered chest. "Wow!" she muttered against his body.

"Oh, Babe, that was way more than 'Wow.'" He pulled her down so that she stretched over him. "I really do need to rest now."

The sun had almost set when Jared finally considered getting out of Holly's nice, warm bed. He'd been serious when he'd told her that he needed to rest after their lovemaking. Yes, he'd had wilder times with sex, but he sure hadn't been disappointed this time. She'd been timid when she'd first straddled him, when she'd first started riding him. This had been her first foray into non-vanilla sex. She'd done well. Really well.

He'd fallen asleep not long after admitting he was dead-ass tired. He'd been drifting off even as she took a shower and dressed to leave for her shop. She hadn't insisted that he leave immediately, though she probably would have preferred if he had. He'd wanted to start getting her used to seeing him in her bed because he planned on being there almost every night the rest of their lives. As soon as he could completely get back in her good graces and get her to agree to marry him. He had a feeling this had been only a lull in the storm ahead.

He sat up with care, gently rolled his shoulder. He still hurt almost everywhere, but it was getting better every day. He'd done a fair job of acting today, getting her to believe he suffered more pain than he really did. She'd be ticked if she found out about that. But he kind of liked it when she got all bristly on him. There was a lot of passion in her small body.

The phone next to the bed rang and ruined his moment of looking forward to butting heads with Holly. He should let it go to voice mail, he supposed, listening to it keep on ringing. He noted there wasn't a caller ID. What if she was trying to call him? Wanted to check and make sure he was okay? He liked that idea. So he picked up the receiver. "Hello."

A man's voice bit out, "Who the hell are you?"

Jared straightened with a frown. "Back at you. Who the hell are *you*?" He had a good idea who it was and he didn't like it at all.

"Eric Adams. Where's Holly? Let me speak to Holly."

This would no doubt come back to kick him in the butt, but he couldn't resist torturing the other man in Holly's life. "She's at her shop, I think. I'm not positive. I drifted off in bed after..."

Predictably, Adams sucked in a sharp, furious breath. "Tell her I'll call back later." The connection ended with a loud Thump!

"He'll call back later," Jared whispered into the room, grinning. Oh, she didn't hear me. Well, too damn bad.

A half hour later Jared had showered and re-dressed. He'd just tugged his boots on when he heard the front door open. Instinct told him he was in trouble.

Holly verified that when she stomped through her house, yelling, "Jared Danville! Jared, I'm so going to kick your ass!"

Yes, *Trouble*. He'd bet his Lexus that Mr. Eric Adams had called Holly's cell phone and ratted him out. He smiled at the challenge ahead. "In here, honey." The *honey* ought to really light her fire.

Sure enough, she stormed into the bedroom doorway and glowered at him, hands on hips. "What were you thinking? Telling Eric that we'd slept together? That you were *still* in my bed?"

Anger made her beautiful. Passion sparked in her eyes, made her cheeks pink. Her vibrancy made him want her, here, now. He controlled his desire and said, "I didn't tell him 'we'd slept together.' I merely said...let me think a second... Oh, yes. I said something like I'd drifted off to sleep in bed after..." He grinned cockily. "Hmmm, I guess that does sound kind of bad."

Her eyes narrowed, and then she sped across the room. In her fury, she seemed to have forgotten about his being injured. She jabbed an index finger repeatedly into his chest. He absorbed the slight pain. "All you ever do is cause me problems. Make me love you, then dump me, breaking my heart." She jabbed again. "I wait for you, for years. Not a word. *Not one word!*" She jabbed harder. "I finally decide to forget I ever knew you. Meet someone new, maybe not perfect, but right for me. I make plans to move and start again."

*God, he'd been such a damn jerk. She'd loved him?* He'd dumped her, according to what she believed anyway. He'd broken her heart. *No, he was far worse than a "jerk."*

Now she shoved him backward until he sat on the bed. "Then you have the *gall, the utter gall* to come back here. To kiss me, make me think about..." She huffed. "No! I *will not* think about anything but moving to San Diego. Got that, slime bucket? I. Am. Moving."

"Are you done calling me names? Are you willing to calm down and talk to me? Really talk to me? Listen to me?" He was getting impatient. He knew her well enough to know that once her temper was released, it took a while for her to cool down on her own. He'd always thought a spanking would settle her down faster.

"I *am* calm. I'm perfectly rational." Her eyes looked somewhat wild now. She was far from "calm."

"You aren't even close to being calm now." Resigned, he grabbed her arm and with a quick tug, drew her across his lap.

She gasped when she hit his knees. "What are you doing?" She struggled to get up, but he tucked her close to him.

"Remember how I promised you a bottom warming? You're about to get it." He smacked her jeans-covered bottom.

"Ouch!" She wriggled.

"Stop being such a wuss. That couldn't have really hurt." He planted his hand two more times on her squirming bottom. Harder. He really liked this sweet bottom, wished he was spanking her on the bare. Next time he would.

"You can't spank me. I'm not a child." She craned her head back to glare at him. "And it does so hurt."

He pulled her closer. "I wouldn't spank a child, but I *will* spank a grown woman who acts like one." He cracked his hand down on the squirming bottom.

She wriggled around. "Stop this! Now! I have not acted like a child."

Her wiggling was starting to cause an arousal he didn't want to experience right now. He smacked her again. "Did you throw a snowball at my car?"

"So what if I did? It didn't hurt anything."

"It could have. What if there'd been a rock in that snowball, even by accident?" The idea of scratching or, worse, breaking his windshield irritated him all over again. He peppered her butt with fierce, biting smacks.

"Ow! That hurt!" She glowered back at him. "I'm sorry about that. Okay?"

"Now that I've spanked your butt, yes." He scowled right back. "You shoved an injured man down on his butt."

"I didn't know you were injured," she countered mulishly.

"Doesn't matter. A grown up woman wouldn't have done it." He delivered another set of smacks that echoed around the room. His hand was beginning to sting from connecting with denim. He much preferred spanking a woman's soft, bare skin. Not that he'd spanked many women. And the idea of having Holly stretched bottom-up and bare over his lap really played havoc with his cock. His little brain was far more interested in driving into her warm body. His big brain wanted to focus on teaching the spirited beauty a lesson in behavior.

"Okay, okay! I'm sorry about that, too." She flexed her legs up.



"Good." He tucked her close again and shoved her legs down. "Now, let's focus on the acting a brat and avoiding a family dinner. Might as well deal with the repeatedly jabbing a finger at my bruised chest, too."

"I'm *not* apologizing for any of that." She slapped at the side of his leg.

"You might want to rethink that." He smacked her bottom, hard. "I'm going to beat this little butt soundly until you do."

"Give it your best," she snapped. "I'm going to be really mad at you for all of this."

He started spanking her in earnest now. He'd thought for years that Holly had deserved a good bottom warming from her mother for the many trials he'd given her. He'd sure gotten his share of spankings for the times when he'd covered up for Holly's pranks. He hadn't really cared, but she might have benefitted from a spanking or two.

"You've been upset with me before. I'll survive." He got into a rhythm, nice firm smacks, one cheek and then the other. "You're going to bed with a hot ass tonight."

"Mad. Really mad," she hissed, her bottom writhing. "Ooooooohhhh. Uuuuhhhh."

It didn't take much longer for her to finally cry out, "I'm sorry! Oooooohh. Sorry for hurting your parents." She sucked in a breath as he held his hand on her warm bottom. "Sorry for jabbing you with my finger."

"We're done then." Good thing, too. His hand hurt like the devil.

He set her on her feet, and she scrambled away from him. He noticed the tear streaks, the way her lower lip wobbled. But she looked at him with a mixture of irritation and respect. He wanted to pull her into his arms for comforting but resisted. "Spankings aren't much fun, are they?"

Holly's hands moved back to rub at her no doubt sore bottom. "Laugh a minute."

He grinned. "Sassy to the end." Then he sobered. "Just remember I have no qualms at all about flipping you over my knee and spanking your butt."

She narrowed her eyes and pointed to the doorway. "And I have no qualms about ordering you out of my house. About telling you I don't ever want to see you again."

"You're such a little liar." Then he did pull her into his arms and kissed the heck out of her. As he'd known she would, she melted against him.

Jared released her, breathing raggedly. He moved well away to keep from taking her straight down to the floor, from stripping her naked, from showing her exactly how much he wanted her again. She stood there looking dazed, and he strode to the doorway. "You'll have to survive without me for the next couple of days. I've got to drive to Kansas City on business. I'll be back on Friday at the latest."

"Do I care? No!" But he thought she sounded disappointed.

"Liar."

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# Chapter Four

It wasn't disappointment that curled through Holly as she crossed her snow-covered yard and walked toward the Danville house the next afternoon. It wasn't. Jared had told her he'd be gone for a few days. Actually, she should be jumping for joy. If she never saw him again, it would be for the best. Right? *Right*

Still, she cast a sad, lingering glance at the long driveway, minus Jared's gold-colored Lexus. And her mind wandered back to the delicious time they'd spent together in her bed. Moments she'd played over and over in her mind during the long afternoon working at her shop yesterday. Time and again Bridget had had to pull her back to reality. Having figured out Holly had come in late because Jared had distracted her, the teenager had tried to pry out the juicy tidbits of what had happened. Holly had blushed and foolishly told Bridget she was too young for such information. Huge mistake that had been! The needling at her had only gotten worse.

She shifted the package of fabric Darlene had ordered and marched on to the house. Thick pine garlands wound around the steps railing and the railing surrounding the wrap-around porch. An enormous wreath of pine, holly, and poinsettias hung by the double doors. She drew in a deep breath. It smelled like Christmas, looked like Christmas at the Danville home. And now, with Jared finally home after all these years, it felt like Christmas. She--and his family--had celebrated the special time in much the way they always had before he'd left. But there had been something missing: Jared. Nobody ever talked about it, but they'd all known. Once upon a time, before he'd gotten all testosterone crazy and harder to deal with, Jared had enjoyed the holiday season more than any of them. She'd forgotten about that until now.

Walking up the steps, she realized his family still wouldn't have that feeling of a complete Christmas this year. Jared intended to be gone soon, a week before Christmas. How could he do this to them? How could he do this to her?

A tear trickled out of one eye. And before she could readjust the package in her arms to wipe it away, Darlene opened the door. With an amazing mother's instinct, her gaze immediately landed on that tiny tear streak.

"What has my son done now?" Although she only wore a simple dress, topped with an apron dusted with flour, Darlene stepped out into the cold. She wrapped Holly in a comforting embrace.

The love within the older woman's hug, the precarious state she'd been in since seeing Jared again, did her in. The sobs she'd been holding at bay flooded out. She'd raged at him, thrown things at him, thought bitter thoughts about him-- okay, had sex with him--her emotions had gone all over the place. But she hadn't allowed herself to cry about how he'd brought back so much pain. How he'd made her dream again about what might have been. How he'd made her wish for something that couldn't be.

Darlene guided her into the warm house, led her into the large living room where the massive Scottish pine tree stood decorated with family ornaments from years past. Holly was overcome with memories. She and her mother had spent all of their Christmases here with the Danvilles and hadn't even put up a tree of their own. When Holly had been five, her mother had returned to her hometown after Holly's father had been killed in a freak accident working as a contractor in Dallas. Her mother had gotten a job as James' assistant at the bank, and he'd helped her buy the cottage next door. He and his family had basically adopted them. Holly had adored Jared from the first time he'd told her to stop following him and his friends. Even more when he'd first punched one of his friends in the mouth for calling her a brat, which she was, of course.

"Would you like some hot chocolate? Some cookies?" Darlene took the brown-paper wrapped package and placed it on the coffee table. "Then you can tell me what Jared has done this time."

"No thanks. I've been downing hot chocolate all morning. Believe it or not, I'm about hot chocolate out." Holly wiped her face with the back of her gloved hand. "I only meant to bring this over, not stay. I know you're busy." She drew in the scent of cinnamon. "Snickers doodles, right?"

"For the party on Saturday. I've already made six dozen. Next I'm making gingerbread men, for the kids. They always like them." Darlene nodded at the sofa in front of the fireplace. "Sit. Talk to me."

Holly knew she should be going. Instead she sank onto the thickly cushioned sofa and tugged off her gloves. She wasn't ready to tattle on Jared quite yet, half afraid she'd burst into tears again. Besides, maybe his mother didn't need to be pulled into the middle of her fight with Jared about her move and about his talk with Eric. She sure didn't need to know how he'd put her over his knee and spanked the blazes out of her poor bottom. No, *that* was definitely private stuff.

"Your tree looks nice." She stalled, studying the tree. She recognized some of the pipe-cleaner decorations she'd made so long ago. They'd been twisted into various shapes over the years, and she couldn't even remember what they were originally. "You should get rid of some of those old decorations."

Darlene looked directly where Holly focused. "Never. They mean too much to me."

Holly cleared her throat, tried to bury the strong emotions she felt whenever she'd looked at the Christmas trees since her mother had died just before Christmas five years ago. She never would have survived that year without the Danvilles. She'd desperately wished Jared would have been there, but...

"He's a difficult one, my Jared. Couldn't figure out where he belonged around here. He was like a square peg trying to fit himself into a round hole. Or at least we made him feel that way." She wiped at her eyes glistening with tears. "It took James and I awhile to realize how we'd driven him away, how we'd hurt him. You were the only one who understood him back then."

Holly hated seeing the pain in her friend's expression and focused back on the tree. A badly mangled Styrofoam snowman with only one black sequin for an eye sat on a branch near the top. Jared had made it in first grade. She'd made one, too, but hers had fallen apart somewhere over the years. "He had to leave. I know that now. I just wish..." Her throat choked up again.

"You need to let it go. I told Jared the same thing the other day." When their gazes met, she added, "It was a miracle that we even managed to track him down. James was more determined to find him this year. We've tried to contact him every year at this time. This year we found him. Thank God."

Holly hadn't realized they'd been looking for Jared. They seldom even spoke about him. The pain of their loss had been too much, but they'd never given

up on him. Yet she had. *Not in your heart.*

Darlene's lips trembled, and she swiped at another tear. "Yes, we feel truly blessed that he decided to come home again. On our part, all was forgiven the instant we saw him standing in your lawn." She sighed. "He's having trouble forgiving himself, though."

Holly wanted to forgive him as his parents had done, but it was so hard. What did it matter anyway? Their lives had gone different ways. She'd finally made plans to start a new life, something she should have done long ago. He may have come to her bed, may have told her they weren't finished, but she couldn't trust her heart to Jared again.

The doorbell rang, and they both jerked in surprise. Holly started to stand, but Darlene motioned her to stay. "No, don't go yet. You still haven't told me what Jared did that upset you so much, and I intend to find out. I'll just see who is at the door." She bustled away in her sensible shoes.

A moment later she returned with Kandee, Jason's wife. Kandee's gaze landed on Holly, and she heaved a disgusted sigh before she glanced at Darlene. "Your sons, each and every one of them, are so frustrating."

Darlene gave a motherly smile of acknowledgment. "You won't hear a denial from me. Now, sit down and tell me what they've done this time."

Kandee sat on a chair opposite the sofa. She unbuttoned her winter coat and removed her gloves. "Jason has made it clear that he doesn't want me to buy Holly's shop. Evidently I'm only capable of taking care of his house, cooking and cleaning for him, and baby sitting the grandkids. We've had a number of arguments about that view, but he'd been starting to come around."

"Until," Darlene prodded. "Until one of his brothers butted into the situation?"

"Actually both of his brothers." Kandee wriggled out of her coat. "Jim thinks it is a hobby shop, not a real business. The bigger problem, though, is Jared."

Holly had tensed at the 'hobby shop' thing. To some people--accountants in particular--that kind of shop was managed by owners who merely wanted to indulge an interest of theirs. Her shop had started out that way, but she'd turned it into a profit-making business. She had a strong Internet presence and made almost fifty percent of her sales that way. But she sat up even straighter at the mention of Jared. What could he possibly have to do with her shop? She wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

"How is he a problem?" she asked, exchanging a puzzled glance with his mother.

Darlene shook her head and looked to Kandee. "He's trying to support his brother in keeping you from buying the place, isn't he? I should have guessed he'd try something like that."

Kandee nodded. "If it didn't mean Holly would cut another tie to Danville, I think he'd back me in this opportunity. He's not nearly the chauvinist your oldest son can be at times."

"Jared honestly thinks that if I don't sell my business, that I won't leave town anyway? He doesn't realize that I can pack up my inventory and move my business somewhere else? Sure, I'd be out some lease money. But I can live with that."

She stood, paced in front of the Christmas tree. "Darn interfering man." She envisioned her hands going around his neck, squeezing. No. Maybe she'd go for a spot that would get his attention better, somewhere considerably lower. Maybe a good knee to the balls.

Darlene gave a quiet chuckle and drew Holly's attention. "The first night he was here, Jared told James and me that you weren't leaving town. That he was determined to fight for you. Guess he's shifted into battle mode."

"Well, he's wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!" Holly went back to pacing. Her anger with him switched from the issues with her store to the past. Where the *real* problems lie. "He can't just disappear one day because things aren't right for him. Then reappear because--"

"Because he finally realized what he'd walked away from," Darlene interrupted quietly. "*Who* he'd walked away from." When Holly glanced at her in annoyance, she added, "Are you really sure--dead sure--that you don't want a second chance with my son?"

*Did she? Yes. Did she think he would change his mind again and hurt her? Yes.* "Fifteen years is a long time. Too long. He had plenty of time to swallow his damn pride and contact me. I'm moving on now. It's too late."

She looked pointedly at Kandee. "Are you going to buy my shop or not? If you aren't, then I'm just going to shut it down."

Kandee glanced uncertainly at Darlene.

Holly heaved a frustrated breath. "Fine. That's my answer.

I'm closing Holly's Quilt Shop as of December 31."

"I still don't think..."

Holly knew Darlene hated the idea of her leaving Danville, of her moving halfway across the country because of some man she really didn't know that well. Holly wasn't in the mood for that battle again. She strode by Darlene, shook her head against going into that discussion, and headed for the front door.

Frustration with Jared's actions, with her complicated feelings for him, and with her life at the moment gnawed at her. She felt raw inside. All of it made her short tempered. With her hand on the door handle, she faced the worried-looking women and spoke more sharply than she should, "Tell Jared to stay out of my life. To leave me alone." Her voice broke as she added, "Completely alone."

"He won't listen to me," Darlene called after her, sounding distressed.

Holly knew Darlene was right. Jared had never listened to anyone. That much hadn't changed about him, but she'd changed. He would *not* get his way this

time! She could be a hard ass, too!

"Tired of small town life yet? Ready to come back? We've got work out our wazoos here. We need you."

Jared leaned against the headboard in his hotel room and listened to his partners' conference call on his cell phone. He'd avoided returning their calls for days now. He'd come here to Kansas City to do some thinking and some serious soul searching away from his family and away from Holly. He'd made some decisions. It was time to start making his plans. First, he needed to deal with his partners.

"I'm not coming back to L. A., except to sell my beach condo." He waited for the protests he expected.

Axel didn't let him down. "You can't be serious! We've been humoring you while you recovered, but enough time has passed for that. Get your ass back here!"

Jared smiled. He could picture the giant bear of a man scowling, probably even thinking about getting on the first plane here to haul him back to L. A. "My mind is made up. I've had enough bullet wounds, knife wounds, and every other kind of wounds. My body deserves better. / deserve better."

"What the hell are you going to do back in Kansas?" Troy, his other partner, questioned, clearly stunned. "Don't tell me you're going to become a banker, like your dad's been hoping all this time."

"No. I haven't told Dad for certain yet. I can't see myself doing that for the next thirty or so years." His dad would be disappointed, but Jared felt his father would support him in his decision now.

"So?" both men asked.

Jared's thoughts turned to Holly, as they always did anymore. As they always had, although he'd tried to avoid such thoughts. She was pissed off at him at the moment. Big time.

"Are you still there?" Axel pressed.

Drawn back to the moment, Jared said, "I'm going to start a background security check business. It's something that can be done by computer from anywhere. I've even done some of it within our current partnership."

"Well, yeah," Troy confirmed. "But you're one of the best at being a personal bodyguard."

"I'm done with that. And there's something else, too." He hesitated. "I'm getting married."

"*What? You? Married?*" Troy snorted. "Ain't happening."

His buddies knew about his previous engagements, how he'd never followed through on the marriage idea. Then. This was different. "You're both going to have to rent tuxes." He'd never gone that far before in his marital planning.

"You're serious this time?" Troy asked, sounding resigned.

"Tuxes? Damn," Axel said on a groan. "Holly, right? She had the stupidity to forgive you? To take you back after all this time?"

"Not exactly." The last time he'd seen her she'd wanted to throw him out of her house. Of course, she'd also come apart in his arms not long before that. Then he'd spanked her, didn't regret it for a second. She'd needed it, and he sure hadn't minded having that sweet bottom over his lap.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Axel asked, confused.

"We had a disagreement of sorts," Jared admitted. He needed to make peace with Holly about the store matter. Somehow. He may have gone about the issue all wrong. "I'm not really on her good side right now. Fact is, my decision to come here to Kansas City for a few days turned out to be very timely. We needed a little distance between us."

"What fool thing have you done this time?" Troy had heard the complete story of what Jared had done to his family and to Holly. Axel knew most of the story.

Jared recalled her decision to move to California and his brief phone conversation with Adams. His jaw tightened. "Before I got back here, she'd sort of made a decision to move away. Still thinks she's going to do that. We have different opinions about the issue."

"And you've done something, haven't you? You're in deep shit with her right now." Axel chortled. "That's my boy!"

"So, let me get this all straight," Troy said. "You don't have a job, if you actually quit this partnership. You're selling your beach condo, so you won't have a home. You're planning to get married, but your bride-to-be is more in the mood to kick your ass. That all sound about right?"

Jared scowled. Hell of a summary. "I told you I've got an idea about the job matter. She already has a house where we can live. And she just needs to calm down."

"Have you actually asked Holly to marry you?" Troy asked.

Jared thought about how he'd been picturing Holly in a lacy gown, all fancied up, walking down the aisle of his family's church toward him. Even more, he'd envisioned stripping her out of that gown. She'd be wearing a white thong, a bit of a bra, a garter belt—he loved garter belts—and thigh-high hose. He'd remove each item, slowly.

"Jared."

He had to readjust his pants. His images had played havoc with his body, which seemed to be always heavy with a hard-on these days. "Not exactly. I did

tell her we weren't finished. That she belonged to me." She hadn't reacted really well to those statements.

"Cripes! Mr. Romantic you aren't." Axel chuckled again.

"I'm thinking we can put off renting those tuxes for a while. Maybe forever," Troy stated. "Oh, and when she turns your proposal down, which she'd be an idiot not to, you've got a job here." With that said, they disconnected.

That sure hadn't gone well. But, damn, he wasn't going to let their downer attitudes get to him. He had a plan: marry Holly. Okay, he needed to expand that plan. Make up with her. Yes, make-up sex was *the best*. He might have trouble getting her into bed, though. In fact, in her present mood, he might want to wear a protective cup for a while. She just might feel like kicking him in the balls for what he'd attempted to do. He'd taught her that little maneuver for self-defense a long time ago. He shivered and forced that unpleasant thought aside. Besides, he'd meant well with this whole stopping the sale of her shop thing. That should count for something, right? Damn right!

He slumped against the headboard. He'd dealt with trouble before. Some people thought he specialized in it. In the past, the kind of trouble had depended on what type of assignment he'd been working. He was pretty sure his skills with weaponry and sliding in and out of places in silence wouldn't help him in this situation. Smooth talking charm hadn't ever been his strength. Kick-ass Badass Danville just might be facing his toughest task yet: convincing Holly Jacobs that he loved her, soul deep loved her.

After the day from hell, Holly dragged into her house late Friday night. If something could go wrong, it had. Bridget called in sick, so she'd had to run the store alone. She'd managed to pull some strings at the newspaper and, on short notice, had run a special sale ad, intending to thin her stock since she would be closing the shop by the end of the month. Having a sale was a great idea, but only when you had enough staff to deal with the extra customers. She'd even had to call Darlene and Kandee in to help out for a couple of hours in the afternoon. Considering they'd never worked there before, it had ended up being more work for her. They'd honestly tried to help. She'd almost begged them to leave at five o'clock, although the shop would stay open until seven.

She toed off her boots by the side door. The weatherman had screwed up his forecast again. "*No more snow until Christmas.*" Did he not know how to read those fancy machines? They'd gotten a new foot of snow today. Not that it had kept the sale shoppers home.

Tossing her coat on the back of a chair next to the table, she told herself she should be happy. There was a lot less inventory now. And she'd made quite a lot of money. But she didn't feel happy. Seeing the emptying shelves had been depressing. They made her realize she'd have to start boxing up things, start making plans to ship it all out to San Diego. Another problem. She didn't actually have any place to ship the stuff to. She didn't even have an apartment or a house there yet. She hadn't planned to move in with Eric, still didn't want to do that.

Eric. He'd been calling her off and on the last couple of days. So far she'd avoided the calls and hadn't returned his messages. She wasn't sure why she'd been reacting this way. It wasn't very nice. He deserved better treatment. Maybe she'd call him later after she took a nice, long, hot bath. Maybe. Or she could call him tomorrow.

Her head pounded, and she rubbed her forehead. At the same time she wondered why the lights in her living room were on? Why the blinds were already closed? Evidently she'd been more tired and stressed out this morning when she'd left for the shop than she'd realized. She must have left the lights on after she'd turned on the TV and listened to the morning weather report, a complete waste of time. She must not have even bothered to open the shades today. Whatever.

*Bath. Think nice, hot bath.* With that in mind, she began pulling off her sweater, then her bra, as she walked into the bedroom. The bedroom with the bedside lamps on. The bedroom with a sleigh bed and a very large, very naked man stretched out, grinning at her.

"Good, God!" She froze in the doorway, dropped the sweater and bra in her shock. "What are *you* doing here? How did you get in?"

Jared's deep chocolate eyes were focused on her bare breasts. In an instant his eyes warmed to hot chocolate. His voice was husky, approving as he said, "Best breasts ever."

"Yeah, right." She bent down to pick up her sweater and held it in front of her. Her nipples had already hardened to tight buds. Funny little tingles danced through her, moving lower, until every part of her wanted Super Stud. The man who had spanked her four days ago. Spanked her!

She fought the reaction to him. "Out! Now!"

The stubborn man didn't move. Okay, his cock moved. Seemed to motion her over to him. *No, that's your imagination! Way too much imagination. Just look away. You can do it.* No, she couldn't.

"Do I need to call your father? Maybe the police? Someone to haul you out of here." *Before I do something really stupid, like coming over to test out that whole riding you again*

"I've missed you." He put his hand around his shaft, stroked it once. "He's missed you."

Holly sucked in a breath, and a shiver went through her. Her inner muscles knew exactly how that precious part of him felt deep inside her. They wanted to explore those sensations again. They begged. The sweater slipped from her fingers. *Dam it*

"I thought I made it clear that I don't want you here. Or anywhere near me." *You're such a liar, just like he said.*

"We need to talk, Holly. I need to explain about--"

"I don't want to talk." She couldn't take her gaze off that damn cock. She couldn't think of anything but touching it, feeling it. She gave up. They'd fight this out some other time. "This is *the last* time. I'm serious. *The last time.*"

He watched her rip off the rest of her clothes, throw them aside. She watched him repeatedly stroke his shaft, noted how it grew even more. Her pulse raced, and she couldn't get on the bed fast enough.

"I like the way you resist me," he taunted as she straddled his legs as before.

"Shut up. I'm not speaking to you." She reached down to gently touch his healing bullet wounds, to touch the almost-gone bruises on his ribs.

"I agree. Speaking isn't necessary."

He cupped her breasts, simply held them for several seconds. Her nipples hardened against his palms. She wanted more, refused to ask.

Amusement flickered in his eyes, awareness of what she wanted. Without speaking, he massaged her breasts, squeezed them. Then he shifted his hands until his thumbs could rub the hard nubs. He flicked them repeatedly, grinning as she struggled with breathing.

Determination driving her on, she took hold of his pulsating cock. Silky. Hard. Warm. She held him with both hands for a second, and then stroked him with one hand as she'd seen him do. His chest shuddered, which made her bolder. She leaned down and kissed the head.

"Damn, Babe!" He arched upward, sucked in air, and his hands fell away from her breasts. "Don't do that! I need you too much."

She broke her vow of silence. "Which means?" She butterfly kissed the head a final time.

He groaned, sucked air again. "I want to be inside you. Now!"

She smiled at his frustration, but didn't resist when he guided his cock to where she wanted it anyway. She impaled herself before he could even think about pulling her down.

Soooo good. All that thickness inside her, pulsing inside her.

"Uhhhh," he gritted out. His face pinched in strain. His big body was rigid beneath her.

Feeling empowered, she drove her weight down, sliding her wet and ready body over him. She clenched around his shaft, and it pulsed deep within. Such amazing feelings. Magic. Bliss. She just sat there in the saddle, massaging him with her inner muscles. She felt every inch of his thick cock. Full. So full.

"Move, dammit!" His face was contorted with powerful need.

She smiled and didn't move, outwardly, for a few more seconds. When he looked ready to make her move, she rose slowly up on her knees pulling nearly off him. Again, she held still and let her clit play with the tip of his cock. Her lower body quivered, and her pulse raced.

Somehow he reached back to swat her bottom. "Don't make me turn you over my knee."

The sting felt different this time. Sinfully sweet. Naughty. She drove down, her body eagerly swallowing him whole. "That better, big boy?" Now she stayed down and moved around and around his cock.

He growled low in his throat. His jaw was set with strain. "You're killing me."

"But in a good way, right?"

Her thoughts were getting muddy, dazed. Her body demanded more, much more. She gave in to the need. She got seriously down to playing dedicated cowgirl. She rode his shaft wildly. *Yea, ha! Oh, yes, this was soooo good!* If you could earn a belt buckle for this, she'd have earned it. Maybe two buckles.

Her inner muscles clenched around his rod. She felt him throb inside her, felt him try to drive higher. *Oh. My. God.* Flutters went through her stomach. Her lower lips quivered and her clit screamed for more. Obediently, she rocked atop him. She rose up on her knees pulling nearly off him, and then she drove down again. *Ohhhhhh, my, yessssss*

Mr. Badass bucked and wriggled for all he was worth. His face grew so red she worried about him, at least for the few seconds of sanity she had left.

"Ohhhh, damn, Holly!" He grunted and thrust upward, holding her to him.

She was near that magical moment. Her brain cells couldn't seem to work together. Everything was hazy, except for the sensations surging through her. Ripples of anticipation. Tingles of awareness of every inch of that amazing cock inside her. Desperation. She needed. She wanted. "Uhhhh. I...I need...Ohhhhh!"

She squeezed her legs together, squeezed him inside her body. *Hot, silky, big.* The shaft pulsing within her felt so wonderful, so powerful, so demanding. The moment was almost there. She quivered, sucked in a shuddery breath. She couldn't focus. Hazy. Feverish. Frantic. "Ohhhhhh yes! Ohhhhh yes, yes, yes!" She orgasmed around him.

An instant later he roared his release.

Holly savored the scent of their lovemaking. Her body felt limp as a noodle, and she collapsed on top of him. He gave a quiet moan of pain, but held her in place. One sweaty, heated body to another. She didn't care at all. She'd never have this special time again. Couldn't. She just wanted to wallow in it for a few precious minutes.

He remained silent, and she wondered if he'd fallen asleep, like he had the last time. She knew it was time. Carefully, so as not to hurt him, she shifted off of him and sat on her knees. He watched her with something she couldn't define in his eyes.

"Never again, Jared. I mean it." She meant to order him from her bed and her house next, but he gingerly sat up and then climbed off the bed to stroll into her bathroom. The words caught in her mouth as she watched that very fine ass.

"I need to take a quick shower," he called back through the closed door. "Then I have to leave. Things to do."

She sat on the bed, drew the sheet around her, and waited. When he came out again, she would seriously give him a piece of her mind. This would not happen again. Could not!

He walked out just as she was finalizing her speech. Evidently his clothes had been in the bathroom because he was dressed now. Before she could get one word out of her mouth, he stopped by the bed and casually ruffled her hair, just like he'd done years ago. Then he whistled and strode out of the room.

"Jared Danville," she yelled and scrambled off the bed to race after him.

He stopped at the side door in her kitchen and gave her a tolerant look. "Sorry, Babe, I can't stay. Even if you beg me. Another time." Then he pulled the door open and left.

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# Chapter Five

"I meant to get into this with you yesterday, but I was too busy. James, do you know what *your* son did the other day?"

Jared froze outside the kitchen, on his way in for some coffee and fresh biscuits that he'd smelled all the way upstairs in his bedroom. His mother was talking about him. He recognized the same disgusted-with-him tone that he'd heard so many times growing up. Back then he'd thought she only got mad at him, never his "golden" brothers or "precious" sister. Why hadn't he remembered that his brothers no longer lived at home to get yelled at or to get on his parents' bad list? He'd been eighteen, testosterone crazed, horny about Holly who had remained determined not to have sex until they got married, and certain small town life wasn't for him. That whole it's-all-about-me phase had really had a hold on him back then. When you added in a large dose of "I don't need this shit," leaving had been inevitable. What a fool kid he'd been.

He stepped into the doorway and spotted his father at the table buttering a biscuit and looking trapped.

His mother didn't wait for an answer. She refilled her husband's coffee cup and said on a huff, "He interfered in Kandee buying Holly's shop."

"He doesn't want her to leave town, sweetheart. We don't, either." James gave her a gentle smile and added sugar-free strawberry jam to his biscuit.

She tapped one black, thick-soled shoe. "It doesn't give him the right to--"

"No, it doesn't," Jared interrupted and drew their attention. "I was a desperate man. After spending over a dozen years dealing with desperate men, figuring out how to out-manuever them, you'd have thought I would have recognized my foolishness. I should have come up with a better plan to fight Holly on this matter."

His mother studied him, frowned. "You don't look well. Are your wounds not healing right? Should I call Dr. Peters?"

"The boy's not sleeping good, Darlene. He's not eating well, either."

"What? Why haven't I noticed this?" His mother looked panicked. She immediately set the coffee pot down and rushed over to put a palm to Jared's forehead. "No temperature."

Jared just stood there stunned, and enormously pleased. It had been so long since he'd felt the full effects of motherly love. She might be upset with him, but he was her son, her baby. Damn, but he'd missed this.

"He's not sick, sweetheart. He's in love and trying to figure out what to do about it." His father locked gazes with him. "Right, son?"

"Loving someone is damn hard stuff." Jared hugged his mother and headed for the table. "I'm starting to get my appetite back." He reached for a biscuit and bit into it, no butter, no anything.

His mother slid a plate in front of him. "Holly loves you, too. She's scared, doesn't want to get hurt again." She pinned him with an I'll-box-your-ears look. "If you even think for a second that you can't settle down, then leave her alone. Let her see if she can make the life she needs and deserves with that man in California."

Jared crumpled the rest of the biscuit in his hand. "Holly is mine. Will be mine, I hope. If I don't screw this day up."

That got his mother's attention. "What do you mean? What do you have in mind?"

He'd spent the night doing everything but sleeping. He'd decided to go with what he knew, making detailed plans. This time it wasn't for some secret military mission or for determining how best to protect some big moneyed hotshot. No, this was a much tougher plan: doing something so unexpected, so special that Holly couldn't possibly turn him down. He'd even called his partners and drawn on their expertise at subterfuge, which might not have been his best idea. Still, they'd been eager to help.

He drew in a steadying breath. "I don't deserve this after how I treated you in the past, but I'm asking for your help."

Tears shimmered in his mother's eyes. "The past is the past. Your father drove you away with all that bank nonsense, pressuring you to--"

Jared focused on his father, who looked guilty. "I never wanted to follow in your footsteps at the bank, Dad. Still don't. But *you* didn't drive me away. Neither did you, Mom." He couldn't face them, studied the crumpled biscuit. "I just couldn't stay here. All I ever did was disappoint you both. Holly, too. I couldn't find a place for me here, not that I had a clue what that place should be."

His mother leaned down and hugged his shoulders, kissed the top of his head. "We were never disappointed in you, frustrated maybe. But we knew you struggled more than your brothers. Being a Danville in this town is tough stuff. You tried so hard to fit into a mold that really only you saw."

"You were nothing like your brothers," his father inserted. "Don't you ever tell them this--because I will deny it--but you were always the son I favored. You had the guts to rebel and become your own man. I followed in my father's footsteps, took over the family bank. Jason and Jim followed in their uncles' footsteps, taking over the Danville and Danville law firm."

Jared's chest ached, and not where he'd been shot. He'd always thought he'd been the family failure, the son who let everyone down.

"When I look at you now, son, I'm so damn proud. You're tough. You're determined. You're strong."

His mother gave him a final hug and straightened, wiped at tears. "Okay enough of this. We're proud of you, love you, and that's all you need to know. Now what is this help business you need from us?"

"We need help," Bridget said, glancing at Holly behind the register. "Especially if you're leaving for the bank's party pretty soon, which I'm still bummed about having to miss."

Holly handed the current customer her change and studied the line of a half dozen people loaded down with purchases. They'd been busy since the shop opened, and it didn't look like the rush would let up any time soon. "I'll see if Darlene and Kandee are free, at least for a couple of hours." They'd been something of a problem the last time they'd worked, but she was desperate.

She picked up her cell phone, held it to her ear and called Darlene while she started to ring up the next order. Her older friend answered on the fourth ring. "I'm desperate. Can you help here at the store for a few hours? Kandee, too."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, sweetie. I've got too much to do today. Kandee's busy as well." She hesitated and then said, "James is busy, too."

"What about Jared?" She was really reaching the bottom of the bucket by asking for *his* help.

"No, he's... Well, he's got big plans today."

*Big plans?* She didn't think he planned to go to the bank's holiday party. She couldn't see that as his kind of thing. What else could he have planned? Stealing into her house and stretching naked over her bed to wait for her again? What was she thinking? Okay, she'd thought about that all night, when she hadn't been replaying every delicious moment of what they'd done.

"Holly? I really am sorry. If I didn't need to help Jared with something, I would come help out."

Smiling at the line of customers, she automatically asked, "What does he need help with?"

"Ummm. I can't get into it. And I really do need to go now." She disconnected, leaving Holly to stand there, feeling confused.

Confusion and frustration reigned supreme the rest of the morning. There wasn't much time to think about anything but waiting on one customer after another. Holly did manage to learn something out of the chaos: don't ever run a sale ad if you don't have enough staff to handle the customers. She would never, ever forget that. She was on her last nerve when they finally faced a lull over the lunch hour.

As soon as the last customer walked out, Holly locked the door and turned around the "Closed, back by 1 p.m." sign. She sagged against the door and looked at Bridget, who appeared every bit as worn out as she felt. "Go. Get some lunch. Run for your life. Whatever you feel you need to do."

Bridget smiled. "A hamburger and fries should revive me. Want me to bring you back something?" She grabbed her coat and purse.

"Fries. Double order. Thanks."

With a nod, Bridget went to the stockroom and left through the back door. Holly followed her and grabbed a bottle of water from the small refrigerator. She was so tired that if there had been a square yard of free space, she might have tried to curl up and grab a few winks of sleep.

She leaned against a work counter and surveyed the area. Stock in the main room had seriously diminished in the last couple of days because of the sale. Even the stock back here wasn't as much as normal. And the far corner held packing boxes. It hurt to look at them. She'd started dreaming of opening this shop not long after Jared had left town. Her mother had been making and selling quilts for a number of years by then. They talked about a quilt shop, but her mother didn't think it could make a serious go in a town this small. With a private loan from James and Darlene, Holly opened it anyway a couple of years later. Two years after that she'd paid them back, and her dream turned into a prosperous reality.

Now after twelve years she would be closing the business.

Her eyes misted and pain twisted in the region of her heart. It hurt to even think of shutting the doors a final time. It hurt almost unbearably to think of moving far away from everyone and all that she knew. From here in the middle of the country, California seemed like the end of the earth. She liked visiting big cities, although she'd actually done very little of that. But she liked life in a small community where you knew most of the people. She didn't know anyone in San Diego, not really even Eric. E-mails and phone calls had started their relationship. Her half dozen, long weekend trips out to see him over the last year had grown that relationship. Enough, for him, that he wanted to go much farther. He wanted permanence, a life where you grew old together.

She took a sip of tea. Eric Adams was a good man. Any woman should be happy to have such a kind, solid, hardworking man for a husband. He treated a woman well. He had the old-fashioned kind of manners, where a man treated a woman with utmost respect. He had never pressed her about sex. But, yes, they'd made love. "Va" sex. The last time it might have even registered a mild "va-vu," but definitely nowhere near a whole "va-vu-voom." Now she felt really depressed. She'd fantasized about that kind of sex, longed to try it, hoped to experience it one day, even if she'd actually held little hope of it with Eric.

The vision of Jared naked and soooo wonderfully male lying on her bed all here-I-am-come-get-me was etched into her brain. She knew it was wrong to compare the two men, but, in truth, there was *no* comparison. She was being unfair to Eric. She would call him tonight or tomorrow at the latest and explain her feelings about why she couldn't follow through with their plans. He wouldn't be happy, but he'd get over her and find someone who really deserved him.

She glanced around the stockroom once more. That decision had lifted some of the burden from her shoulders, not all. She still wasn't sure if maybe it was finally time for her to move somewhere else. She could re-open her store anywhere, especially with her web presence becoming more and more of her business. Right now she wasn't ready to make that kind of decision. She needed to focus on working another couple hours of retailer's heaven-hell. Then they'd close early so she and Bridget could go to the bank's party. She wasn't in much of a partying mood, though.

"Aren't you just the cutest thing." The customer, Mrs. Tanner, who had been in the other day when Jared had come to get her for the dinner, grinned at Holly as she sat some fabric on the counter an hour later. "You're always so good about helping at the bank's party. And that elf 's costume is so darling. The kids love you." She winked and laughed at a couple of ladies close by. "I'd have to say the men don't mind seeing that costume, either."

Holly blushed, gave Bridget the evil-eye for having talked her into changing into her costume already. She'd worn this same green velvet and white fur trimmed dress with green-and-white-striped leggings for years. Every year it seemed to grow shorter, a little tighter. But she'd never gotten around to making a new costume. She tugged on the hem. "I think it's good that this will be the last year I wear it."

it'll be so strange to go to that party next year without you being there," one of the other ladies said.

"I can't believe you're really leaving us," another middle-aged woman stated.

Mrs. Tanner moved closer. "I hear that your Jared is still in town. Will he be coming to the bank's holiday party today? I know there are a lot of people anxious to see him again. See how he turned out." She glanced at the curious women around her. "When I was in here the other day, I saw him. He's matured quite nicely. If ever the label 'tall, dark, and dangerous' fit a man, it fits Jared Danville."

Several women looked in interest at Holly. "He's *not* my Jared. We're just...old friends."

Bridget muttered under her breath but loud enough for Holly and the closest customers to hear, "Right."

The bell on the door jangled and a white-haired, elderly woman bustled inside, excitement dancing in her expression. "Come outside, all of you! You've got to see this!" She looked directly at Holly. "Especially you. Hurry!"

Arms still laden with their purchases, all eight of the customers in line turned and headed outside, with Mrs. Tanner hot on their heels. Bridget, too, scooted around the counter and sped after the others. By now with the door open so much, Holly heard the jangling of bells, the heavy trod of hooves on the snow-packed street. *Trod of hooves? Jangling of bells*

Holly's stomach fluttered with nerves, with anticipation, and with a bit of dread. Or was it hope? Unable to resist finding out what the excitement was all about, she grabbed her ankle-length coat and tugged it on.

Jared had spent over a dozen years trying to blend into the shadows, trying not to be seen because either his life or someone else's depended on that ability. He was so far out of his element now that it scared the hell out of him. When he'd come up with this first part of what he called Win Holly's Heart Plan, he hadn't really considered how much extra attention he'd draw to himself. His focus had been on Holly and wanting to do something completely outlandish for her. Okay, daring to sneak into her house and strip down to wait for her in her bed had been pretty out-there. He'd gotten her attention, and some darn good sex, too. This wasn't about sex, though. More about a man desperate to prove himself to her. He'd thought it would be showing her how romantic he could be. Evidently it was showing her what a romantic idiot he could be in front of the townspeople.

He guided the borrowed horse-driven sleigh normally used in the Danville's annual Christmas parade down Main Street. Why had he thought there wouldn't be so much foot traffic out on the downtown sidewalks today? How had he forgotten Christmas was less than two weeks away? He was, after all, going to be Santa at the bank's party today.

He shifted the reins to one hand and reached up to scratch his chin under the white Santa beard. Normally he could tie one and one together and come up with two. Tying Christmas fast approaching and needing to get out and shop, should have been easy to figure out. It shouldn't have surprised him to have kids along the sidewalk spot him in Santa's sleigh and in his costume. He shouldn't have been surprised to have them wave madly in his direction and call out to him. He'd spotted the confused expressions on the parents' faces. Okay, the plan hadn't been that well thought out. He'd just wanted to surprise Holly, not mess with the parade thing, which would be next weekend. Still, he'd come to enjoy waving back to the kids. He'd missed the whole Christmas celebration thing.

"Are you going to be at the Community Center later, Thanta?" what appeared to be a front-tooth-missing six or seven year-old yelled out just as Jared spotted Holly's Quilt Shop.

"Of course," Jared called back, actually looking forward to it now.

The kid beamed up at his mom. "We're thill going, right, Mom?" At her nod, he hopped around beside her.

Jared's focus shifted to the small gathering of women on the sidewalk ahead. When Holly stepped out of her shop behind the group, his heart started beating overtime. All of the others faded from his vision. The only person he saw was Holly. The group moved aside so that Holly could come forward. Holly in an enormous hooded black leather coat that covered her clear down to a pair of spike-heeled black boots.

"What are you doing here? As Santa? In his sleigh?" she asked in confusion.

The wind picked up and blew one side of her coat apart enough to reveal a shapely, green-and-white stockinged leg. She pulled the coat closed but not before he also noticed the very short skirt she wore. His breath hitched and all the blood seemed to rush from his near-frozen brain right down to the little brain. Fortunately in the baggy, red velvet pants no one could see his body's reaction.

It took him a second to regain enough brain power to respond. "I'm here to give Santa's helper a ride to the Christmas party."

An immediate adoration-filled "Ohhhh, that's so sweet" came from one of the women, only to be echoed in various ways by the others. Beneath his beard, Jared felt his cheeks heat. But, when Holly's eyes lighted in pleasure, he stopped caring what anyone else thought.

Holly glanced at Bridget. "We're still so busy. I probably shouldn't go yet."

Disappointment curled through him, but Bridget came to his rescue. "Are you kidding me? You'd pass up riding in a sleigh next to the hottest Santa in existence? No, no, no!" She shoved Holly into the street and toward the sleigh. "I'll handle these customers, close the store as soon as I can, and bring your purse to you later."

Neither of them spoke for several blocks, other than to return greetings to the surprised adults and delighted children they passed. The annual Christmas parade with Santa wasn't for another week. This was an added bonus to the kids, except no candy was being tossed to them as usual. But no one seemed to care about that. Those who knew Holly appeared far more interested in knowing who the Santa was seated beside her. From the way Jared had tugged her close to him and kept leaning over to try and steal a kiss people who knew Jim—who usually played Santa—knew this wasn't him. Holly could only imagine the gossip about to spread through town.

"I can't wait to see that whole costume," Jared said, waving at yet another small group of kids on the sidewalk.

*And I can't wait to see you out of that bulky Santa costume.* But she couldn't say that. "I can't believe you're going to be Santa at the party today. You haven't even wanted to talk about anything Christmas related." She didn't know what had changed his mind, but was grateful for whatever had. Maybe he really was on the road to emotionally healing, to letting go of what he'd done. She was, too. Darlene had been right: it was time to forgive his young and foolish mistake.

He drew the team of four horses sporting red and green blankets with jingle bells along the sides to a stop behind a pickup truck at a light. The driver did a double-take at them in his rear view mirror. Then he leaned out the driver's window to yell back, "I didn't think the parade was until next week."

Holly recognized one of the area ranchers, one she'd gone out with a few times. "You're right, Chad. This is just..."

"A special taxi service," Jared stated, not looking particularly happy at the way Chad was smiling at her. "A surprise for my favorite elf helper."

The light changed and Chad drove off, not looking too happy either. He'd wanted to take their occasional dating to the next level. Like Eric. Again, Chad was a nice enough man, even pretty good looking. But he hadn't been Jared. Now, as she sat next to Jared, she finally realized that she was a one-man woman. If she was ever going to have a complete life, she needed to figure out how to make things work with Jared. If he could settle down. *And that is the big question. Can I depend on him*

"Where exactly do you live?" she asked, wondering if she could move wherever that was. Somehow the idea wasn't as unnerving as moving to where Eric lived. Eric might be dependable--as much as she knew anyway--and attentive, even forgiving, since he knew she'd slept with someone else. But... this was Jared. And she loved him, "warts" and all.

Jared glanced at her, but she couldn't tell anything in his expression because of the Santa beard. He urged the team of horses to turn right, down the final few blocks to the Community Center. "I have a beach condo in Santa Monica, California. But I'm selling it."

She frowned. "Why?"

He shrugged, but didn't look her way. "It's not right for me anymore." He briefly put a hand on her knee and even through the coat and stockings she felt his heat. "Why the sudden interest?"

"Just making conversation." She wanted to ask more, but they were almost at the Center. She thought about how he'd claimed that she belonged to him, but had it only been a line? He'd come to her bed, twice, but had he just wanted sex and figured she would be an easy conquest? All of a sudden she felt anxious, worried. He was selling his condo. Why? Why wasn't it right for him now?

"Save your questions for later, okay. There's something else I need to do first."

"What?"

"We're here." To her annoyance, he refused to fully answer her question. She wanted him to explain about why he was selling the condo, where he was moving now. He guided the team through the already half-full parking lot. Kids raced yelling and waving in excitement toward Santa and his sleigh. Some acknowledged her, too, but Santa was *the man* today. Their moment of privacy was gone for now. Before he turned to get out, he faced her and squeezed her hand. "We'll talk later." His gaze promised more, and she would hold him to that.

An instant later they were surrounded. Families hurried out of the Center and joined the kids already vying for Santa's attention. A few people smiled and called out greetings to her, but basically this was Santa's big moment. With the way he stood tall and his eyes shining with delight, Holly knew he was finally enjoying the holiday season. It warmed her heart to know that he'd finally healed as far as being part of Christmas again.

One kid after another tugged on his arm, a couple tried to get him to pick them up. Only she seemed to note the way his face flinched beneath that beard, heard the slight sucking in of his breath. But she knew that he wouldn't want anyone to know. He would tough it out. If he could manage it, he would be the Santa of their dreams. Her Jared was just that determined. *Her Jared? If she could finally get the Christmas wish she'd held inside her all these years, he would be her Jared*

Slowly the group surrounding Santa moved enough that they could all go into the Center. It was warm and loud inside, with the smell of spiced cider and gingerbread. She lost sight of him for a minute, but he came back for her. He toted Clay, Jason's three-year-old grandson, like a football in the crook of his right arm. Jason and Kandee walked behind him, looking concerned. But Clay grinned in pure pleasure and giggled. Jared grinned as well.

"Look what mischief maker I found." He eased the boy down and nudged him toward his parents. "In fact, Miss Elf, there is a big room packed with mischief makers just around the corner. It appears we've got our work cut out for us this afternoon. Are you up to this?"

She had to touch him. Ignoring everyone around them, she stepped closer and cupped his face. "Are you?"

His eyes sparkled. "Damn right I am."

Clay tugged on his sleeve and scowled up at him. "Santa doesn't say *damn*."

Jared ruffled Clay's tawny head. "Sorry, bud." He looked at Holly. "I don't suppose Santa is supposed to do this either."

Before Holly knew what he intended, Jared pulled her inappropriately close--although she didn't mind--and kissed her. A kiss so hot it would definitely melt snow. She was melting, and wanting more.

Avoiding his parents' efforts to grab him, Clay tried to shove between them. "Santa does *not* do that kissy stuff!"

Holly's face heated in embarrassment as she heard snickers around them. She shot some of the grinning adults an irritated look. Not very elfishly friendly.

Jared chuckled and glanced at his brother. "Hope I haven't traumatized your grandson."

Darlene bustled around the corner and shook her head at her youngest son, still holding Holly far too close to him. "Behave yourself, Santa. There are a lot of innocent eyes and ears here."

Jared looked unconcerned at the mild chastisement. He even tucked Holly closer to his side and gave her a squeeze. Then he motioned the others away toward the room filled with sugar-crazed kids and Christmas music. "I guess we should get this started."

Holly expected him to release her so he could head for an area set up with red carpet and the Santa throne chair. But he didn't. The crowd--now that she noticed--stood off to the side as he led her toward where Santa would reign the next couple of hours. There was no line of children waiting anxiously for him to take his seat. And his family stood oddly close to the throne, appearing expectant. Of what?

"What's going on?" she asked.

He tugged her with him up the carpet right to the chair. Again, she expected him to release her and sit down. Again, he surprised her and moved her until she sat down instead. She blinked in confusion. Someone turned the music off. The room grew nearly silent. Her heart raced.

"I don't understand."

Jared went down on one knee in front of her and looked up. Beneath the beard, she was almost certain his expression was cautious, anxious. But his eyes had warmed to deep chocolate. They shimmered with such strong emotion. *Was he?* Jared who had always liked his privacy about personal things was about to do something so unexpected, so... so personal and wonderful! *Oh, my God*

"Holly Jacobs." He stopped to clear his throat. "I'm a hard man to be with at times. More stubborn than anyone else in the world." He smiled at her. "Well, maybe not more than you."

A spattering of laughter drifted around them, but she barely heard it because her heart was pounding so loudly. Yet she heard his mother snuffle, and Holly looked at her. Darlene had known what he planned to do today.

Holly's gaze moved around the room. They all knew. They were all pulling for him, for the town's former "bad boy" who had run away so many years ago. A boy many of them had suspected would end up in real trouble one day. The Danville family had been happy to have him back and word had spread. He was being welcomed back into the fold. Her eyes filled with tears, and she blinked rapidly.

Jared drew in a breath and touched her knee to regain her sole focus. "I've made some serious mistakes in my life. No doubt I will make more. I'm just that kind of guy," he said solemnly.

She smiled. "All of what you said might be true, but there is so much more to you. You love your family so much that you thought leaving would be easier for them. You thought you were saving the Danville family's reputation. With you gone there would be no more trouble making son, no more rebel who just didn't know how to fit in here." She put her hand on his. "You were so wrong. You left a hole in their lives, and in mine."

Holly glanced up, blinked back tears, and heard Darlene snuffle again. James put his arm around her, his eyes shiny now, too. Beside them, their other sons and daughter were all looking ready to become a sobbing choir. Their family was complete again.

Her gaze shifted back to Jared. Mr. Badass didn't look so tough right now. He looked uncertain, hopeful. She gently touched the side of his bearded face. "Your biggest mistake was in not letting your family...or me...show you how much we loved you."

His broad shoulders shuddered once. He was fighting to keep his composure, which warmed her heart even more. He couldn't seem to speak. What she wanted to say should be said in private.

The emotional silence gradually dissipated. Women in the group began whispering about how romantic this was. Men began grumbling about Jared being a bad example to their wives. The younger kids were starting to ask what was going on, getting impatient to have their turn to talk to Santa.

"I think you'd better get on with this," Darlene prodded.

Holly held her breath. *Now He was really going to do this now In front of all these people .*

"Marry me," Jared said in a rush, as if he couldn't get the words out fast enough.

Yes! Yes! Yes! "Is that an order?" she asked, giving him a teasing smile and sitting back, trying to act cool and calm.

"Yes."

"Well, okay then." She smiled, leaned forward to kiss him to a chorus of childish "Oh yucks!"

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# Chapter Six

The sun had long ago set by the time Jared parked his Lexus in his parents' driveway. He was still functioning on something of an adrenaline high. From past experiences, he knew that he'd be seriously "up" for at least a couple more hours and then he'd have to crash. He intended to spend these final "up" hours with Holly and use them to their mutual best advantage.

Her small cottage was lit in invitation, signaling she was waiting for him. He sat for several minutes absorbing the wonder of that knowledge. How many times had he wished he was coming home from a mission or a job to let her hold him, let her help him make sense of the craziness he'd gone through? How many times had he longed to hold Holly in his embrace? He'd honestly thought he'd never get this second chance with her.

He'd have been here earlier, but he'd stayed behind to help clean up the Community Center and ended up hanging out even longer to catch up with some of his old high school friends. Friends he'd hurt when he'd walked away. Friends who, by some miracle, had decided to give him another chance. All in all this had been a damn humbling day for him. And his mother had been right about that, too. He needed a large dose of humbling, or a few good kicks in his ass.

A snowball hit his side window.

As before, he tensed and then reached for the lock box under the seat. And, as before, he looked warily up and spotted Holly. She didn't appear pissed off this time. No, but there was a definite dance of mischief in her eyes. He liked that, a lot. His heart raced with excitement. Desire coursed through him.

She glanced around to make sure there wasn't anyone else watching them, opened the passenger door, and whipped open her ankle-length coat to flash him. She wasn't naked, but damn near.

"This offer only stands until I get back inside my house and close the door." She flashed him again. "If you're not inside with me, well... Sad for you, Stud Boy."

With that she closed the door and strutted back across the snow-covered lawn.

Jared sat there, his heart slamming against his chest so hard that he wondered if he was having a stroke. His cock had hardened and now threatened to shove right on through his jeans. He wasn't even sure he could move without breaking apart.

He glanced in her direction and discovered she'd already made it to the porch. *Shit!* She'd do it too, close that door and then refuse to let him in just out of omeriness. No damn way was he missing out on this! He shot out of the car and slipslided at break-neck speed after her.

Holly was just shutting the door when he jammed his foot in the way. "Cutting it pretty close, weren't you?"

Her coat had opened, and he gaped at the sexiest Christmas elf anyone would ever see. The breasts he so loved to hold were barely covered by a see-thru, green lace bra with tiny fur puffs to hide her nipples. Nipples that he was certain were now hard and eager for his attention. The green-and-white-striped leggings had been replaced with green lacy thigh highs. There wasn't a garter belt. But even more enticing were the green lace bikini panties, with a tiny strand of silver bells leading down to exactly where he wanted to be.

"Better close your mouth, Kick-ass Danville. Or your tongue will freeze in this cold air."

She dropped the coat and kicked it aside while he just stood there in shocked appreciation.

"Since I've got other plans for that devil's tongue of yours, I'd prefer it to be nice and warm."

He managed to move inside and close the door. "Holly." *What? What was he going to say?* "Holly."

She laughed. "Talk is overrated. Action is what is called for now."

"Action. Yes." He tugged off his coat, toed off his boots.

A flame sparked in the fireplace, and he noticed the thick quilt spread in front of it. She turned off the lights, leaving only a spattering of candles lit around the room. A romantic setting. It was nice, but all he needed was her. Him and her, nothing more. Never in his life would he tell her that, though. She'd gone to a lot of trouble, and he wanted sex. Having her pissed at him for not appreciating this would not be good.

"Looks nice." That was the best he could do. Thank God she appeared okay with his basic statement.

Jared quickly shed his clothes down to a pair of boxers. Normally he wore briefs, but he'd picked these up the other day hoping to share them with Holly.

She stared at the green silk boxers with a picture of a man's black gloved hands cupped around where his cock would be, the words "Santa's got something special for you" just above them. "You naughty boy," she said on a chuckle.

He reached beneath the placket and pulled out his throbbing, hard shaft and walked toward her. "Man. Naughty man."

She licked her lips, and her breasts shuddered. "Man, oh my, yes."

He stopped in front of her and grinned while he reached down to flutter the string of bells. "Cute. Sexy. Now get rid of it." He slid his gaze from her breasts downward. "All of it. Off. Now."

Her chin jutted up. "Maybe I don't want to follow orders."

"Maybe I should turn your pretty bottom over my knee for a spanking." His pulse picked up at the idea, but he really was more interested in sex right now. "You want me to strip it all off of you?"



She ignored the spanking comment. "Think you're man enough to remove my clothes and not lose control?" Challenge sparked in her gaze.

In truth, he was a bit worried about getting so close to her, about touching her while undressing her, without rocketing off his load. He wanted her just that much. But he'd faced tougher situations. *Well, maybe not. But you're going to buck-up and get'er done, son*

Determined, he reached for the front-clasped bra with shaky fingers. He only had to swallow hard once as it came undone and his fingers smoothed against her soft skin when he removed it. Okay, when the sassy minx cupped her breasts with her hands, he had to swallow hard again. Then when her thumbs moved over the already hard nipples, he had to look away and draw in a desperate breath.

"You're a wicked, wicked woman," he said huskily and went down on his knees in front of her. He inhaled the scent of her arousal and nearly shot off right then. Somehow he held it in. Somehow he turned his focus to pulling down and off the stockings. His fingers sliding over all that soft, bare skin almost did him in. Even smoothing his fingers over her small feet had him sweating bullets.

She smiled down, heat in her gaze. "Only one thing left, Tough Guy." She stepped closer, so that his face was almost to her crotch. "Think you can handle this?"

"Hell yes!" But his cock had started screaming to end this punishment, to get on with the main event. It was incredibly difficult not to grab hold of those panties and rip them off.

He'd just managed to take a gentle hold of the top of the panties when she said, "I've read about a man using his tongue." She stopped, put a finger to the wet area at her clit. "Using his tongue here. I've always wondered what it would feel like."

He collapsed back on his haunches, sucked in air. "Good God, Holly! You are killing me. I mean it. Killing me."

She laughed, a sensually seductive laugh. "Maybe another time."

Jared's expression grew serious. "No. We're doing this."

Holly froze, the air completely stilling in her body. Anticipation thrummed through her. What should she do? What did the heroines in the romances do? Panic replaced the anticipation.

He took hold of her hand and led her to the quilt, gently encouraged her to lie down. She trembled all over. For just a moment he reached to cup her breasts, squeezed them. When he pulled away, she missed that touch.

He moved her legs apart, pushed her knees up, and braced her feet so that he could lie between her legs. He used his fingers to lightly stroke her inner thighs, making her pant, making her quiver. She reached back and grabbed onto the pillows behind her.

"Are you ready?" His voice was husky and filled with promise of something wickedly delicious.

"Yes." She wasn't really sure what to expect next, at least not how it would actually feel. She knew the descriptions in the books.

He took hold of her thighs and kept them spread. His head lowered, and she felt his hot breath against her. Then his tongue slid out, and he trailed it through her pubic hair. She jerked in surprise. As his tongue snaked along her lower lips, her surprise turned to a gasp, and she arched her lower body upward.

"Oh! Oh, my!" She clutched the pillows, tried to remember to breathe.

His fingers pulled her lips apart, and his magical tongue found the sensitive insides of her labia. Over and over he licked her. Over and over she squirmed and practically ground her body at his face. When his mouth moved to her clit and his teeth tugged on it, she arched upward. "Oh, my God!"

He pushed her down with one hand and drove a finger inside her, then two, never letting go of her clit. She felt hot.

Everywhere. She felt lost in a haze. She needed. She didn't know what she needed.

He did, though. He gripped her thighs to hold her still and went to work licking, sucking, driving her beyond wild. Her thighs shook, and then she totally lost it. She screamed, sobbed in release. He pleased her until she collapsed and fought for breath again.

She had just started coming back to reality when he drove his cock deep inside her. That was totally fine with her. She loved the fullness, the strength of his thrusts. They quickly began the game of drive and retreat, over and over. Both needed this. Both were in command. They reached climax at the same time, crying out as one.

The day had finally come. Her wedding day. It had only been twelve days since she'd agreed to marry Jared, a man she'd almost given up on. The time had passed in a blur of getting ready for today, although she'd done nothing more than try on her mother's wedding dress one time. She'd always dreamed of being married in the satin and lace gown that had meant so much to her mother. Her mother who had been widowed young and never remarried. Like Holly, she had been a one-man-only woman. She'd loved her husband with all her heart. Holly loved Jared that way. He made her complete. She looked forward to butting heads with him for a good long time, to having that much-praised, hot make-up sex, too. And she looked forward to trying every one of the positions in the *1,001 Ways to Make Love* book she'd purchased online. *Oh, yes, every one of them*

"Are you ready for us to help with the dress yet?" Darlene asked from outside the bride's dressing room in the Danville's family church.

Nerves fluttered in her stomach, and she put a hand to rub at them. "Yes." She still couldn't believe this was happening so fast. Darlene, Kandee and Jocie had gone into miracle-making mode and arranged everything.

The three of them walked in and found her sitting by the dressing table, finishing up her make-up. She wore only a white lace teddy and white lace stockings.

For just a second, Darlene blushed, and then her eyes danced with knowledge. "My son is really going to like that."

"He'll like it even better off her," Kandee corrected, and then covered her mouth.

Darlene chuckled and went to get the floor-length gown. "No doubt about that." She walked to Holly with the dress and smiled. "I'm so glad my son stopped being an idiot and came home. And I'm so pleased that you had the good sense to forgive his stupidity."

Holly stood and Kandee and Jocie helped Darlene lift the gown over her head. They wriggled it into place. Tears threatened in Holly's eyes. "Mom would have loved to see me in this dress." She studied the satin A-line gown with its chiffon split front overlay. No train, her mother had liked simple things. So did she.

Stepping back to admire her, Darlene said emotionally, "She's looking down on you now. She'll be watching you today, every bit as proud as I am."

"She always liked Jared, knew how much he meant to me." Holly forced the thoughts away. This was not a time to be sad. This was her moment to shine, her moment to finally claim the love of her life. "Speaking of Jared, I haven't seen him for a couple of days. He *is* here, isn't he?" He'd claimed to be too busy to spend time with her, and she'd been determined to keep busy as well. But she'd missed him.

Kandee's eyes lit up, as did Jocie's. It was Jocie who said, "Yes, he's here. His friends, Axel and Troy, are here, too. His best men."

Darlene shook her head and chuckled. "Yes, he has *two* best men. Neither of the men were willing to settle for just being witnesses. He was afraid they'd get into a fight right here in church. So he has two best men."

Holly's lips twitched. She hadn't met the men yet, but he'd told her a lot about them. They were his partners in the security business in Los Angeles, the ones who refused to let him quit the partnership. The last she'd heard the three of them were still negotiating. She really didn't care. Wherever he ended up choosing to live and work, she'd be at his side. But she did prefer that he give up risking his life.

"Jared never does anything the easy way. Although, in this instance, he might not be at fault." She moved in front of the mirror and sighed. Tears threatened again. She wished her mother could have been here on her wedding day, at least she wore her gown.

The sound of music drifted down the hall from the sanctuary. She didn't recognize the tune, but she knew the organist would play the traditional wedding march. It was the only other thing besides wearing her mother's gown that Holly had insisted on.

"It's time, sweetie," Darlene looked at her in the mirror. "Time to get you down that aisle and married to my son before you change your mind."

Holly spun around and grinned. "I still have that option? Changing my mind?"

"Now that he's made up his mind. No."

Holly smiled. "Then let's go do this thing."

Jared had been in war zones where he'd been certain he wouldn't survive. He'd risked his life time and again for some rich guy he hadn't even actually respected, but protected. Yet the most difficult thing he'd ever done was stand here in the front of the church and wait for Holly to appear.

"You're starting to look like maybe we need to nail your feet to the floor," Axel taunted from beside him.

"You that scared of getting married?" Troy asked. "If so, why the hell are you doing it?"

Jared turned his attention away from the sanctuary packed with family, friends, neighbors, and a whole lot of people he didn't know. It seemed that the entire town of Danville knew Holly and loved her. But they didn't love her near as much as he did, which was the entire reason he stood here instead of fleeing for his life.

"When your time comes to face this moment, you'll understand," he stated. It wasn't getting married or being married that had him fighting hard to be patient. He'd survive the wedding ceremony and looked forward to a half century or so with Holly. It was feeling like he was on display for all of these people. He worked behind the scenes, specialized in *not* being seen.

He reached up to adjust his tie yet again, feeling strangled. Ties and tuxes were not his thing.

"Leave it alone," Jason loudly whispered from the other side of his partners. When Jared glanced at him, his oldest brother gave a small smile of understanding. They'd finally made peace a couple of days ago. His brothers had helped him with a legal matter, buying the building Holly had rented for years to give to her as his groom's gift to his bride. He'd also bought the building attached to it to use as a base for his new background search business, a branch of the security firm that he'd agreed to continue with as a partner.

The organist switched to the wedding march. All three men standing next to him straightened and turned their gazes to the back of the church. Jared's stomach churned, panic tried to creep through him, but he forced it back. *The time had come! Could I really do this? Yes! Hell, yes!* He probably needed to clean up his language—even his thoughts—here in the church.

His skin felt clammy, knees weaker. But he straightened his shoulders and faced the doorway. Her bridesmaids, Jocie and Bridget, walked slowly up the aisle in dark green, calf-length dresses. Both women were beaming. When Bridget drew opposite him, she winked at him. She liked him, fully approved of him marrying her boss. He liked her, too, and was secretly arranging a college scholarship for her.

Kandee entered the room next. Her gaze went straight to Jason, and she smiled. She'd forgiven him—Jared, too—for interfering with her buying Holly's shop, which was no longer for sale. Jason had agreed to her at least working part-time there. The only person who wasn't aware of any of this was Holly. She still didn't know what Jared had decided about his partnership, which would affect her shop.

The music picked up in tempo and finally the wedding guests stood to watch James Danville step up to the aisle with Holly on his arm. His dad looked as proud of her as if she was his own daughter. She'd been part of their family already for a long time. But it wasn't his dad he'd been waiting to see.

*So beautiful. So damn beautiful.* His heart raced, like it did every time he first looked at her. She was finally going to belong to him. No. She'd made it darn clear that she wasn't a possession, not something or someone to belong to anyone. They would simply be sharing the rest of their lives, supporting one another, loving one another. All of that was acceptable, but, truthfully and secretly, she would belong to him. He just wouldn't tell her that.

Their gazes met, and she smiled only for him. He grinned back, only for her. He wanted this ceremony done and behind them. He wanted the reception done with as well. Most of all he wanted to get back to their home, Holly's cottage--their cottage--and strip her down to nothing but soft, creamy skin. Then he'd see how many of those 1,001 positions they could manage tonight. She didn't know that he'd found the book in her night stand when he'd been adding some fun little body lotions to the drawer. But he'd never been so pleased with a discovery. She was a constant surprise, his Holly.

The next fifteen or so minutes passed by in a haze. The minister who'd watched him grow up, witnessed the problems in his youth, seemed to think this was a good time for a brief sermon. People were squirming in their seats, wondering--like he was--when the actual Do You and I Do stuff would happen.

Finally, Axel nudged him in the side. "Your turn." Evidently he'd missed the actual start of the ceremony.

He blinked back to the moment and glanced at Holly. Her pursed lips told him he'd been caught not paying attention. She'd probably grill him later, try to get him to repeat what the minister had said. He was in trouble with her already.

If that was the case, then he might as well do something to really get on her bad list. He motioned for the minister to hold up and moved so that he stood right in front of Holly, facing her. Gasps from his breaking wedding ceremony rules, or whatever, flew around them. His mother's eyes widened, and she seemed to prepare herself for him to do yet something else to make him fodder for the gossip mill. His father merely grinned. Holly, apparently, didn't know how to react and just stood there.

He tossed the veil over her head, pulled her close, smashed the bouquet between them, and kissed her. He'd needed this kiss, bad. It wasn't a simple peck on the lips, either. He *kissed* her.

Way before he was ready to end it, Axel tapped him on the shoulder. "You've skipped a few steps here, buddy. The crowd is getting hostile. They want the whole works: I do's, the pronouncement, etc."

Instead of being upset with him, Holly gave him a final kiss of her own. Then she took his arm and tugged him with her until they stood together right in front of the minister.

"Okay, the short version, Reverend," she said boldly. "We've got places to go, things to do...if you know what I mean."

His face reddened, but he smiled. He looked at her. "Do you?"

She nodded. "I do."

He looked at Jared. "Do you?"

"To loving Holly, honoring her, protecting her, and anything else for the rest of my life...I definitely do."

The reverend gave a curt nod and looked at the guests. "We're done here. Time for cake!"

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# Starla Kaye also writing as S. K. Fero

Contemporary, historical, sci-fi, paranormal, erotic

Just call her Starla and, hopefully, she will respond. She has been writing and publishing in different genres and lengths for fifteen years. Her first published book, Tug of Love, was a "sweet" romance published with iUniverse under the pen name of Starla Kaye. Not long after that she started writing edgier romances and changed her pen name to Kay Starr. Then she went to erotic romances as Starla Kay. And then added an edgy romantic suspense style and went to S. K. Fero. And now she is back to writing as Starla Kaye, and still as S. K. Fero. Confused...try being her.

Starla has been heavily exposed to all facets of understanding how to write, read, and market everything from short stories to novellas to novels. And she has been a president, vice president or secretary of several writing organizations for twelve years. She struggles with saying "no" and actually meaning it.

As a published author, she has out five long, short stories, nineteen novellas, nine novels, and two anthologies with various publishers: Blushing Publications, Red Rose Publishing and Black Velvet Seductions. In addition, she is a book reviewer for Got Romance! Reviews and Mistress Bella Reviews.

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